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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 October 2012

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

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage

Ms Brown (continuing): This is not about removing support from the vulnerable and needy. No individual in the House would willingly sign up for that. This is about reform and restructuring to ensure that the system works better and does what it was designed to do in the first place.

8.00 pm

I want to work with the parties on the opposite Benches in Committee to ensure that all our concerns are addressed, but I have confidence that we can make our case without relying on clichéd statements about the past. The Westminster Government have demonstrated that they will talk and negotiate on matters that have real consequences in Northern Ireland.

The Treasury has engaged on corporation tax and air passenger duty. We must have the confidence to make the arguments, either here or at Westminster, and take the Bill to the next stage. We may not win every argument or we may fail to achieve every objective, but that is what politics and leadership is about. It is about recognising need and doing something about it.

I am not averse to making a case for additional revenues or measures to promote jobs and build the economy for all those who want to play their part in shaping the future of our economy and society. I am, however, averse to those who offer only delaying tactics without realising the full implications of such delays for our communities.

The nature of politics in the Assembly is that we sometimes lapse into "whataboutery" and pantomime politics. We may sometimes get away with it, but I want to see an end to that. Welfare reform is an issue that gives us an opportunity to demonstrate to the electorate and to Westminster that we are coming of age

and that we can work together on difficult issues.

I am not against change, nor am I against amendments being tabled if they serve a purpose and can add something meaningful. The reasoned amendment does neither. The Bill should pass Second Stage and the debate should continue in Committee. In taking it forward, we are giving assurance to all those who are legitimately claiming benefits that they will not be cast aside. We must demonstrate to them that, in the Assembly, it does not matter who you are, which party you vote for or where you live. If you are in need, we will support you and your family.

I support the motion and reject the amendment.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak in favour of Sinn Féin's reasoned amendment. The austerity measures that are being pursued by the British Government will be extremely detrimental as they continue to attempt to cut their way to recovery. As usual, those who are hardest hit will be the most vulnerable in our society: the unemployed, the sick, low-income families and, in particular, the youth.

This can be blatantly seen in the reform of housing benefits. In fact, just yesterday, at the Tory Party conference, it was announced that a further £10 billion would be cut from welfare. Yet again, it will be young people and children who will bear the burden, a burden that is supposedly necessary because of the current economic circumstances, which we, the youth, played no part in creating.

We have already lost access to housing benefits for one-bedroom flats for single people under 35. Now young single people will be pushed into shared accommodation. I wonder, for example, what the difference is between a single 22-year-old and a single, unemployed 40-year-old. The shared accommodation proposals will also have specific and potentially very dangerous implications for young single women.

Just yesterday, George Osborne said:

"How can we justify giving flats to young people who have never worked".

He does not seem to realise that it is not that young people do not want to work; it is that they cannot, because the jobs simply are not there. The Tories want to reform how housing benefit should work. If they want to do that, it should be done on a needs-assessed basis rather than simply cutting off young people. The measure will leave an estimated 6,000 young people a year homeless. Already, 22% of the homeless people who present themselves to the Housing Executive are under the age of 25. How can George Osborne or anyone else justify that?

It is not as easy as simply sending someone back home to their parents. For some people, that is simply not an option. This is another huge blow to young people who are trying to set up a life and whose options for education and employment are already limited. A further financial blockage will be placed on young people and their independence.

The imposition of these harsher sanctions will target the young and unemployed. However, there is absolutely no evidence that any of the sanctions that will be imposed will reduce the levels of joblessness among young people. Unemployment can be addressed only by increasing opportunities and by having a job creation strategy that works. I appreciate the work that the Executive have already done in that regard, given the resources that they have.

As Sinn Féin's spokesperson for families, children and young people, I am especially concerned about the impact that certain aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill will have on families. The single household payment of universal credit is a worrying prospect, as it essentially represents a transfer from the purse to the wallet. It is estimated that 80% of payments go to the male partner in a household. By increasing the dependency of women in the family unit, we are leaving women and children vulnerable. Research clearly shows that money that goes to the female in the home is more effectively spent and will be spent, first and foremost, to target the needs of children.

Another worrying aspect of the Bill as it stands is that single parents who have a child aged five or over must be actively seeking work and must take a job if offered one. I am sure that many people in that situation are doing so. However, unlike in Britain, there is no statutory duty in relation to childcare here just yet. Many do not

have a support system around them. This could be particularly difficult given that the cost of childcare can outweigh the financial benefit of working. If a job is not accepted, further sanctions will be imposed, meaning a further loss of benefits to the single parent. Creating opportunities, not punishment or discipline, is the key to addressing poverty.

The most vulnerable in our society will be the most adversely affected by the Bill. We have to have an understanding of what the unemployed and low-income families go through daily just to feed their children. We have to have an understanding of the despair that young people feel in searching for jobs, in leaving home to find work, and in just trying to make ends meet. Yesterday in the Assembly, we discussed two motions. One was on the importance of, and growing need for, food banks, and in the debate on austerity, we heard about the importance of our young people. Without considering our amendment, we can do nothing to alleviate the pressures on the people we discussed at length yesterday. Suicide rates are soaring, and we know that this Bill will only worsen people's circumstances. Therefore, how can we in the Assembly agree to the Bill as it stands? I urge everyone in the Assembly to support the amendment and to consider the needs of the constituents we represent.

Mr Poots: It is useful to get the opportunity to speak on this matter. Having said that, it is quite astonishing that we are in the position of having this reasoned amendment. Indeed, reasoned amendment is a rather curious, perhaps spurious, name for it. It is a wholly unreasonable amendment. There is no reason, logic or sense to what the party opposite is proposing. Members come to the House and go to radio and television stations telling people that they are doing this so that they can have more time to negotiate and ask others to take things into consideration. Sorry; this is the Second Stage. We have quite a lot of time to go through the Committee Stage, and those negotiations can go on while we undertake that work. So, there is absolutely no logic or reason to the reasoned amendment.

I do not understand what part of the issue the parties opposite do not understand. Why are they prepared to sacrifice the social fund, which is used by 250 million people who are in need? The parties opposite are prepared to sacrifice that by April next year and throw it away. They would deny that social fund to the people who are in the most difficult of situations, the most need and the most dire circumstances and who turned to that fund in those circumstances. The folks opposite, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, are

prepared to throw those people into a situation of having to go without. That is very dangerous activity.

Those parties are not demonstrating responsibility for the people who work in the social care system. It has been identified that many jobs are carried out in Northern Ireland to administer welfare on a UK-wide basis. They are putting those jobs at risk. Those are jobs right across the Province, including in the Foyle constituency.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Poots giving way. Earlier, he made a statement to the House on 'Transforming Your Care' and announced that all state-run residential nursing homes would effectively be shut down over the next few years. How many jobs has he put at risk today? Those jobs are definitively at risk. Can he come clean and tell the House how many people in those care homes will lose their jobs? That is a fact. As far as I can see, everything else that he says is either speculation or scaremongering. I will let the rest of the House make the best judgement on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to return to the scope of the Bill.

Mr Poots: That is not about people losing their jobs. It is about people changing jobs, people doing more domiciliary care, and the creation of more opportunities in the private sector. So, the Member is wrong, and it is not about saving money or cutting jobs but about providing a service.

The Member and the Members beside him are prepared to put jobs at risk. The loss of £220 million causes all of us great concern, because £220 million is money that this Province can ill afford to throw away, yet the Members opposite are prepared to take that risk. I sat in meetings where people were talking about testing the British Government. Last week, when they were talking about testing the Government, the cuts were £18 billion. This week, they are £28 billion. I do not believe that any SDLP notion of testing the British Government will bring one extra penny to Northern Ireland's Budget. I do not believe that the SDLP believes that it will bring one extra penny to Northern Ireland, but it is in some ludicrous competition with Sinn Féin. While Sinn Féin is grandstanding, the SDLP is delivering stunts. I remember very well that, when I was a little younger, there used to be a TV programme that had as its theme tune 'Unknown Stuntman'. There are plenty of unknown stuntmen in the SDLP. We cannot

afford to engage in stunts. We cannot afford to grandstand.

The truth is that two thirds of our Budget is taken up by education and health. That is just a fact. If we have to find £220 million, it is likely that two thirds of that would come from education and health.

Mrs D Kelly: I appreciate the Member giving way. From his ministerial portfolio, I am sure that the Member will acknowledge the fact that poverty is a key cause of ill health. Therefore, will the Minister not join us in opposing these welfare reform cuts?

Mr Poots: I hear what the Member says about welfare reform cuts, but it is not entirely about welfare reform cuts, is it? It is about getting people into employment and about taking 10,000 children out of poverty. Perhaps the Member wishes those 10,000 children to stay in poverty. I would certainly be happier to take those children out of poverty and give them a better chance in life. That is what this party is about, not about keeping children in poverty.

I happen to think that getting people into employment is a good thing. Mr Hamilton talked about research that will identify where children are being brought up in homes where unemployment exists generation after generation. All the public health outcomes are worse, all the educational outcomes are worse and all the issues around justice are worse. Therefore, I am very supportive of working hard to get people into employment and to give them opportunities.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: I will give way in a moment.

If we are going to do that, we need to invest in supporting the private sector in particular to create job opportunities and get those people off the dole and into employment.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate the work that he has done on occasions. Recently, I met him about Holywell Hospital. I have a very serious point on the consequences of the welfare reform changes in housing benefit, and I hope that it is treated seriously. As we discussed previously, the thrust of your policy has been to reduce the number of beds in hospitals and move people from hospital to live in the community. We will take that first of all. That will require accommodation. In some cases, given the nature of particularly sensitive mental health

problems, that will require special accommodation. The fact is that the legislation, by its very nature, will cause additional financial hardship for many people who live in the community, and that can add to their stress and anxiety. With their mental health problems, that could result in them arriving back in hospital again. In his capacity as Minister, has Mr Poots

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that Mr Poots is here in his capacity as a Member, not in his capacity as a Minister.

8.15 pm

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much. Perhaps he could convey that to the Minister then. *[Laughter.]* My point is that very serious work needs to be carried out between the housing benefit people and the health people, particularly where there are those with serious mental health vulnerabilities, and we need to see the implications of the proposals on housing benefit. This is a very serious issue, and detailed work needs to be carried out.

Mr Poots: Being in employment helps to raise people's self-esteem and gives them a purpose to live. Getting up in the morning to go out to work gives people and families dignity and respect. Therefore, I am very pleased to support something that will give dignity, respect, self-esteem and opportunity to people.

Our task is to work very hard to create employment and to support those who are creating employment. We will not do that by continuing with the welfare system that we have ad infinitum. Members may be saying that this welfare system is perfect, but, I am sorry, it is not. I was doing doors on Friday and one lady came to the door and said that she has a very good friend who is an alcoholic and gets x pounds every week. He says that that money does him no good because he can never break off the alcoholism because that money is always available. Members may think that that is good, but I do not, the public do not and, sometimes, even the recipients do not.

We need to address issues with the welfare system that are clearly wrong. It is, without doubt, flawed and has become damaged over the years. What is proposed is not necessarily perfect, and that is why we need to give the Minister the opportunity to continue with his negotiations and why we do not need to collapse the Bill and let it fall flat on its face. That will hurt those people who need the social

fund money, put employment in danger and take £220 million out of our Budget.

I will identify the implications for Members, because I was somewhat distracted when I mentioned education and health. The implications are quite brutal. Around £100 million of the £220 million would come from the health budget. What would £100 million buy? It would buy us 10,000 coronary bypass operations. Who wants to say to people who require coronary bypass operations that they cannot have them because we did not put welfare reform through? It would pay for about two and a half million treatments by physiotherapists in the community. It is very necessary for physiotherapists to treat people in the community. It would buy over 15,000 inpatient hip operations. Do you want to keep people in pain waiting on hip operations? It would buy almost 20,000 knee operations. It would account for almost our entire spend on physical and sensory disability, and, indeed, £100 million would be approximately our entire spend on public health.

So, if the parties opposite are saying that public health is not as important as welfare reform and that we should drop cervical cancer screening, breast cancer screening and bowel cancer screening because welfare reform is much more important, I challenge you to tell that to your constituents. Go and tell them that you want to do that and that it is much more important because you want to grandstand and pretend that you are playing for some additional time on this issue while jeopardising our budgets in the process.

Close to half of our mental health care costs around £100 million. We talked about mental health outside today, and World Mental Health Day takes place this week. Close to half of the money that we spend on mental health, which a Member referred to earlier, is £100 million. Outside, I saw Members pushing their marbles around. I think that if the people opposite vote for the proposals, they will have lost their marbles big style. Close to half of our annual learning disability budget is £100 million. Do you not want to look after the learning-disabled and provide care and support for them? That is just the brutal reality, folks.

We cannot have a situation where we jeopardise our funding in this way: where we engage in grandstanding to try to make some political point or allow others to drive the agenda. As far as I can see, if a party in government has difficult decisions to take, it needs to step up to the mark and take them. Life is not always about making easy decisions.

It is not always about easy options. Very often, we have to make decisions on difficult options.

Sinn Féin is the leading party in the nationalist community, and the challenge has come to it. You are a party of government now, and you are supposed to be a responsible party. However, here we have Sinn Féin — I have seen this — facing the poodle of the SDLP coming forward dressed in a Rottweiler suit, and Sinn Féin is running scared. Sinn Féin, as a responsible party of government, needs to do the right thing. It cannot afford to be jeopardising our health services, our education system or our justice system by throwing money away because of grandstanding on this issue. It needs to show some courage, because the SDLP has been an opposition party for a long time, and it appears that it will continue to be an opposition party for a long time. Sinn Féin does not really have to be scared of the SDLP. It can safely vote this through without having to fear the SDLP on this issue. Nonetheless, that is the position that we find ourselves in.

We need to go forward from tonight on this legislation and allow it to move forward through its various stages. The notion that we will have the reasoned amendment or, indeed, the other unreasonable amendment from the SDLP, will not move things forward one iota, and it will not bring one additional penny to Northern Ireland. All it will do is jeopardise the funding that we have, the jobs that we have, and funding that goes to the most deprived people through the social fund. That may be the irresponsible position that others wish to adopt, but it is not the position that this party will adopt. We take our role in government seriously, we take our role in delivering for the poor seriously, and we take our role in addressing the causes of poverty seriously.

I would really like to see a real impetus, particularly from Sinn Féin, on the issues and causes of poverty. I am very clear in my mind that if we are to tackle poverty seriously, we need to do it at the earliest stages of life, with early intervention, going right through the primary system, and into our secondary schools. I do not see the same impetus coming from Sinn Féin. I would love to see Sinn Féin step up to the mark when it comes to those early interventions and ensure that children get a good start in life; ensure that children get a good education; and ensure that, where there is that gap and where, in many places, children are not ready to start school, additional work is done to prepare them for school, and additional support is provided to them in school. That support can make a real difference when it

comes to getting qualifications and, therefore, jobs and opportunities. I have not seen that impetus coming from Sinn Féin. I have seen officials in the Department being obdurate, being allowed to be obdurate, and nothing being done about it. So if Sinn Féin is really serious about tackling poverty, it needs to tackle the causes of poverty and identify those causes. It needs to step up to the mark, and I look forward to that, because I have not seen it yet.

The other issue that I want to touch on is this: the system has been subject to abuse over the years. Welfare has been subject to abuse, and we all know it. We had the rather shameful situation where a Member of the House drove up and down to this facility in a DLA vehicle that belonged to someone else. What an embarrassment to the party involved and, indeed, to other Members in the House. I see that his chair is empty. That case was a shame. Unfortunately, it is not the only one, as the case has been replicated a thousand times. The truth is that if we have 8% unemployment, we have 92% employment. The 92% of people getting up in the morning and travelling to work, whether they get a bus or a train, get into a car or walk to work, do not need to be paying for people to defraud the system. People should take a look at themselves and consider how we can ensure that we can clamp down on fraud. We can ensure that people who get money, deserve to get it and that those who do not deserve to get money, do not get it. I have no problem with Members intervening: if they want to do so, they can. People who do not deserve money should not receive it. The truth is that if we do not challenge the current system, that abuse will continue. I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the 92% do not have any time whatsoever for those who take money out of the system undeservedly. While others get up early in the morning to go to work, they, perhaps, do not and may have no intention of doing so.

Many people who are unemployed do not wish to be unemployed. There are many young people who do not wish to be unemployed. We need to give those young people a chance. We do not need to encourage them to stay in the welfare system for the rest of their life. That is not giving them a chance. We need to create employment opportunities for them, and we need to think clever. Minister Farry, along with our Enterprise Minister, has a very significant role to play in all that. That work has to be done to ensure that those young people do not fall into the trap of welfare benefits becoming a way of life and asking themselves how they can milk the system. That is not the way forward.

Therefore, moving forward on welfare reform is essential and critical. If we step back from it tonight, we will be doing a huge disservice to the House, the public and, most of all, to the poorest who are most in need. In some ways, I am not surprised that some Members will put their political ambitions before the welfare of the people whom they are supposed to serve.

Mr Dickson: As my colleague Mrs Cochrane said earlier in the debate, we will support the passage of the Bill and oppose the reasoned amendment. That is because halting the passage of the Bill would not cause the content to change, nor would it cause any worry or have any impact in the corridors of the Department for Work and Pensions in Westminster. Rather, it would further impact on those whom we represent.

Although we support the passage of the Bill, that does not mean that we support everything in it. However, the House must be clear that this is not where the fight is. The fight over the Bill should have been fought, and has already occurred, in Westminster. As has been referred to, my colleague Naomi Long MP voted against the majority of the proposals brought forward by the Government and gave her support to amendments suggested by the House of Lords.

I note, as recorded here before but worth repeating, that none of the five Sinn Féin MPs took the opportunity to oppose or amend the legislation in the House of Commons. Perhaps they will now attempt to constructively engage in Committee Stage and do what they are supposed to do in the House, which is to scrutinise it line by line and, where practical, make appropriate changes for all our constituents. That, however, does not mean that we simply roll over and implement exactly the same changes in Northern Ireland. We have the opportunity, through the Social Development Committee, to carefully scrutinise the Bill, as I said, line by line and clause by clause. I welcome that the Committee is committed to doing so and to seeking changes where they are possible and where parity can be pushed to its limits, stretched and tested. Deferring the progress of the Bill today would only delay the Committee's opportunity to do that, and I do not think that any Member could or should argue that that would be good for the Committee, the House, those whom we represent or those who will be affected by the Bill.

8.30 pm

While I can agree with many of the points made in the Sinn Féin amendment, I can see no compelling cause to delay the passage of the legislation further. I believe that its late introduction, coupled with the timetable, already make it difficult enough to ensure that the Bill is passed on time. When considering each of the points made, I see no reason why they cannot be pursued at the same time as the passage of the Bill. The challenge is that it is up to you to do that through continued negotiation with the Government at Westminster, scrutiny at Committee and amendments at each stage of the Bill.

As my colleague has already pointed out, Alliance does not believe it feasible that we can breach parity on benefits and qualifying thresholds. However, we can push administrative and operational matters to fit with local circumstances. That is where all the members of the Committee should best put their efforts. My colleague Judith Cochrane will, I am sure, work alongside her fellow Committee members to identify those areas where that can be done, and be done to the benefit of all our citizens in Northern Ireland.

Alliance does not believe in providing any kind of false hope to our constituents, but there seem to be plenty in the Chamber who do. To support the amendment and block the passage of the Bill would do exactly that. Halting the progress of the Bill is not a good idea. Come 1 April, our constituents who work delivering social security services on a UK-wide basis will be at risk of losing their jobs, jobs that are scarce enough. There will be a huge hole to plug in our Budget, where we will seek to fund the breaches caused by breaking parity. All Members know that Northern Ireland does not have the appropriate tax base to sustain our local benefits system or to pay for large divergences from what happens in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the plain, cold fact of the matter. Therefore, although some Members may claim victory if the progress of the Bill is delayed, or even blocked, I believe that we would be merely storing up trouble for the future and delaying the ability of this House to get on with doing its job, which is to realistically amend the Bill as appropriate. For that reason, Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the passage of the Bill to Committee Stage, where I genuinely hope that Members will get down and do the real work, on behalf of all our constituents, to identify reasoned changes that can be made.

Mr Ross: This has been a long debate on a substantial piece of legislation, but it is exactly the type of legislation that Members from all

sides of the House argued that we wanted to deal with when we talked about devolution being restored to Northern Ireland. Members from all parties talked about wanting to make the tough decisions here in Northern Ireland that affect local people. Today's legislation is a real test of that will. It is a test to see whether political parties and individual Members are up to the job of making tough decisions. Unfortunately, although we have heard some impassioned speeches today, and I am quite sure that most of them were entirely genuine, the tactics from two parties in particular mean that they are failing the test of responsibility in the Chamber.

Two fundamental issues are at stake in the debate. The first is the Second Stage of a Bill. Members have been here long enough to know that Second Stage is about the general principles of a Bill. However, a second issue has been brought into this, because of the amendment Sinn Féin has tabled. That has perhaps changed the nature of the debate. They call it the reasoned amendment and want to delay the implementation of the Bill. I listened carefully to Mr Maskey's remarks at the beginning of the debate. He was at pains to say that the purpose of the amendment was not to kill the Bill. However, listening to the comments of Ms Ruane, some hours later, it would seem that she did not get that memo. Very little she said would suggest that Sinn Féin is intent on doing anything other than killing the Bill.

I wish to talk about some of the general principles of the Welfare Reform Bill, and I will then talk specifically about the amendment tabled. My colleague Pam Brown mentioned the fact that, in recent days, weeks and months, we have had a series of debates in the House on the challenges facing our economy. Only yesterday, we had a debate on how we could help to boost the economy, help businesses to invest more in Northern Ireland and create more job opportunities for people. The difficulties in the global economy, the euro zone and the impact that those have had mean that we all face those challenges in our constituencies. I said yesterday that Northern Ireland was not immune to the difficulties.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I will know as well as anybody that the recent job losses in FG Wilson have had a devastating impact. Many people, young and old, who worked in FG Wilson have lost their jobs for the first time in their lives, and they have now found that, through no fault of their own, they are relying on welfare, because they have lost their jobs or cannot find jobs. Other young people have

been in and out of work because of the economic circumstances, and they have found themselves having to rely on welfare at various stages.

The responsibility of government is to help the most vulnerable. It is important that we have a fit-for-purpose welfare system that will support individuals who are out of work or seeking work or individuals who cannot work due to health problems or disabilities. However, my colleague Mr Poots posed this question to the Assembly previously: is the current welfare system working? Does it have the right balance between ensuring that there is an incentive for people to get into work and ensuring that those who cannot work or who are out of work and are looking for jobs have the right level of support?

We can look at some statistics about the spending on welfare reform over the past 10 or 15 years. Between 1997 and 2007, welfare spending went up by some 48%, but the number of individuals who were living in severe poverty did not decrease; that figure increased over that same period. So, we are spending more money on welfare, and fewer people are benefiting from it. I think that that shows that the system as it is at the moment is in need of reform. I think that most Members will argue that changes are needed in welfare and that the system needs to be reformed. We may differ in how we do that, but the case for reform is one that very few people could argue against.

Who should the system help? As I said before, we need a welfare system that supports those who are looking for work and those who cannot work because of ill health or disability. However, we cannot shy away from the challenge. There is a perception out there among not just those who are in work but those who are genuine recipients of welfare that plenty of people are milking the system or are in receipt of welfare that they do not deserve. We cannot shy away from that point, which Mr Poots made.

There are levels of fraud going on. There are also those who refuse to work. I am pleased that there are measures in the Bill to tackle fraud. There will be an investigation service, tougher penalties for those who are found ripping off the system and a faster method for those individuals having to repay money to the state. That is something that everybody in the House should welcome and support. Anybody who is a taxpayer should support it, as should anybody who is a genuine recipient of welfare. I commend the Department for the progress that has been made on this issue over the past

decade. We were in a position where £61 million was being lost from the system because of fraud, but that has reduced to £20 million. I think that further progress should be made on that, and I would certainly welcome that.

Another part of the Bill is about incentivising work and ensuring that we have a fairer system that means that people who are in work are always better off than those who are not. We heard at length from Mr Hamilton, and, latterly, Mr Poots, about the benefits for people who are in work not just for their health but for their self-esteem, their dignity, their reason to live and everything about their general health and state of mind about how good it is for people to work.

I have heard various individuals talk about universal credit, and, largely, they have been very supportive of it. In my short time on the Committee, I have recognised that Members from all parties talked about the overcomplexity of the current system. Members will welcome anything that can help to simplify that. It will ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay. It will help the most vulnerable, and, importantly, it will help to improve the levels of benefit uptake from those who require it and those who are entitled to it. That is important, because having an overly complex system can often be scary for individuals who are not confident about how to apply for benefits. The bureaucracy involved in claiming different benefits can also be off-putting for people. Therefore, I think that people will welcome the simpler form that is a single benefit. Of course, if there are further efficiencies in the system, more money will hopefully be available to filter down to those in most need.

The Minister began today's debate by outlining the Bill's four key aims, which are to protect the most vulnerable; to maximise support for people to get back into work; to ensure that the system is fair; and to promote personal and social responsibility. Again, I do not think that anyone in the House can argue with those aims and objectives. What is not to support in those general principles?

Is that to say that the Bill is perfect? Of course it is not. We have heard Members from every single party outline their concerns and difficulties with the Bill and talk about the elements that they would change. Of course that was going to happen, because the Bill was not drafted in Northern Ireland; its genesis was at Westminster. Therefore, of course we would seek to change certain elements of the Bill. However, it is not as simple as saying to the coalition Government, "We do not like this. Forget about it. We are not going to implement

that." That is what Ms Ruane seemed to suggest that we say, but we do not have that luxury, and any Member who argues that we do is simply deluded. There are consequences from taking that sort of action. It may be easy to do it, and it may gain some short-term popularity among a particular party's voting base, but it is not responsible and will have severe consequences for everyone in Northern Ireland.

As other Members said, major changes to the legislation are not possible, but there are changes and flexibilities that we can and should be seeking. One of those areas is personal responsibility. I must say that I understand the rationale behind the Government bringing forward some elements of personal responsibility. I understand the rationale behind ensuring that people are able to manage their finances in order to prepare them for the move into work. I am a big believer in individual responsibility and in the need for government to promote that. However, I am also acutely aware that there is huge opposition to that and that there are concerns about how payments are received, about who those payments are made to, about getting rid of the direct payments to landlords, and about the potential consequences of that for many vulnerable families and individuals across Northern Ireland. I think that there is agreement, not just in the Committee but, after listening to comments today, among Members across the House, about implementing certain flexibilities in the Bill and making those changes in order to make sure that we protect the most vulnerable in our society.

The place to make those changes is at Committee Stage. As with any other Bill that passes through the House, you have a Second Stage at which you discuss the general principles, and you have a Committee Stage at which you get into the detail of the Bill; investigate the elements that you are perhaps not as comfortable with; take evidence; hear from stakeholders who will be directly impacted by the legislation; examine the impact that the legislation will have on those stakeholders; look at the consequences of the legislation and any amendments tabled thereafter; and test the changes and any possible amendments that an individual or party wants to table.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Certainly.

Mr Poots: It appears that the Member is suggesting that fairly extensive scrutiny will take

place. What additional scrutiny can the SDLP proposal bring to the Bill that cannot be delivered by the Social Development Committee? What is the logic of creating another Committee to supersede the good work that is done by the Social Development Committee? Is the Member more confident in his party colleagues to carry out that work than the SDLP is in Mr Durkan in this instance?

Mr Ross: I, too, am confused by the fact that the SDLP feels that there is a need to have a Committee that is not a Committee, particularly given that the Social Development Committee has already cleared its workload and scheduled extra Committee meetings to ensure that it gives the Bill the scrutiny that it deserves. I think that the Social Development Committee should be applauded for taking that action to ensure that it can give the Bill the scrutiny that it deserves. I do not understand the SDLP's position and why it does not have the same level of confidence in its Committee members as we do in ours.

8.45 pm

Those parties that argue that they are uncomfortable with the Bill seem to talk about it as if it is in its complete form, and it is not. We know that Bills change over time. I remember a Sinn Féin Bill, a private Member's Bill, in the last mandate that changed not only its entire contents but its name as well. Bills change as they progress through an Assembly or Parliament. That is the normal legislative process. If, at the end of Committee Stage, at Consideration Stage, Further Consideration Stage or even Final Stage, the parties opposite are that uncomfortable with how the Bill looks, they will still be able to block it then. So, what is the point of trying to delay or block a Bill at Second Stage before we have had the opportunity to put amendments forward and test some of its contents? Surely, sensible people would believe that, as long as the option is still there to block the Bill by putting down a petition of concern, which Mr McGlone tweeted about earlier, they can do that at a later stage. Again, that is normal process.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member very much for giving way. What does sleepwalking our way to job losses in the region of 1,500 say about the socialist principles of the Benches opposite?

Mr Ross: What is remarkable is that those on the Benches opposite talked about wanting to protect the most vulnerable in our society, yet the actions that they are taking today will hit the

most vulnerable the hardest. We heard from various Members about the job losses that will be incurred, the 250,000 individuals who will lose access to the social fund and the £200 million that comes out of the block grant. The Member is absolutely right; it is the most vulnerable who will suffer most from the actions of the parties opposite.

What makes it even more remarkable is that Sinn Féin has supported this Bill through its Executive stages. On the Welfare Reform Committee that was established, there were a number of areas that all parties identified as being potentially problematical or areas where they would seek to have changes. So, why not allow the normal legislative process to continue to Committee Stage, when those parties can then seek to make those changes? That is how Bills progress through this House, yet it is not the procedure that the two parties opposite wish to follow today.

As was asked before of Sinn Féin, if it is that opposed to the Bill that it wants to block it, why did it not seek to block it at Executive level or work with the SDLP to put down a petition of concern today? The answer is very simple: it is because today's stunt from the Benches opposite is about optics and not opposition. They both know the consequences of this legislation not going through and they know that the Bill has to go through, but they want other parties to do the heavy lifting and take the tough decision. That is a lack of leadership.

Mr Bell: I thank the honourable Member for East Antrim for giving way. Will he agree that one of the optics put out today was that women would suffer most if the Bill was allowed to go to Committee Stage? However, is it not the case that women would suffer most if this was not allowed to go to Committee Stage? Is it not the purse more than the wallet that would be hit? Certainly in my 20 years as a social worker, I found that it was mainly women who were applying to the social fund. *[Interruption.]* Members from the Ulster Unionist Benches may laugh, but they stood with David Cameron in the La Mon House Hotel in 2010 after, I believe, he had gone on 'Newsnight' to say that Northern Ireland would be targeted specifically for cuts. So, they can laugh at women applying to the social fund if they wish, but they will get their — *[Interruption.]* Well, they got their answer in 2010.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions should be brief. *[Interruption.]* Order, order. I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Mr Bell: Would the Member agree —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: How can I give way? *[Laughter.]* The Minister should be aware that I cannot give way when I am making an intervention myself.

The point I am making and the point that should be made, which I will make briefly, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that, of the 230,000 people who were applying to the social fund, the majority were women and children. The 1,500 jobs losses will affect women and families, and the £220 million that will be taken out of the economy will impact on women and families most when it comes to schools and hospitals. The point that I am making to the Member is that it will be women who will suffer if we were to follow the policies of the two parties opposite.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that intervention. I also thank the Deputy Speaker —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Form an orderly queue, folks, we will get round everyone. I also thank the Deputy Speaker for allowing for latitude during the interventions.

The Member was absolutely right in the point he made. I know that he was a social worker for 20 years and that he has a level of experience on this matter that many Members do not have.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: It is not just women, of course, who would be impacted upon; it is men, women and children who would be impacted upon by the measures that the parties opposite want to implement. I will give way to Mrs Kelly, then to Mr Kennedy, who also wanted me to give way.

Mrs D Kelly: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. He referred to junior Minister Bell. I am sure that he will be somewhat surprised to learn that junior Minister Bell is a former member of the Tory Party. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mrs Kelly, you have the Floor. *[Interruption.]* There should be only one Member on their feet at a time. Everything should be done through the Chair.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I refer to what Mrs Kelly said. In 1989, I was a member of a Conservative student association; I was not a member of the party. So, in this, as in so much else, she finds that she is wrong. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That was clearly not a point of order.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It would be very helpful if Mr Bell outlined whether he was a conservative student or a member of the Tory Party. Was that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: Was that during any part of the 20 years for which he was a social worker? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we come back to the debate, please? I call Mrs Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The one piece of advice I can give to the junior Minister is that, when you are in a hole, stop digging.

I will refer to the issue of leadership that Mr Ross spoke about. Would it not have demonstrated better leadership to have brought forward the Welfare Reform Bill, rather than doing a deal with Sinn Féin over the Education Bill, which seems to us to have included choreography between Sinn Féin and the DUP, which was not in the best interests of the people whom they claim to represent.

Mr Ross: I never thought that, when I started my speech, it would cause such excitement.

I will deal with the issue that was raised first. Plenty of Members have changed political parties over the years, or have had associations that have changed over the years. I am glad that he is where he is now and came to his senses. I know that Members to my right had a flirtation with another political party only a number of years ago. Perhaps that puts them in a more embarrassing position.

Mr Kennedy: We were glad to get rid of him, too. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ross: I am quite sure they were, and I am quite sure that it is causing embarrassment during today's debate.

Mrs Kelly can deflect as much as she wants, but the fact remains that the position that Sinn Féin and the SDLP have adopted today will be bad for people in Northern Ireland. It will be bad for vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, including men, women and children. Those facts are there, and I think that everybody now understands that they are there.

The arguments about parity have been well rehearsed; I do not think that there is any need to go over them again. Although exact parity of timing was not possible, largely because of Sinn Féin's delaying tactics and foot-dragging in the Executive, it is important that the time gap remains as small as possible to ensure that we do not have to foot a huge Bill. Northern Ireland cannot afford to breach parity or to delay the Bill. The reasons why we cannot afford to delay the Bill were mentioned by various Members, but I think that they are worth going over again, for Mrs Kelly if nobody else, because she seemed confused about the impact that delaying the Bill will have.

It will impact upon our welfare recipients, civil servants and public spending across Departments. If the Bill is not in place in April, as other Members said, some 250,000 people in Northern Ireland who benefit each year from the social fund will find themselves without any support. That is one of the impacts of the position of Sinn Féin and the SDLP today.

There will also be job losses for the civil servants who administer benefit payments across the United Kingdom if we were to break away from the single benefits system. That is one of the impacts that would come from the position of Sinn Féin and the SDLP. If welfare changes remain unimplemented over the next two years, the Executive will face a bill of over £200 million, to make up the difference between the money that would have been paid by the Westminster Government for the new system rather than for the existing one. The £200 million will come out of our block grant, if we are to follow the course promoted by Sinn Féin and the SDLP. From where would they seek to take that money? Would it be from health, education, roads or what else? Those are the real impacts of the politics are being played opposite.

That is not to mention some of the other things that the Executive is trying to do in order to help boost our economy. There are negotiations ongoing about the potential cost of devolving corporation tax. It would, of course, be even more difficult for the Executive if we had to make up a £200 million bill because of the party politics played opposite and the delay of this

Welfare Reform Bill at second stage level. As was said by Mr McIlveen earlier, the tactic that is being used in the name of protecting the most vulnerable in society will impact upon them hardest. I think that that is shameless.

However, it should not surprise us. In the debate yesterday, both of the nationalist parties pursued this idea that they wanted to have a full suite of tax-raising powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly. They did not recognise the cost of that. The cost is that there would also be devolved the deficit that we run each year from subvention. The SDLP, in particular, talks about wanting to lower the rate of fuel duty. They do not tell us how much that would cost, or what other elements of public spending they would reduce in order to pay for it. And it is the same story today. They do not tell us where they would make up the £200 million bill that we would be hit with.

Some Members: Sell the airport.

Mr Ross: Yes, I have heard Members from various positions talk about selling land that they do not own. We have heard that before in this Chamber.

The only conclusion that you can come to about the £200 million shortfall that we would have if they were to delay this Bill, and the money they would have to make up if they want tax-raising powers devolved to the Assembly, is that they would only be able to achieve it by taxing households more heavily. We know that they are not going to do it from public spending, because they want the first-class public services that they talk about. At a time when households suffer as it is, is taxing those individuals more heavily really a policy worth promoting? That is the position of both nationalist parties and, again, I think it shameful.

I conclude by echoing the comments of the First Minister, in his intervention to the Social Development Minister during the opening comments. The Assembly has two options; a choice to make. It is a test of the maturity of political parties and of individuals. Members can back the Sinn Féin amendment and negotiate with Lord Freud, but incur the job losses and the £200 million hit on the block grant. It will mean that those who are reliant upon the social fund will get no funding next year.

The second option is that they can follow normal legislative processes; pass the Second Stage and approve the general principles of the Bill; they can still have their negotiations with

Lord Freud and the central Government; and they can work on the Committee where amendments may be made to make this Bill a better Bill for people in Northern Ireland. Members should choose the path that proves real leadership, which will be better for people in Northern Ireland and which will be welcomed by people in Northern Ireland on both sides of this argument.

I hope that the House will vote against Sinn Féin's tactics and ensure that the most vulnerable in our society will not be hit because of the tactics of the nationalist parties in the House.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This has been an interesting debate. It has in many ways exposed a fault line in the Assembly. Time and again, when it comes to key strategic moments or opportunities, we find arguments which are perhaps more to do with whether there is some hidden threat to the constitutional position, as opposed to a debate or dialogue between parties of equals, as to what is in the best interests of the community that we all serve.

9.00 pm

The issues that are being discussed are at the heart of the debate. The entitlements that the Tories are determined to deny to the most vulnerable in our society are so vital that every party in the Assembly should be united in determined opposition. However, that option appeared to be ignored or rejected before it was even proposed. I believe that will continue to cost people, particularly the most vulnerable, in our society.

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

I know very well that there is history and there is blame and responsibility on all sides of the House. There is a fixation among some to avoid accepting any responsibility for the travails and traumas that this society has been through but reality, nevertheless, speaks louder than those rejections. There is a responsibility on all sides of the House for the circumstances that arose. When we get the opportunity to come together, our first option should not be to reject it. We should explore to the nth degree whether there is something that we can do. On this issue, there was a very significant opportunity for not just the parties in the Assembly; there is very significant opposition in Scotland, Wales and England. There were opportunities for us to attempt to provide a

platform or even leadership to those who are faced, on the basis of disunity, with the reality that the Westminster Government could end up imposing this, notwithstanding the quantum of that opposition. We should pause to reflect on that. Whether we do it in the course of this debate or after it, it remains an issue for the Assembly if we are ever to achieve the potential that, I think, all of us hope that we can reach.

This is a reasonable thing to say this evening: the parties on the opposite Benches quite clearly have in their ranks many people who are capable of developing rational arguments and examining the arguments of others. However, what we have is almost an ideological or knee-jerk response. Many examples have been given of the opposition that people have demonstrated in the course of the discussions at Westminster. The reality is that that opposition did not amount to a hill of beans. That is the fact. The reality is that we should not deny ourselves the power that we, as an Assembly, have to do something about that, in conjunction with and with the support of the Members who made that case. Our view is quite clear; I do not need to rehearse it. We did not expect you to be able to reverse the situation in Westminster. However, we expect us, in the Assembly, to maximise our strength and recognise the benefit of adopting all-party positions. It happens very rarely, and that is a matter of regret. We are hobbling ourselves.

I have listened to Members, and I have heard the bidding war on the DUP Benches. People have grasped figures out of thin air. They do not have the information. My party brought a motion on corporation tax a number of years ago, and it was rejected. What do we have now? We have an all-party position in agreement on the benefits of corporation tax powers. We have advanced negotiations. We also have increasingly more data about the revenue streams that are an essential part of the overall economy here. It is not about only public expenditure and the private sector; it is about the revenues that flow from here to the Treasury. However, extracting that information, as our Finance Minister will tell you, has proved very difficult. Getting that information is like extracting teeth. Why is that? Information and knowledge is power. If we have the knowledge and information, we can make informed decisions. I say this with regret, but I have found that, even when we talk about air passenger duty as an option for the Assembly to deploy, people psyche themselves out and frighten themselves by saying that it would cost £60 million. If we were to advance on the basis of looking at those rates, we would see that it would be an integral part of developing the

economy and of opening up export opportunities, perhaps one route at a time. That would mean that we would have to deal not with the quantum but with that one element and its benefits, which we would then test. However, we deny ourselves that time and time again. The first response is that we cannot depart from parity. If that argument does not prevail and is not sufficient, we frighten ourselves. That argument very often does not prevail, because if air passenger duty and devolving corporation tax powers are anything, they are departures from parity. We talk about £200 million or £400 million — it depends. We had a debate yesterday. One Member said that the deficit was £9 billion, and the Member who spoke immediately after him said that it was £15 billion. That is the kind of Mickey Mouse approach that we take to the cost of running our own affairs.

I am not saying that every decision can be afforded. I do not argue that. However, I do argue that we should not frighten or talk ourselves out of it on the basis that people are plucking figures out of thin air. It happens too often. If Members want to say that I am wrong about that, I am quite happy to take interventions. *[Interruption.]* Are you offering?

Mr Poots: Yes. In the first instance, the Member should realise that there are breaks with parity on a range of issues, whether they are the social care that we offer for free, free transportation for the over-60s or our attempts to seek to introduce our own air passenger duty rates. So, the Assembly can rise to the challenge.

When we are talking about welfare reform, we should remember that we have a figure of £220 million. If the Member wants to disparage the work that DFP and DSD have done to arrive at that figure, let him do that factually, as opposed to just making some general comment. That £220 million is the amount that we are, potentially, at risk of jeopardising from the Northern Ireland block Budget as a consequence of dropping the Bill. What are we prepared to accept when it comes to breaking parity on welfare? Are we prepared to accept £2 million, £20 million, £200 million or £2 billion? Once we break parity, we do not know where the figures will stop. There may be lots of just issues, but we do not know where it could end. That is the danger of going down the route of breaking parity on welfare.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Member, particularly for his other examples of breaking with parity. However, I do not think that he challenged effectively the point that I made

about how parity is advanced as a defensive argument or the way in which the figures are plucked out. There is nobody in the House —

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes, OK.

Mr P Robinson: The Member cannot continue to make comments such as "plucked out", as though somebody just thought of a figure and threw it out. The Department of Finance produced that figure. It was given at our Executive meeting, and it was not challenged by any Minister, including his own.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I was not at the Executive meeting, but I am challenging the figure. I have heard those figures, and I heard what people told us when we introduced the argument about corporation tax. They said that we could not afford it and that the claims on the block grant would be so significant that we could not deliver on our public service commitments. It turned out that that information was wrong. It turned out —

Mr P Robinson: Tell us what it is.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am demonstrating to you that, when this matter was introduced to the Assembly, we were told that we could not afford it. Now, all of a sudden, we find that it is worth negotiating. I do not know what the outcome of the negotiations will be, but I do know — I think that you will acknowledge this — that we now have much more information about the actual deficit than we did before that exercise started. For that alone, it has been worthwhile

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: As you know, I have already given way, and we cannot just go on debating this back and forward.

Mr P Robinson: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: If you are prepared to listen, I have demonstrated that, once we took our courage in our hands and started to examine the issues, we discovered that we could do more than we initially thought. We are very well advanced on that issue. On the example of air passenger duty, I also heard people in the House tell us that we could not do that. However, when we realised that our single route to North America was at risk, we, of course, discovered that we could. I am now arguing that we should go the next step,

because I think that other routes would benefit from a similar application of that flexibility. I would then apply that in as many other circumstances as we, with our creativity and innovative approach, could imagine.

Mr P Robinson: Will you give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, sorry, I will not.

Mr P Robinson: You have all the time in the world.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Make all remarks through the Chair.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: As to the issue that we are discussing tonight, Sinn Féin's amendment was not to kill the Bill, because we could have killed the Bill this evening. We have explained over and over again that we believe that it can be improved. We believe that there are ideas that should be tested that have not been tested. We raised that as early as February or March this year, and we find that the Bill that has been brought forward has not changed one iota. On that basis, we are taking a stand. Our position is that —

Mr P Robinson: Do it at Committee Stage.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am not giving way.

On the basis of our proposition, we are saying that this Bill can be improved, and we are prepared to work with all parties in the Assembly to do that.

When it comes to the broader issues, let people be aware that if we do not attempt to establish the degree of support that there would be across all the regions that Westminster has a responsibility for and has to take account of, and if we do not make ourselves aware of that and become part of that, we quite clearly leave the matter at our cost, particularly for the most vulnerable in our community. They will pay the cost of the Tories' drive to hollow out the welfare benefits system. That is exactly the course that they are set on. While we are having this discussion, they are announcing another £10 billion in cuts.

Let us face it: this is a very significant challenge to the whole efficacy of regional Assemblies. I do not think that we would be the only Assembly, legislature or Parliament to respond to the opportunity to come together, act collectively and make representations on that basis. We have enough power in this place to be heard, and I think that we have enough

skill and persuasive power to convince others to join us in addressing this issue with the people who can make the decision.

We can divide ourselves, weaken ourselves and paralyse ourselves. We can refuse to bring forward reasoned amendments to this Bill and present to this House, to parties that are not prepared to accept it, the Bill as it is. That is the choice we can make. People can play the numbers game if they think that that will help, but they know in their hearts that it will not. As we have argued for the transfer of fiscal powers, we do it on the basis that this Assembly will make informed decisions. It is not a matter of handing an open purse to anyone, nor is it a matter of writing blank cheques; it is a matter of us, as people who have experience and responsibility, working together to make informed decisions.

Mr P Robinson: Why can you not do it at Committee Stage?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I have given way enough times, and I want to bring this to a close.

My appeal to the Members opposite is to give us an explanation as to why they are not prepared to engage with the parties who are offering to engage to see how we can address this issue in a collective —

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, if you do not mind —

Mr Givan: You have asked a question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks through the Chair.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am putting the point; this is a question that we have avoided all afternoon, and it is getting late —

Mr Givan: Well, let us answer it.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No. We will answer it. You are going to get a vote: you can answer it. My view is that they are ducking around and questioning whether people have an ulterior agenda when, in fact, all we are trying to do is to make people aware that we can take more responsibility than we have at present. We can take more creative options than those we are taking at present. We do not have to go for the balance of negativity; we can go for positive

outcomes. We can develop local solutions to local problems. I do not think that the Assembly has reached that potential on very many occasions thus far.

This is a challenge, on this particular issue, to listen to and reflect on what has been said by those who have argued against welfare and benefits reform and have taken a stand against the Bill as it is presented. The question is whether you are going to attempt to push it through against that opposition or whether you recognise the opportunity to engage in meaningful, sensible discussion among ourselves. We will know the answer to that question when we get to the vote.

9.15 pm

Mr McDevitt: I want to focus on Part 4 of the Welfare Reform Bill, which deals with DLA reform and the proposed personal independence payments. Part 4 really illustrates the significant impact that the proposed legislation will have on our region from an equality point of view. It highlights the very significant new inequalities that this law, if passed, will create. It does so because, bluntly, it is not us but the fiscal institute in London and, I am led to believe Lord Freud, who accept that this region will be the worst affected in the context of welfare reform.

It is ironic that when you know, as a matter of uncontested fact, that you are in the Government of a region that is to be adversely impacted by something and that that region happens to have some of the best equality laws in the world — different from elsewhere in these islands — that you would not seek to use your statute book to defend the people whom you purport to represent. It is ironic, if not negligent, that this Executive and this Minister are refusing, point blank, to exercise the leverage of the differential in equality laws in this region versus the rest of the United Kingdom on this Bill. I can suspect only that the Minister does not want to test this theory because he is scared of the answer. He is scared that it might be found that the Bill does not meet a fundamental or proper detailed test against our equality legislation.

If he is not scared, let him invoke Standing Order 35. Let him put the interests of the most vulnerable in this region first. Let him test the boundaries of devolution. Let him assert the power of the Assembly. Or, let him be a little surrender monkey to those who really pull the DUP strings. It is a basic test. We know that the Minister supporting the Bill has a dodgy record on the ministerial code. We know that

he does not really "get" some of the duties involved in holding office, but you would think that when he has a Standing Order smacking him in the face that states:

"For the purpose of obtaining advice as to whether a Bill, draft Bill or proposal for legislation is compatible with equality requirements (including rights under the European Convention on Human Rights) the Assembly may proceed on a motion made in pursuance of paragraph (2)".

Paragraph 2 states:

"Notice may be given by ... any member of the Executive".

We know, because the Speaker ruled on the matter yesterday, that that means the relevant member of the Executive or a Minister acting on behalf of the Executive:

"or the chairperson of the appropriate statutory committee".

Why would we not want to give ourselves extra leverage with the British Government? Why would we want to deny the most vulnerable in this region, whom everyone, including the most right-wing Tory, believes will be the most disadvantaged and affected by welfare reform? Why not have another shout at a better argument that means that they get a better settlement? Why? The only conclusion is that you do not want to. That, I think, deals with the Minister's lack of proper duty towards his office today, which has been highly illustrated so far in this debate.

I place the same challenge at the door of the Chairman of the Committee. I hope that he has personal reasons for being absent for most of the day, because his absence for most of the debate has been noted. He stands for a party that claims to build an Ireland of equals — *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr McDevitt: He stands for a party that likes to own the issue of equality and purports to champion equality. Well, he has, at his disposal, a mechanism in the Assembly that gives him the means to test the Bill against nothing other than its compliance with our equality legislation and the European Convention. Let him step up to the mark and invoke Standing Order 35. Let him show that he is interested in moving beyond the rhetoric

of opposition on the substantive, grievous, awful proposals in aspects of the Bill. Let him stand up to those who are being derelict in their duty. One of the things that I am struggling with today is the suggestion that we are going to be out 1,500 jobs if the Bill is delayed by so much as a day. We have heard it from the DUP, we heard it from Mr Dickson — who, I have to say, did the Alliance Party one of the greatest disservices that I have seen anyone do the Alliance Party in recent times — and I am sure that we even heard it from Members in the Ulster Unionist Party. Where is there one bit of proof that 1,500 jobs could go? Can you produce a letter or an e-mail? Do you even have a text? Did someone tweet it? No, no one did, and you have no proof. What you are doing is obvious to us all. You are scaremongering the people on your own Back Benches into believing that if they do not whip themselves into line, even though they disagree with the Bill and everything that it stands for, there is going to be significant fallout.

People need to reflect on whether it is really responsible to come to the House and scaremonger. You need to reflect on that on the day that you actually do come to the House and make specific policy announcements that will cost people jobs. That happened this afternoon. The Minister of Health came to the House and made specific policy announcements that will have a job impact. That is not speculation or scaremongering but fact, yet all that we have heard from the DUP today is that there may be, there could be, or — if we take Mr Ross's word for it — there will be 1,500 jobs going. Why? Because a Bill does not make it to Committee Stage next week. It is just pathetic. It is a disservice to the people who are making the suggestions, and, frankly, it is the sort of thing that gives politics a bad name.

One of the reasons why I find it difficult to believe a lot of what has been said is that, during his contribution, Mr Poots — speaking as Mr Poots, not as Minister Poots — said that we had 8% unemployed in this region and, therefore, we have 92% of people at work. That is just not true. We have the highest level of economic inactivity of any region in Europe. We do not have 92% of people at work. How can you have confidence in someone who cannot even grasp that basic concept?

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: No, I will not give way yet. I will be very happy to give way to you in a second, Mr Poots. The fact that you think that 92% of our people are at work proves that you do not

get the real impact of the Welfare Reform Bill. It proves that you do not understand that there are a huge number of people who are economically inactive, many of them reliant — solely, obviously — on welfare of different forms. Many are on DLA and other types of payment. You have forgotten those people. You have written them out of history. You have erased them from the narrative. They are the people whom the Bill is going to hit the hardest. They also happen to be people who are living with the legacy of our conflict. I will give way to Mr Poots now.

Mr Poots: The fact of life, and Mr McDevitt may have difficulty accepting it, is that, of those who are available to work, 92% of them are in work. If Mr McDevitt does not understand that, that is a problem. If he wants to twist it, that is another matter altogether.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Poots's clarification. Fortunately, the Hansard report will prove which of the two of us is right. He took his 8%, he got his 92%, and that makes 100% in his ideal world. I wish it were so, but, tragically, it ain't.

One of the things that is worth seriously reflecting on at this stage is the impact that the Bill will have on those people who are permanently economically inactive. Not people who have the possibility of work or the option to work. Not people who, as some right-wing conservatives — as it turns out, in this House and across the water — like to suggest, just choose not to work, but people who cannot and will never be able to work. The Bill will hit them harder than it will hit anyone else. We have more of that type of person in this region than anywhere else in these islands.

I ask colleagues in Sinn Féin why they keep saying that we all share the blame for the Troubles. It is just not true. We are not all to blame for what happened, nor will we all accept responsibility for what was done. It was not done in our name, it was not done for our nation, and we do not perceive it to have been, in any way, a patriotic event.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: No. I am not going to give way to Mr Bell, and I will tell you why. When his own colleague gave way to him, it triggered a cacophony of hilarity from his own Back Benches, and I do not think that it is fair to subject him to a cacophony of hilarity from his own lot. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr McDevitt: I have too much of a working relationship with the junior Minister, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, to want to have him subjected to the hilarity of his own lot.

Mr P Robinson: Look behind you.

Mr McDevitt: The First Minister was not in the Chamber for that —

Mr P Robinson: I saw it.

Mr McDevitt: If he had been, he might be wanting to reflect on it the next time there is a reshuffle on the cards in the DUP. It was not what you would call a vote of confidence.

On the issue of confidence, there was a question about us proposing a special measures committee — a Standing Order 35 committee — and the impact that that might have on the standing of Mark H Durkan, our social development spokesperson. I assure colleagues who may be concerned for Mr Durkan's standing in the SDLP that it would have no impact. In fact, you will find that, when the Bill comes to Committee Stage, he may have a lot more to say about the really awful equality implications of this Bill.

That is the basic question tonight: what are Members scared of? Why will they not allow the Assembly to assert its authority, not just here in this jurisdiction but towards London? What is wrong with that?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member elaborate on what the SDLP said in response to the equality impact assessment on the Bill that was conducted between 5 September 2011 and 30 November 2011, and which is referred to in the explanatory and financial memorandum to the Bill? It would be useful to set out the precise points that were made by the SDLP at that stage on equality issues. Bearing in mind that equality is very much part of the memorandum to the Bill, which can be considered as part of the Social Development Committee's scrutiny, why can the equality issues not be considered in tandem with the rest of the Bill through the normal processes rather than having a separate stand-alone process, the effect of which will be to focus solely on equality issues and, at best, force a situation in which the rest of the Bill would have to be taken through by accelerated passage?

Mr McDevitt: That is a bit of homework there, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I will do my best to deal with it.

Dr Farry makes a couple of very interesting points. The first is a procedural point. As a man whom I have known for quite a number of years and who was given to reading Standing Orders at night when the rest of us would be heading off to the pub, he knows why we would want to invoke Standing Order 35. He would understand exactly the difference between a procedure under Standing Order 35 and the work of a regular Committee. He, more than anyone, having represented his party on the bill of rights forum, if memory serves me right, would understand that the test that we need to apply is a pre-legislative test.

It is a fact that we are choosing to invoke this procedure at this point, but it is not a fact that we ignored the equality issues in the Bill. You will find significant commentary throughout this process from the SDLP about the equality impact of this Bill. That is a matter of fact, and there is just no getting away from it.

Dr Farry: Did you respond to the consultation? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr McDevitt: It is also a matter of fact that Naomi Long, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks must be made through the Chair. You can respect the Chair or do otherwise, but the Member has the Floor, and I ask other Members to respect that. Everyone will have their chance. It is early in the day yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McDevitt: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is also a matter of fact that Ms Naomi Long took an entirely different position on the Bill to the one that the Alliance Party is taking in this Chamber. I have had a cursory look through the amendments that are relevant to Part 4 of the Bill — the part in which I am interested — and I see that she opposed every single bit of it. She backed the Labour Party on every single amendment. That said, there was at least one DUP MP present for all those votes in opposition to it as well. That is a situation that, I am sure, that party will be able to square at some point.

9.30 pm

I pay tribute to Lord Morrow. When the House discussed the House of Lords amendments to the Bill, which were very helpful to those of us who think that it is a bad thing, I could see that the good Lord Morrow felt somewhat satisfied with the work that he had done. It is true that, when Members, from all parties, have had the space to think about the Bill and its merits, they have done the honourable thing. What is absolutely unbelievable is that, when those same people — some of them actually are the same people, such as the Minister of Finance — find themselves in office, they seem to forget their principled stand. They seem to lose the integrity of the opposition position that they held when they were acting as parliamentarians. I am afraid that that is the only conclusion.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. If you look at the Member's remarks, you will see that he is suggesting that the Minister of Finance has no principles. That is not an acceptable remark for any Member to make, and he should withdraw it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I caution Members. In a debate across the Floor, it is sometimes easy to stray. However, I ask all Members to mind the language that they use in their descriptions.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate your guidance, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I made no such suggestion. If there was a suggestion that I made such a suggestion, I am happy, for the First Minister's benefit, if there was even a perception in his delicate mind that that may have been my suggestion, to correct it. However, I am questioning the integrity of the political position. I am questioning the justification. How can you stand in front of your electorate and justify having one position in London and another in Belfast that is basically diametrically opposed? How can you have one position when you are an MP and another when you are a double-jobbing MLA in an Executive Ministry? Those are statements of fact and legitimate questions to pose in the House.
[Interruption.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no point in me continuing to repeat myself if no one is passing any remarks. I ask Members to respect the Chair and allow the Member to continue.

Mr McDevitt: I can only presume from the constant reaction to even a suggestion that there may be a contradiction in the DUP's position that I am onto something. Given the

desperation — we may get a point of order or two yet to try to push the issue — I can only presume that there is some substance to what I am suggesting. That is for others to reflect on, I suppose.

The issue of the particular impact that the Bill will have on women has already been raised. It has been raised in the context of the proposed changes to the way payments will be made and the fact that, if the Bill passes, some payments that currently go to the woman in a household will no longer go to the woman and will go elsewhere. It has been raised in the context that the impact of Part 4 of the Bill will be particularly severe on women in this community. It has been raised in the context of our understanding the continuing role that women play in dealing with the legacy of our conflict.

I have heard some pretty awful remarks made from a sedentary position about legitimate remarks that were made, legitimate questions that were asked and legitimate issues that were raised. It raises this question: are we so determined to be gold star pupils with the Treasury or the Department for Work and Pensions that we are willing to sacrifice the most vulnerable in this region? Are we as an Assembly so determined to fall into line because a couple of Ministers have suggested that, if we do not, there will be some awful constitutional crisis, when, in fact, all we are doing is exercising the power that we have been devolved to exercised? It is the power that the very Parliament that these people purport to hold as sovereign has given to us to exercise. Are we really honestly suggesting that a failure to properly scrutinise the Bill for, specifically, the equality implications and the ECHR implications would not undermine and lessen the legislative process in this House and weaken the House's standing either in the eye of this region or in the eyes of Westminster?
[Interruption.] I hear from the Benches opposite some suggestion that that may be how people feel. If that is the case, how do you square that with what Scotland has done? Scotland does not even have welfare reform devolved to it, and it has managed to have a considerably higher degree of influence over the Bill in its jurisdiction than has been managed here.

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will give way in a second. We have a power available to us, and, rather bizarrely, we refuse, point blank, to even consider using it. I give way to the First Minister.

Mr P Robinson: Of course, we have a power, and we have a normal procedure to scrutinise. You scrutinise it in Committee. That is exactly what this debate is about. It is about sending the Bill into Committee so that it can be scrutinised. Tell me what difference there is between negotiating with DWP outside when you have brought the whole thing to a standstill with all of the consequences that that will have and negotiating with DWP while the Bill is in Committee. What is the difference?

Mr McDevitt: The First Minister has nearly left me speechless. This is a man who is meant to be a master tactician. This is a man who is meant to have masterminded all the great negotiations on behalf of the DUP — everything. This is a man who is meant to be able to think like a champion chess player and anticipate the moves ahead. You would think that, if he was sitting on a jewel piece and had a free move on that would never be threatened by making this move, he would use it. I suspect that at the heart of this issue is the fact that the DUP does not want to use equality legislation to strengthen the hand of this region because it does not like or believe in equality legislation and does not think that we should have human rights particularly enshrined in legislation. It wants us to be just the same as everywhere else. Well, we are not. We are manifestly different, and we have different powers and different duties. Most importantly, we have different opportunities.

What I hear from the First Minister is this desire to be just like Scotland, when, in fact, I would like to hear from him is "Do you know something? We are not like Scotland. We have more powers than Scotland, and we are going to exercise them in the interests of this region". That is what exercising a Standing Order 35 procedure would allow him and his colleagues around the Executive table to do. It is absolutely shameful that the House tonight is deliberately ignoring the opportunity to make a strategic move. It is a move that, if he were negotiating in his party's selfish interest, he would be the first to make but which, because he is looking over his shoulder to another big party that he may or may not be looking to do a deal with in the future — I do not know — he is unwilling to make.

That is just about as much as I would like to say about the Bill. The question is this: does this House have the courage to use its power to stand up to bad law from London, or does this House surrender to bad law and adopt bad process in doing so? That is the question for the DUP and Sinn Féin to answer.

Mr Douglas: I speak for the motion today or tonight, whatever it is. The Book of Proverbs says that there is nothing new under the sun. Unfortunately, I will probably regurgitate some of the stuff that has been said already. I suppose that there is nothing new under the moon at this time of night.

I want to make a number of important points as background to the debate. As has been highlighted a number of times today, many of us across all the parties have serious problems with aspects of the welfare reform before us. The current welfare system needs to be streamlined and simplified. However, during the process of reform, we must ensure that the caring principle enshrined in our welfare system is not lost. We must not leave a vulnerable person or family without help or assistance, and I am pleased that Minister McCausland highlighted that yesterday during the debate on food banks.

Universal credit attempts to address the two principal failings of the current benefits system, and I believe most of us agree on those. The first is the complexity of the system. Anyone who has claimed benefits will readily testify just how difficult it is to cut through the tangled web of bureaucracy. I know another big word: *delicatessen*. *[Laughter.]* Members in the House and their office staff will definitely know that you nearly need a master's degree to fill in the forms for constituents, and we have all experienced that at a local level. Secondly, the current system fails to make it worthwhile for people to take up paid work. As someone who has experienced the scourge of unemployment in the past, I know only too well the failings of the system and the feelings of hopelessness and despair of being on the dole.

I had a cup of coffee with my friend Blakely McNally from Ballybeen earlier. I think he is in the Public Gallery somewhere. He said to me that a journalist had approached him and asked him if he knew anybody who enjoyed being on benefits. That is a terrible slight on the many genuine people who, unfortunately, find themselves unemployed and on benefits. By the way, Blakely is looking a lift to Ballybeen tonight if anybody is going that way.

We in the Northern Ireland Assembly have a unique position among the UK's devolved Administrations in that we have the capacity to set aside some or, indeed, all of the welfare reform proposals. My colleagues and I are uncomfortable with certain aspects of the Bill — yes, we have had discussions in the Social Development Committee — but it is not principle we are talking about tonight but

process. I firmly believe that any stalling will have serious repercussions for hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable in our society. The reality is that Northern Ireland has never broken parity with the rest of the United Kingdom on social security, and, hopefully, we will all agree that that should never happen lest we have a shortfall that the Assembly simply could not afford. As the First Minister said, we are talking about job losses to Northern Ireland if we mess up tonight.

Those who suggest that we should defer, ignore or hold out for changes to the welfare system in Westminster are not living in the real world. Tonight is "Make your mind up time" for the Assembly. While we will continue to scrutinise and press for changes and improvements to the Bill, we fully support the principle of parity because we recognise that Northern Ireland could not afford to meet the potential shortfall of hundreds of millions of pounds if the Bill is thrown out tonight. My colleague Simon Hamilton mentioned earlier that the cost could eventually reach £1 billion if we do not sort this out. Other Members have questioned that, but that is what Simon said: £1 billion.

Some people will know Bumper Graham from NIPSA. Speaking at the Social Development Committee on 2 February, he said:

"On a general point, the normal arrangement has been the application of parity for social security and, indeed, occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland. NIPSA believes that, by and large, parity, warts and all, is the lesser of the evils, so to speak. We are concerned about attempts to break parity ... We have had the nonsense from Tories, this week and previously, about looking at regional benefit rates in the UK."

That is the trade unions speaking. He finished by saying:

"While we are not absolutely wedded to parity, we believe that it is the baseline for going forward."

We are all aware of Northern Ireland's special social and economic needs. A study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, outside London, Northern Ireland will be the UK region worst affected by the coming changes to tax and benefits. However, the question that I ask Members is this: who are we to demand that vulnerable people in Ballybeen or Ballymacarrett in east Belfast should be treated more favourably than vulnerable people in

Birmingham, Brechin in Scotland or Bangor in north Wales?

9.45 pm

As neighbours and citizens, we have a duty to care for those in need, whether as the result of sickness, bereavement or some other circumstance beyond their control. Although the government-sponsored welfare system is a recent development, the principle behind such a system dates back to biblical times. Welfare reform should not be about gaining the high moral ground; it should be about doing what is best for our communities and neighbours, in particular, the most needy. It is good for people to work. Therefore, we support the aim of reducing welfare dependency and encouraging progression into work. The welfare system should not discourage people from getting a job; rather, it should be structured to encourage advancement into the workplace.

Minister Nelson McCausland has pressed and will continue to press for changes and improvements to soften the blow so that we can make sensible modifications to the, frankly, horrifying situation faced by sick and disabled people. However, time is running out. Any delay to the introduction of the Bill will have potentially serious consequences for hundreds of thousands of our most vulnerable citizens.

Let us have a reality check about what we are really dealing with. The current Con-Dem coalition Government have the block grant in their sights and will continue to reduce our allocation. Every Department and every public service faces further dramatic cuts in years to come. Yesterday, the Chancellor, George Osborne, announced in Birmingham that benefits are to be slashed as the Government attempt to find another £10 billion in spending cuts. I read a report that said:

"The proposals place him on a collision course with Liberal Democrat coalition partners, after he bluntly rejected their calls to tax the rich".

That is the Government we are dealing with. It went on to say:

"the Chancellor set out an argument he clearly hoped would appeal to working people, as he insisted benefit claimants should be forced to make sacrifices to help the Government balance the books."

What a statement. Here is another millionaire member of the Cabinet, a Chancellor who has

never known what it is like to stand alone in a dole queue, borrow from a moneylender to feed his children or struggle every August to buy school uniforms. This is the face of the Treasury that we are up against when Minister McCausland goes to London to press for changes. Can we really expect any empathy or understanding if, as a result of tonight's vote, we break ranks and, possibly, break parity?

The Bill is only at Second Stage, and we will continue to press for changes. I have just returned to the Social Development Committee and learned recently that it will increase the time spent in meetings from roughly three hours a week to around 20 hours a week right up to Christmas to scrutinise the reforms. If the Bill succeeds tonight, I will have a few nights off. Surely, that Committee, with the 20 hours a week to scrutinise the Bill, is the arena in which to come to agreement on the changes that are required by us all. There is precious little time to enable us to address concerns that I and many others in the Chamber have, but the answer is not to delay the Second Reading. I support the motion and oppose the reasoned amendment.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an rúin. I did not think that I would have found myself agreeing with a quote from the Book of Proverbs, but there is nothing new under the sun. Hopefully, like the Member who has just spoken and brought newer material to the debate, I am not going to reiterate many of the points that have been made today.

I thank my party colleague Mickey Brady for tabling the reasoned amendment and Alec Maskey, who outlined the party position and, indeed, the position of the Committee. It was very noticeable, particularly with regard to the views of the Committee that he laid out, that all the Committee members who spoke subsequently did not disagree with anything he said.

The first of two of the striking things about the debate today is that I have not heard a single Member who has spoken say that this is a good Bill. Not one person in the Assembly who has spoken has said that this is a good Bill. Indeed, the person tasked with tabling and leading on the Bill — the Minister himself — said that it was not a Bill that he would have tabled if he had had the power to do something different. The question that raises is this: if this is a poor or bad Bill, what are we going to do to make it a better Bill?

Mickey Brady tabled the amendment on behalf of Sinn Féin. It provides an opportunity for the Bill to be made better. Again, I do not think that any Member whom I have heard speaking today has not said that they do not want to see a better Bill as the outcome of this process. So why would people not be for deferral to give us the time, space and opportunity to make this a better Bill?

One of the other aspects of this is that the Minister said that he was still in discussions or negotiations — whatever word you want to use — with his counterpart in the Tory Government. When he is having those negotiations, would it not be better if he was in a position to say that the Assembly is not satisfied with the Bill and will take time and space to make it a better Bill? Certainly, I believe and I think that our party and any person who thinks about it rationally would say that that would put the Minister in a better position. If it is passed, as it stands, I have absolutely no doubt that the person he goes to meet next week — we wish the Minister well — will say, "What is the point of me changing anything? You have already agreed the principles. Just proceed and take it as it is".

The Minister can address this when he is on his feet. The Bill has been in process for a long time. The Minister got sight of the Bill and will have seen its broad parameters. He tells us that he has been in discussion with his counterpart in the Westminster Government. Can he tell us what changes are in the Bill, as it is presented today, so that we can ascertain and analyse what changes have been made? When I asked that question earlier —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

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Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mr F McCann: Do you agree that two other Ministers have met Lord Freud on a number of occasions? They were the two SDLP Social Development Ministers, and they delivered nothing either.

Mr McCartney: I am certainly not going to disagree with that. I think that that is what we have to say.

In many ways, if we are going to strengthen the Bill, let us strengthen the hand of those who are tasked with making it a better Bill. In my opinion, deferral is the best way of doing it. If we vote this through to Committee Stage, why would the person on the other side of the negotiating table not say, "You have already

revealed your bottom line. Why should I negotiate with you?"

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Bell: This is not a question of deferring it to allow the Minister to meet next week or the week after that. The Minister made it very clear at the start that, if we defer it tonight, it goes to 2013. That means that we have no social fund from 1 April. That is the reason why he cannot do it.

Mr McCartney: That leads on to the second very remarkable thing about today's debate. I have never heard so many assumptions in a debate. People got up and made assumptions. They think that, by making an assumption, all of a sudden it is fact. That is not the way that it works. This has never happened before. This is the first time that there has been a reasoned amendment. None of us knows how long the deferral will be. People are making assumptions because of what happens in Westminster or Leinster House. This is the Assembly. We are tasked with bringing this forward in the way that we wish. However, people are making the assumption that it will be six months and then the timeline will be broken.

When the Minister spoke today, I was struck by one phrase that he used. He said that we had run out of road, but he did not give us any timeline. That is another assumption. We have not run out of road. There is an opportunity, by deferral. The Assembly and the people who are tasked with making this a better Bill can, if they focus their attention, do it and do it within a timeline that would allow the Bill to proceed without all the assumptions that have been made here today. That is important. The assumption is made that the social fund will come to an end. Where are the facts? Assumptions were made today about the figures. I heard a number of figures mentioned, even in the debate. Some people talked about £220 million; some people talked about £200 million; and some people talked about £250 million. Those are all assumptions. When Alec Maskey spoke on behalf of the Committee, unchallenged by any Committee member, he said that officials could not tell the Committee the exact figure. I assume, which is perhaps a bad thing to do, that they could not tell the Minister either, because he did not give us a figure. It was very noticeable —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Allister: I inform the Member that I hold in my hand an answer that I received today from the Minister of Finance, which says that the direct costs amount to some £207 million during the spending review period and that, for the rest of the decade, they will accumulate to £1.2 billion. Someone seems to know, and that seems to be the Finance Minister, who might be thought a more credible source than the Member.

Mr McCartney: If the Member, with his training as a barrister, were given that answer in court, I am sure that he would certainly give it rigorous cross-examination. That is simply because the Finance Department tells us, at a particular —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: You challenge the House by saying that no one is able to provide facts. A Member presents you with facts, in writing, and you still will not accept them. Is it not the case —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Humphrey: Is it not the case, Mr Deputy Speaker, that this is not about parity or facts but simply about a party being led by the nose by those in Dublin who are trying to fight cuts in the Republic of Ireland and will not face reality here in Northern Ireland?

Mr McCartney: It is wonderful, when you make a point about assumptions, that the next Member to speak makes a number of assumptions.

That is a two-line answer. I do not know what the question was. Therefore, it would be very, very foolish, in an Assembly that prides itself on scrutiny —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Allister: The question was this:

"To ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel what would be the estimated impact on the block grant if the Welfare Reform Bill was not passed in sequence

with similar changes in the rest of the United Kingdom."

It is not a two-line answer; it is a two-page answer. It says that there will be £207 million in this spending period, accumulating to £1.2 billion by 2018-19. If Sinn Féin thinks that the money for that grows on some mythical tree at Connolly House, the same tree from where money will come to fund a united Ireland —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions —

Mr Allister: — it really is completely deluded.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be short and to the point.

Mr McCartney: I would never assume that money grows on trees.

I am told that you were once an eminent barrister. I am sure that, when the word "estimate" is used, that is all that it is: an estimate. I am sure that if you —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr McCartney: If you were defending someone in court in the morning —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair. Everybody.

Mr McCartney: I am sure, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that, if the honourable barrister were defending someone in the morning, he would surely look for the grey area around the word "estimate". Assumptions are assumptions. We deal in facts.

I have not ruled out nor have I said —

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He has lectured us about making assumptions. Can he provide the House with evidence of Sinn Féin's assumption that, in deferring this matter, the British Government are somehow going to roll over?

10.00 pm

Mr McCartney: Alex Maskey and Michael Brady did not make that assumption. However, we asked a simple question, which was why anyone would negotiate with you when you have already revealed your bottom line. It is

like going to buy a car and telling the guy in the garage that you will buy it for £5,000 but you want it for £4,500. What is he going to say to you? He is not going to say, "Aye, right enough, let's talk." You have already revealed your bottom line. That is the point that we are making. The reasoned amendment does not stop the Bill from becoming better. That is our basic contention in seeking a deferral. It may not work out, but there is an opportunity that, in our opinion, we should not spurn.

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

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will, indeed.

Mr Maskey: Many people have referred to the social fund. Albeit it used to be governed under this wonderful beast in the room called parity, it is a devolved matter. It is entirely a matter for this Assembly how and when we disburse the social fund. It is not a question of parity. The social fund is not subject to legislation. It is already devolved to the Assembly, so let us dismiss the argument that if we do not pass this legislation, it will impact on the social fund. The Minister's departmental officials advised the Committee no later than last week that this legislation will not impact on the social fund. They said to the Committee that there would be an issue around the money to be approved. That is a matter for this Assembly and the Finance Department. It is not subject to this particular legislation. It is already devolved.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much for that observation. It is very interesting. It has been said a number of times as a statement of fact that parity cannot be broken, but there is increasing evidence that there have been a number of instances in which parity has been broken. Therefore, the assumption that parity cannot be broken is just that — an assumption. Again, I congratulate the people who are involved in it.

I want to turn to the points that Edwin Poots made. He did a very good impression of the Minister of Health from the Back Benches. Conall McDevitt took up the same point. Perhaps it is something that you can reflect on. The idea is that 8% of people are unemployed, and the other 92% resent the fact that the 8% are claiming benefits. Even using your own statistics, many of the people who would be in your 92% bracket claim benefits. Therefore, the idea that it is the unemployed — in your definition, the 8% — who are the only people on benefits is totally and absolutely wrong. It is not

only wrong; it is insulting to the people who find themselves in employment, and I have absolutely no doubt that there are people in this Assembly who claim benefits, and quite rightly, because they may have invalidity issues or something else. Members have done it in the past, and I am sure that they will do it in the future. Therefore, I think that it is bad for you, either as a Back-Bencher or as a Minister, to make that type of assumption and generalisation. If you are looking for me to give way, I will give way.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. He has been very reasonable on that. On the 92%, is it not the case that elements of welfare reform are helpful to the working poor? Is it not the case that the working poor actually need the most help at the moment? Is it not the case that 10,000 children will be lifted out of poverty as a result of this?

Mr McCartney: I do not disagree with what you are saying. You are actually making my point for me. You had the 8% as the only people getting benefits. You have now accepted, even in your own percentages, that some of those 92%, quite rightly because they are working poor, are entitled to benefits and should be protected. I just want to make that point.

When we come to this type of debate, which is a very serious debate, we should not use a single incident about one person as a way of trying to convince the rest of us of what we should be doing. To say that someone out there has a drink-related problem and then for someone else to say that the reason that that person has a drink problem is because he or she is getting a couple of pounds on benefits is really crass. I can imagine you negotiating with a sector of the health service and saying that you are not going to give its staff a pay rise because it employs a couple of alcoholics, who might use it to get more drink. It is a bit silly to say that. We should not reduce this debate down to that type of argument, where we pick one anecdotal incident and give no evidence to back up a point that is spurious and that tries to create this sort of image that people on benefits are somehow malingerers. I think that that is wrong, particularly when it comes from a Back-Bencher or a Minister.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mrs Foster: Does the Member agree with me that it is also crass that a single mother who works 25 hours a week is not entitled to get free

school meals for one of her three children, who is in secondary school this year, because of the policies of the Education Minister? Is it not the case that welfare reform is seeking to help the working poor to be able to work? That girl would be better off not working, and I think that that is wrong. She wants to work but is being penalised for doing so because she is not able to get free school meals for her child who has just gone to secondary school.

Mr McCartney: I do not doubt —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will allow the Minister to answer that.

Mr O'Dowd: We have actually broadened the criteria for young people who are entitled to free school meals. One of our concerns, however, is that figures produced in England show that thousands and thousands of young people will lose out on free school meals because of welfare reform. I have made a commitment in this body that I will not allow a similar situation to arise here. I hope that the Member opposite is as keen when it comes to backing that up at the Executive table, because it will require extra finances.

Mrs Foster: Well, that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr McCartney: I feel that I am taking on the role of the Deputy Speaker. I will certainly allow you to answer that.

Mrs Foster: The Education Minister did not answer the question about somebody who is in need now — now — and is working poor. He has not answered the question.

Mr O'Dowd: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to get back to discussing the scope of the Bill, please, rather than having this wider debate and this bit of tit for tat across the Chamber.

Mr McCartney: I am very mindful that I do not want to insult anybody in the House.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way on a related issue?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mr O'Dowd: One of the issues relating to the Welfare Reform Bill will be passported benefits such as free school meals. We will have to conduct a review of free school meals. I would like to expand, and will bring proposals forward to expand, the category of young people who qualify for free school meals. I am delighted to hear the Member opposite state that she will support those proposals.

Mrs Foster: I am saying —

Mr McCartney: I think that it is has got to the stage where I will be accused of double-jobbing, and I would not like to — *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: We can take it outside.

Mr McCartney: I know there are those —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Could all remarks come through the Chair, please?

Mr McCartney: Some people are very comfortable with double-jobbing, but I am not one of them.

On the Member's point, if someone finds themselves in that position, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that they can progress in the way that the Member outlined. As has been pointed out to me from a sedentary position, the Bill, as it is now constituted, will allow the Member in the future to stand up and talk about not just one person but perhaps countless others, and that is what we are trying to protect ourselves from.

A Member — I wrote this down but I am not sure who said it — said that we cannot break parity because we do not know where that will lead. Again, that is a massive assumption. I was only in the Assembly a short time when Mitchel McLaughlin tabled a motion on corporation tax. Members got up that day and made the exact same observation: if we break with parity and the tax regime, who knows where it will lead? Success has many fathers and mothers. Everybody now seems to say that the first person or first party to bring up the corporation tax issue was them. So you can break with parity if it is the right thing to do for the people whom we represent.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He seems to talk about corporation tax as if it is a done deal. I do not know whether he heard the Secretary of State at the Conservative Party conference yesterday. He seems to be saying that that was a breach of parity as if it had been accomplished when, three years after it was first raised, it still has not been done. So, how is it a break with parity?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that this is not a debate about corporation tax.

Mr Campbell: No, but it is about parity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we try to stick to the scope of the Bill, please?

Mr McCartney: The Member was not here when I said that one of the remarkable things about the debate was assumption. I never said it was achieved. What I said was that when it was said that it was good idea, people said that you cannot break with parity because you do not know where it is going to lead. I did not say that we have achieved corporation tax powers. Perhaps the way I talk translates as something different across the Chamber. Perhaps I will try it in Irish, and you may be able to understand it the next time.

Whatever we do and however we progress this, please do not base it on assumption. Base it on evidence and fact and then, perhaps, we will have a better debate.

I was struck by something that Sammy Douglas said in his last remark, that George Osborne wants to impose £10 billion of further cuts. If I was in George Osborne's shoes tonight, I would be looking across at this Assembly and saying, "Roll over." This is the rollover. They all said it.

I will finish off with a point I made at the start and I will give way to any person here who said it. Not one person here tonight or from the minute we started this debate this morning said that this was a good Bill. As a matter of fact, they all got up and said they would love to change it. So, if I was in George Osborne's shoes, do you know what I would be saying? "If you want a rollover, come over here." But there will be no rollover from this party. *[Interruption.]* That is why we will go for a deferral. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Givan: I support the motion brought forward by the Minister. I will recap on some of the key points on the broader principles of the Bill, which I support. The Members opposite challenged that they heard nobody say that they think this is a good Bill. This party has been clear that there are aspects of the Bill that need to be improved but the Minister indicated that this party supports the Bill's core principles and what it is about. Yes, there are elements that we want to change, and we will do that in the appropriate place, but the core principles of the Bill are something that this party can support.

Mr Ross: I appreciate the Member giving way so early. Is it not the case that virtually all Bills that come to the House at Second Stage will change through the normal legislative process? So, to claim at this point that the Bill is not fit for purpose before we have even got to Committee Stage to make amendments is a ludicrous position to hold.

Mr Givan: Yes, that is exactly right. This Place set up Committees to do that work, to scrutinise legislation then to come forward with proposals as to how it should be changed. As Members indicated, whenever that process has been followed through, at times Bills are radically changed. At last, after months of delay, this Assembly now has the opportunity to do that work and make changes that could improve the Bill but the Members opposite and Sinn Féin delayed the Bill and denied the House that opportunity.

One of the Bill's core principles is about protecting the vulnerable. It is the mark of any society how it cares and shows compassion to those who are vulnerable and need help. That is something that we as a party are very clear on. I think it is something that everybody in the House shares, that those who are in need, need to get support. That is something that we all wish to do and provide for. We want to help those who are genuinely in need of that assistance. We never know when constituents of ours will need that help. Many who pay into the state, such as those who worked for FG Wilson, now need that support. They will find that support very helpful and it is quite right that that support will be there for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members, please.

10.15 pm

Mr Givan: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

What is important, which the Bill articulates clearly, is that people who can work should work. That is quite right and is a principle that I would have thought every Member would be able to sign up to. However, alarmingly, what I heard from the Members opposite relates more to keeping people stuck in the benefits trap as opposed to asking how we can help people get into employment. There has been a great degree of absence from the SDLP and Sinn Féin about getting people into work rather than keeping them stuck on benefits.

At the start of the debate, the Minister mentioned an interesting figure, which I have not heard Members refer to. I heard Members talking about the needs of children. The Minister said that 60,000 children have no working parents. We talk about a generational issue and how you break that cycle. Is it not alarming to everybody here that that is the environment and culture that 60,000 of our children are growing up in? There are very real reasons why some do not have a parent or parents who work. That is something that I thought every Member would want to address. There are 120,000 households in which no one works. I would have thought that that was something that every Member would want to address. There will be some who, for genuine and legitimate reasons, are unable to work, and they need support. That is why I am disappointed that the Members opposite have been greatly lacking in talking about how to get people into work and how people can be supported to get in to work, which is what the Bill talks about. Instead, the current welfare system has created benefit dependency. The current system denies people the opportunity to work, because, for some, it does not pay to work. That is what we need to change. We need to change the system to one that pays people to work instead of them being stuck in a benefits trap. What we need to do then is challenge —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McGlone: I think that, maybe, we have to inject a little bit of reality into tonight's proceedings. We are talking almost in isolation from the real world. In the past wee while, 38,500 more people are out of work not because they want to go on benefits but because there is no work. So, if we could just inject a little bit of reality into the debate, please.

Mr Givan: I am glad that the Member is now talking about the employment market. I say that because the parties opposite have not been talking about how to get people into work. Of course, there are people who have lost their jobs in what is a difficult economic climate, but jobs are available. Are Members really saying that there is not a single job vacancy in Northern Ireland that people could be applying for? I do not think so?

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I made the point earlier that all the parties were united weeks ago in complaining about and decrying the fact that a number of people lost their jobs in, for example, FG Wilson and have perhaps been thrown onto the dole queue. No Member would have had the audacity to say, "By the way, stop crying to us about losing your job in FG Wilson; there are plenty of other jobs out there. Go and get one of those." No Member said that.

Mr Givan: When Members talk about injecting a little bit of reality, let them not twist words and manufacture things that have not been said to try to detract from the flaws in the argument that they were making all day and up to 10.00 pm.

It is true that there are individuals who could work but, because of the current welfare system, it does not pay them to even go for those jobs. We should be supporting people to go for those jobs. As I indicated earlier, we should be supporting people who genuinely are not in a position to work, and people who are in genuine need and are vulnerable should be getting that support.

There are elements of the Bill that I welcome and that I think that all Members can support. For example, there is additional support for childcare. Mrs Foster mentioned the example earlier of a constituent of hers who it did not pay to work. The Bill will assist individuals, particularly women, who want to work and it will support them in meeting additional childcare costs.

I also welcome the fact the people who will be on the universal credit system will be able to remain registered on it for at least two years, so they will not have the fear of going for a job, getting that job, losing certain entitlements, and then having the concern that, if they lose their job, they may not get the benefits again. The universal credit system will help to facilitate those people to make that choice because they will have the security and knowledge that that support will be there for them again, if it becomes needed.

A core principle of the Bill is that the system should be fair to taxpayers. Taxpayers who pay into the state will want to ensure that the system is compassionate. That is the system that I and our Members want: one that will show compassion and support the vulnerable. Taxpayers also want, as the Minister indicated earlier, a system that is effective and affordable. We need to encourage taxpayers, particularly those who are on lower incomes, to stay in work. We should not allow those on low incomes to look at others and ask, "What is the point in working?" The working poor want to know what is the point in going out, day after day, sacrificing home life, and all that, if they feel that the benefit system would reward them more. Therefore, they may not continue in their employment. We need to create a culture in which we want people to go to work, and we support them into work. That requires political leadership which, unfortunately, is absent in the SDLP and Sinn Féin on this issue.

The consequences of not taking the Bill forward have been made very clear, and Members have talked about assumptions. We made no assumptions in outlining the consequences for the social fund, the threat to jobs for those who administer the system on behalf of GB, and around the IT requirements to be met.

I did not quite pick it up earlier, but I see that Mr Brady is in the Chamber. He referred, I think this morning, to the NASA IT system as some kind of example. He referred to NASA in some respect.

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes.

Mr Brady: Let me clarify the point that you are trying to make. *[Laughter.]* What I said was that, in 1993, when the Social Security Agency went live, as the saying goes, it was the biggest computerisation outside the NASA space system. It went £55 million over budget, but it still did not work properly. That was the point that I made.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member saying that. I could not quite make it out when he spoke earlier.

The other assumption that was made was that, somehow, our position in going to the British Government will be strengthened by accepting the amendment to defer the Bill, which, ultimately, will kill it. Why do Members opposite not think that the British Government will turn around and say, "If you want to break parity and

bring upon yourselves a bill of £200 million plus over the next decade, and £1 billion plus, which you will need to find within your own budget, go ahead; feel free. If that is the choice that you want to make, you will need to identify how you plan to pay for it, and where you will make cuts in health and education." I would say that it is a pretty safe assumption to make that that is exactly the position that the British Government will take when the Members opposite seem to feel that they hold some kind of extreme leverage to make the British Government pay for all that.

Members have talked around the principles of the Bill, but the crux of this, the reason that we are faced with the reasoned amendment to kill the Bill, is more to do with politics, the grandstanding that is taking place and the internal competition that is going on with the SDLP. That is really what determines the positions of the parties opposite.

The Bill was delayed for months by Sinn Féin and, as I said earlier, that denied the House the opportunity, until this point, to scrutinise the Bill, and come up with ways in which it could be improved. At no point in any of those discussions did Sinn Féin indicate that it would approve the Executive's paper, allow it to go to the Assembly and then, at the very first hurdle, table a reasoned amendment to defer it, which would, ultimately, kill the Bill. That was never raised in any of the discussions that took place. How has that come about? Why has it been the position of Sinn Féin, until now, to play this political game over the issue? I suspect, as Members indicated earlier, that it has as much to do with the internal divisions within Sinn Féin on this issue. What you are really saying is that the long arm of Adams is reaching out from Dublin and controlling and interfering with Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. He is more concerned about the position that Sinn Féin is taking in the Dáil, where Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ridicule his party for implementing Tory cuts in Northern Ireland. That has more to do with Sinn Féin's position now. That concern has been coming from its Southern counterparts. Let us crystallise the position: it is a case of the Twenty-six Counties wagging the British Six-Counties tail of Sinn Féin, and it does not like it. The Members opposite need to try to take back some control. They are in a Northern Ireland Assembly. Stop being controlled by your Southern counterparts. Stand up and realise that you are the largest nationalist party in the Assembly.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for giving way. You talked about the reasoned amendment killing the Bill. I reiterate what I said this

morning: tabling a reasoned amendment is not about defeating a Bill; it is about creating an opportunity for further consideration and adjustment. It is not about curtailing the legislative process; it is about using it to promote better outcomes. I just wanted to clarify that for you, because you seem to have difficulty grasping that concept.

Mr Givan: Thank you very much. I grasp the concept of the reasoned amendment. Members opposite have said that this has never happened before, and so the Assembly can decide how we would set a precedent. If the Assembly were to set a precedent of introducing a Bill, immediately tabling an amendment that, ultimately, would defer it and then saying that it would bring it back the next week, that would be treating the House with contempt. It would make a mockery of the process. If the House decided to kill a Bill, which is what reasoned amendments do, as they do at Westminster, it would make a nonsense of the House to want to bring it back a week later. Members need to catch a grip of exactly what they are suggesting and the way in which they think that they can use this place as some kind of toy. This is a serious Chamber, and the Members opposite should treat it as such.

Sinn Féin's failure of leadership, as the Members opposite indicated, is demonstrated by the fact that its MPs do not take their seats. The Members opposite will ask what difference it would make. I pose the question to the Members: why did it stand down its MLAs who were MPs and announce that they were going to spend more time at Westminster and make their presence felt? What is the point of the party taking that decision, recognising that it wants to spend more time at Westminster but not being able to walk through the door into where it could vote and make a difference?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to come back to the scope of the Bill, please.

Mr Givan: I am quite happy to do that, Mr Deputy Speaker. We, in this place, need to show leadership. Sinn Féin, as the largest party on the nationalist side of the Executive, has demonstrated cowardice as opposed to leadership. It has been shown lacking and needs to step up to the plate and show political leadership. Members of my party have made it clear that there are elements of the Bill that we do not like. There are elements of it, such as the core principles, that we agree with. We want to get it to Committee Stage so that we can work and engage seriously on it. Where

we can make improvements, we will do so. Ultimately, however, difficult decisions have to be made in politics. There will be those who are prepared to make those decisions and those who are prepared to duck them. What disappoints me is that Sinn Féin is ducking the political responsibility granted to it by the electorate. It is not showing leadership on this issue. My party, as the largest in the Executive, will show leadership not just for our community but for all the people of Northern Ireland, because they look to this place for serious consideration of and leadership on difficult issues and, ultimately, for the difficult decisions that need to be taken. That is what my party will do later tonight.

Mrs D Kelly: I remind Members that the economic meltdown was not caused by the poorest families and their children. The scandal today is that they are being asked to bear the brunt of austerity cuts in this recession.

I have listened carefully to what many Members have said this afternoon and this evening. I hope to refer to some of their contributions and to make some comments on how women will be adversely impacted by the cuts.

I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin Members have said that they are not going to roll over. There is still time for them to sign the petition of concern if they do not want to be roll-over Tory puppets. I invite them to reconsider their position on that basis.

10.30 pm

I listened carefully as many Members talked about the unemployed as if the unemployed have made a lifestyle choice. I welcome the contributions by other Members, who recognised that there are many people who are working poor. People ought to remember that.

I want to look at some of the statistics provided by Save the Children. In Northern Ireland, 21% of children live in persistent child poverty, which is more than double the GB rate. More than 12% of children or approximately 50,000 live in severe poverty. Approximately half of the children who live in relative poverty are in a family in which one parent works.

It is well known that Northern Ireland is a low-wage economy. According to the 2011 annual survey of hours and earnings, median earnings for all employees stand at £18,720, which is some 10·9% lower than the UK's £21,008. There has been an increase in part-time jobs at the expense of full-time work, and median gross

weekly part-time earnings stand at £151·06. The unemployment rate for May to July 2012 was estimated at 8·2% or 71,000, which was up 10,000 over the quarter. Unadjusted figures show that 45·5% of the unemployed have been unemployed for one year or more. Those figures represent a rise of almost 20,000 since 2009, and the Northern Ireland jobless level has moved above the UK average. As Members all know, from that period until today, that brief has been held by a DUP Minister. It is unfortunate that the jobs Minister has left the Chamber, but, perhaps, that was to save her blushes. I know that she invited Mr O'Dowd to take it outside. I note that the boxing Minister is here, and perhaps she might referee if there any further interventions or invitations to take matters outside.

The cuts come not just against a background of rising unemployment. We all know about the rising cost of living. The cuts are happening at the same time as higher living costs, with utility bills in Northern Ireland up by £800 and the average cost of a shopping basket up by 18% since 2008. It is calculated that an average household in Northern Ireland will need to spend an extra £3,500 just to pay the bills compared with four years ago. That threatens to push more children into poverty. I am at a loss to understand how the Welfare Reform Bill will bring more children out of poverty.

In preparing my contribution, I looked at some of the research that the Committee for Social Development has rightly commissioned. One such paper is the Assembly Research and Information Service's 'Poverty and Social Deprivation: Mapping Executive and Departmental Strategies, Policies and Programmes in Northern Ireland'. I want to look at some of the measures that are supposed to assist people who live in poverty and to help take them out of poverty. The Minister for Social Development referred to some of those.

The SDLP did not support and still does not support the social investment fund. Nonetheless, it is a measure that is supposed to tackle poverty. It has not been delivered. We welcome the social protection fund, and it may well be a measure that can be enhanced to address poverty. In relation to that fund, the paper states:

"The Executive states that it remains committed to tackling the problem of disadvantage within Northern Ireland. This disadvantage is most acute in those interface communities where the problems are many and complex."

I know that many of the Members opposite represent such communities, and I believe that, tonight, they do them a real disservice by not recognising that their needs should come before we pander to the Tories and their imposition of cuts on the people in the North. Devolved government was supposed to be about making a difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

We should look at the childcare strategy, which others have referred to. We all know that affordable and accessible childcare is key in assisting people who are trying to get back to work. It is an enabler that will help many people to return to work, particularly those who have low pay. It has not been agreed. It says here:

"A new strategy is in preparation — to be launched summer 2012."

Sinn Féin and the DUP have questions to answer about some of the measures that they have put in the Programme for Government commitments to assist both the working poor and children in families that live in severe poverty.

I was somewhat alarmed at Mr Givan's contribution. I wonder just what his value system is and whether the DUP is wedded to the principles of a welfare system. Where would his theory end if we followed his argument? Would he propose that we had a US-type welfare system? I think not. That is not something that the SDLP would ever want to see in any other jurisdiction.

The Minister referred to mitigating circumstances, although we have not seen proof of those yet. The Children's Commissioner launched a report on 26 April 2012 that stated that the welfare reforms would put more children into poverty. Research at that time found that the families of 6,500 children would lose money. That is attributed to the plan to cap benefits at £26,000 a year for working-age households. The Minister then said:

"I think the figure of £26,000 is a reasonable income on benefit and I think most people out there across Northern Ireland would take that view as well."

Perhaps that is a fair comment. He went on to say:

"I think that the impact on Northern Ireland will be very similar to what is it to many other parts of the UK."

Accepting that does not give us much confidence that he recognises Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. Many of my colleagues referred to those circumstances. The Minister went on to say in April:

"We are still waiting on information from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to enable us to get the precise figure."

I trust that he will be able to tell us the precise figure when he sums up this evening.

Turning to the ways in which the welfare reform will impact on women, I put on record our opposition to payment of the universal credit to one member of the household, which, in most cases, will be the main designated applicant. I welcome other Members' recognition of that. Ms Ruane pointed out that Sinn Féin opposed that measure. That is because we recognise that, in practice, it will often mean that the money will go to the man in the household. That provision could leave the vulnerable open to financial abuse, particularly in cases where domestic violence, abuse or addiction plague a household. It will not be as simple as a mutual agreement; instead, many claimants will have no access to their benefits and will thus be deprived of any state support. That will lead to serious domestic problems.

A recent report on economic resource transfers to women from men — from the purse to the wallet, as some call it — indicated that differences in preferences, incentives and bargaining power mattered to household outcomes. Even when women and men have the same capabilities, households do not act as unitary entities, and preferences over household production and consumption decisions are broadly gender-specific. A household is a collective entity where intra-household bargaining takes place, and decisions may or may not be fully co-operative. Bargaining power may be affected by individual household members' shares of resources or income.

A 10% cut to childcare tax credit should be reversed to provide financial support for low-income families and universal childcare. I hope that the Minister will take note of that.

My colleague Patsy McGlone referred to steps and actions that the Scottish Executive have taken and the types of Committee that they are establishing to look at how welfare reform will

impact on their people and how they might mitigate that. I suggest that Minister McCausland look to the Scottish Government as an example of good practice in how to take seriously the adverse impact of the cuts on our people.

A great number of people have said tonight that money cannot be found. Only last night, all parties around here found an additional €15 million to be paid to the farming community. It has been widely acknowledged that money has been lost through the failure of Sinn Féin and the DUP to agree on the Education and Skills Authority and to legislate on that. The most recent estimate was that around £12 million had been squandered on lost opportunities. I also ask Members to reflect on the all-party calls for air passenger duty to be different here in the North. Surely that could be classified as a breach of parity. Therefore, there are precedents for money being found, money being squandered and breaks in parity when there is the political will to do so.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr Allister: The Member talks about money being found and quotes agriculture. Is the truth of that situation not that the Minister announced that she would not take money from the farmers, which is modulation? That is not finding government money; that is allowing farmers to keep a little more money in their pockets. On corporation tax and all of that — I am no fan of that, as the Member might know — is the fundamental of that not that, if you are to devolve it, you must make up the shortfall out of the block grant? That is the parity point about that.

Mrs D Kelly: I will go back to the agriculture point, because, as the Member well knows, it is taken out of modulation, and the Member is correct, but there would still be a loss —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will Members make their comments through the Chair, please?

Mrs D Kelly: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the Member well knows, that is then a loss of €15 million to the rural development programme, which is designed to improve opportunities for economic growth, social capacity and cohesion in rural communities. So, there is a political will to move money around. I made the comment that money can be found where there is a political will to do so, and there can be arguments. That was my

point over lost opportunities and the money that has been squandered over the failure to agree the ESA.

There has been a lot of talk this afternoon and this evening about political leadership and political skill and about time. The SDLP is prepared to commit to working day and night to get the Bill right, and I ask other Members to join us in that task. What confidence can we have as a devolved Administration when many of the amendments that the parties that attend Westminster supported were ignored by the Tories? Those amendments are not all particular to Northern Ireland. Many people living across GB will be adversely impacted on by the welfare reform cuts. So, let us get real here on what this actually means.

I used to work with a doctor — a psychiatrist, actually — *[Laughter.]* I worked with him; I have no difficulty with that. He used to say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I". Nobody knows when their family and their job will be at risk, and they may be in need of the very benefits that the Bill will diminish or do away with altogether. You should start telling that to the people in Larne and east Antrim in particular who will lose their job over the next few weeks with the closure of FG Wilson. Those people will say that they worked all their life and paid tax all their life but, when they went to look for benefit, there was nothing there because Members opposite did not have the courage to stand up and say that this is a devolved region that will make welfare reforms that are fit for purpose for the people whom we represent.

10.45 pm

Mr Agnew: The Bill is about cuts: cuts to social security, cuts handed down by the Tory-led coalition, cuts that are an attack on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. In asking me to support the Bill, you ask me to support those cuts: I cannot do that.

From the outset, the UK Government have made it clear that they want to cut £18 billion from social security. It is worth pointing out that benefit fraud is estimated to cost us £1 billion, so that is £17 billion over and above trying to tackle welfare fraud. It is not just about going after the so-called undeserving; it is about making cuts across the board to social security payments. If this were proportionately applied to Northern Ireland, it would mean about £500 million worth of cuts to our social security payments, but we all know that, in Northern Ireland, we have a disproportionately high number on benefits, so that figure could be higher. Therefore, more than £500 million

could be cut from the budgets of the poorest people in Northern Ireland should the Bill be agreed.

When you set a target of saving £18 billion, it is clear from the outset that your agenda is not improving the system to make it work better. It is clear that your agenda is to re-engineer the system to save money. I hear people talking about welfare reform as something that needs to happen and saying that we can all agree that the system is not perfect. We can agree that, but, ultimately, the changes that have come from Westminster and have been duplicated in this Bill are about saving money and taking money from the poorest households. Why do we need to make those savings? Not, as the Government would have us believe, because we spent too much on public services and therefore must cut back, but because of the billions that we spent on bailing out the banks.

During the Westminster election, my party and others called for a Robin Hood tax. The proposed reforms are the opposite of a Robin Hood tax. They propose to rob the poor to pay for the mistakes of the rich. Last year, average earnings shrank by 4.4%, while the incomes of directors of the FTSE 100 companies rose by 49%. We talk about making work pay, but, clearly, it pays some much more than others. In fact, the UK is one of the most unequal of the developed nations, with the poorest 10% of our society receiving only 1% of the total income, while the top 10% receive 30 times that. The proposed social security cuts will only increase inequality across the UK and in Northern Ireland. We are not all in it together. Clearly, those at the top have not felt their share of the pain. That is where the Government should focus their attention, not on an ideological attack on the poor.

We have been asked to accept the changes on the basis that they will get more people into work. Although that is a laudable aim, you cannot get more people into work when there are fewer jobs and continuing unemployment. Effectively, what is proposed is to punish people like the workers in FG Wilson who are set to lose their job. It is to indiscriminately punish people across the board who seek support from our social security system. It is to say that, even though you have lost your job through no fault of your own, we will change the system to make it harder for you to receive your entitlement and to ensure that, ultimately, we pay out less. It is to punish our young people who cannot get a job because of an economic downturn that is no fault of theirs. Again, we are saying to them that we will make it harder for them to get support from the state.

The proposals in this Bill will disadvantage not only those who are solely reliant on the social security system to meet their basic needs but those in employment on a low income who rely on the social security system to supplement their income to support them and their family. In fact, the group on which the proposals will have the greatest impact, according to figures highlighted in the Children's Commissioner's report on the impacts of welfare reform, will be children, including those whose parents are in employment. I think that I am right in saying that that is based on IFS figures.

Across the range of groups of those on a low income, whether in employment or otherwise, everyone will be worse off as a result of the cuts, with the exception of single pensioners and pensioner couples. Single people who are not working will be worse off, as will single people who are working. Lone parents who are not working as well as those who are working will be worse off. Earner couples without children will be worse off, and earner couples, both of whom are in employment and who have children, will be worse off. It is clear across the board that we are seeing cuts that will have a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable in our society. Whether you are poor and in work or poor and out of work, you will be worse off as a result of the proposed changes. I say again that the Bill is an attack on the poor.

We have already seen that the changes to DLA that have come into effect have made it harder across the board for anyone to receive that benefit, regardless of their circumstances. The changes are making it harder not just for those who are perceived to be swinging the lead but for those who are genuinely disabled. We are saying that we are going after people who defraud the system, but the cuts go well beyond tackling benefit fraud and are applied without discrimination to all who seek the state's support. That is true across the proposed changes. Again, they are being applied *carte blanche*. They are not targeted; they are making it harder for people to receive support from the state, with the sole aim of saving £18 billion. As George Osborne has said, if he gets his way he will seek to save another £10 billion with further attacks on the poorest in our society. That is the real agenda. It is not about making the system better; it is about saving money. If that means that genuinely disabled people will lose their benefits, those who support the Bill seem to be prepared to accept that as a necessary consequence: I am not.

Mrs McKevitt: Does the Member share my concerns about how the standards and principles of the United Nations Convention on

the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will be met in this welfare cuts Bill?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for her point, and I share those concerns. I have looked particularly at the impact on children. Whether you look at the Children's Commissioner's report or the Save the Children report, their conclusions are unanimous: this will have a detrimental impact on some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

I turn to the issue of housing benefits. Other Members have raised some of those points, so I will not dwell on them. There are a number of housing benefit issues that particularly concern me. I welcome the Minister's recognition that removing the choice for direct payments to a landlord could have a detrimental impact. As things stand in the Bill, however, the option for direct payments would be removed. We have not seen any amendment at the front end of the Bill.

Another particularly concerning aspect of the proposed changes to housing benefit is the increase to 35 of the age of those who receive the shared room rate, and I come back to the potential impact on children. The Conservative Party claims to be a party that represents the family, values the family and believes that the family is at the heart of our society. However, it is clear from the proposals that it has a very narrow view of which families in our society it wishes to support. Separated couples who have children and happen to be under 35 will not be supported by the current UK Government to allow both partners to have a stake in the child's life. If you are not the primary carer but still have access to your children, you will be required to live in shared housing. That leaves you with three choices. The first is that you do not have overnight access to your children. Surely that is not in the best interests of the child where it has been deemed, in some cases by a court, that such access is in the child's best interest. Alternatively, you can bring your child back to a house that you may share with strangers. However, there are serious child protection issues with that. Thirdly, you can seek to find an agreement with your former partner to return to the family home to have that time with your children. However, given that we are talking about couples who have broken up for various reasons, there is likely to be continuing stress. Therefore, that, too, might not be in the child's best interest.

The Minister outlined three areas in which he would like to see flexibility for Northern Ireland.

I mentioned direct payments. He suggested that he would like to see flexibility in the payments of universal credit so that they are made monthly. The Minister also said that he would like to see flexibility in single payments to households. I urge him to add to that list and exempt single parents with access rights to their children from the shared room rate. When the courts are considering whether a parents' access to children is in the best interests of the child, they should not be deciding that it is not in the child's best interests to see the parent because that parent cannot get state support to have a bedroom for the child to stay in. The Bill as it stands is an attack on the poor and particularly on children in the poorest households.

As some other Members mentioned, studies have concluded that the cuts will have a particularly devastating impact on some women in our society. Save the Children, in its report on women in work, highlighted examples of working women who will be worse-off under the proposals. I will not highlight all of those, but it gives the example of a single parent with three children who works full-time for the minimum wage and has average housing costs. Under the current system, that single parent would be above the poverty line. However, under universal credit, her income will drop by £67 a week once cash protection runs out. That will push her and her children into poverty.

We have talked about making work pay, but it will not pay for everyone if these changes go through. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Agnew is speaking.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Paying universal credit to one member of the household has the potential to add to the disadvantage that women will face under these changes. There is the potential that the benefit will go to the main earner, who, in many but not all cases, is the male head of the household, instead of to the primary carer, who, in many but not all circumstances, is the mother.

That is where the focus should be: on the primary carers of our children, who are mostly, but not solely, the female head of the household.

11.00 pm

These cuts have been handed down by Westminster, and we can choose to accept them or to reject them. The amendment calls

for a deferral, and I have heard concerns about that proposal. It is certainly not an ideal situation, but, equally, it is not an ideal situation that the first time that the Assembly has been able to have a debate on the Bill is at the stage where we are pushed right up to the limit of our time. Surely, that is a collective failure of the Executive as a whole.

Parity has been used an excuse to hide behind to put through these changes without accepting responsibility for doing so. The Minister said that not voting through these changes would cost us £200 million and that it would result in the loss of teachers, nurses and money for school-building schemes. Indeed, his colleague the Health Minister said in the media earlier today that it would cost lives. If the loss of £200 million will cost lives, I have to ask how many lives will be lost if we are to follow the Minister's party's proposals to reduce corporation tax at a cost of £400 million. It seems that a breach of parity in those terms and a loss of £400 million to the block grant is acceptable when it comes to giving tax breaks to huge multinational companies, but a loss of £200 million to seek to protect the most vulnerable in our society is not something that we are willing to support. I fail to square those two positions.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will.

Mr Bell: The reason is the thousands of jobs that could be created, but that £220 million is for this period. If you take it through to 2020, you are looking at a loss to the Northern Ireland economy of £1.5 billion. I actually agree with a lot of what you and Mrs Kelly said about protecting women and children in welfare reform. Where I disagree is on the view that the best way to do it is not to allow this Bill to go to Committee but to hold it up here. If we hold it up here, the legislative programme will take us up to 2013 and we will lose our social fund, £220 million and something like 1,500 jobs. The question is not whether we agree or disagree with the Bill tonight. The question is this: how do we protect the most vulnerable? Do we do it by means of a reasoned amendment and take that hit, which will be much harder on women and children, or do we do it in Committee, where the work should be done?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention, because it gives me an opportunity to answer some of the points that have been made in the debate. First, I have seen no compelling evidence that those 1,500 jobs will

be lost. In fact, if the UK Government were to relocate those jobs and change the administrative system, they would be cutting their nose off to spite their face. I have seen no evidence that they would do that, and I am not convinced by the Members opposite that that would happen. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Agnew: I am not convinced that those jobs are at risk, and I agree with others who have said that these figures are scaremongering.

No one in this House disagrees with the need for provisions for a social fund, so if it is absolutely essential that we get legislation for the social fund passed, why not decouple it from this Bill, which is controversial? I would certainly support accelerated passage for legislation that would seek solely to give us the power to implement a social fund. Why not decouple it and put it through the House with accelerated passage? I would support that, and I suspect that everyone in this House would support that. This is a controversial Bill, and the social fund is not. The two being tied together does not serve the social fund well.

On the issue of the £200 million, Mr Bell talked about the cumulative impact of that. Equally, there would be a cumulative impact on a cut to corporation tax. It has been suggested that the figure on corporation tax could rise to £700 million, leading, again, to a significant disadvantage. Indeed, even the best estimates on corporation tax are that we break even after 11 years, and that is the best bet. That is 11 years of pain and cuts to our block grant for something that may, some day, produce benefits. The other point is that the cut to the block grant that will come if we do not agree the Bill is the extra differential that will be paid to people through the social welfare system. So we will not lose that £200 million completely. That £200 million will come out of the block grant for the Executive to allocate, and it will go directly to the most vulnerable.

If you were to ask me whether I would rather the Executive spend £200 million or be guaranteed that the £200 million would go to the most vulnerable in my society, I would be honest and say that I do not have that much faith in the Executive's spending the money wisely. I have seen no evidence to date that the Executive would spend it on the most vulnerable. Indeed, many of the changes that the Executive sought to make were regressive and would cause the most detriment to the most vulnerable. So I would rather have a

guarantee that the money would go to the most vulnerable. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There are many conversations going on. Only one Member should be speaking in the Chamber at a time.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

On one hand, Ministers are flying back and forth to London to fight the cause for a tax cut for big businesses; on the other hand, the same Ministers are refusing to fight to protect the most vulnerable and ensure that we have the power in Northern Ireland to make significant changes to welfare reform.

The Executive also have powers to raise revenue that could mitigate the worst impact of the changes. Indeed, the Social Development Minister said that he would welcome proposals on how we could mitigate the worst impacts, which he recognised, of the changes to housing benefit. Many of those changes could be detrimental. The cost of not introducing water charges has been £200 million. Water charges could be introduced in a progressive manner to ensure that those who can afford to pay, do pay.

Mrs Cochrane: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Agnew: We had it as well. Do not worry, we did not steal it from the Alliance Party. To be fair, I should say that Paddy Hillyard, the chair of the Independent Water Review Panel, proposed it.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

If the current Executive were willing to use the Assembly's powers to ask those who can afford to pay more — the wealthy — to do so, we could mitigate the worst impact of the cuts. Rather than seeking tax cuts for big businesses or, as mentioned today, seeking cuts to air passenger duty, people should be prepared to stand up and fight for the most vulnerable. We should be prepared to raise revenue through a more progressive rates system. We currently have, essentially, tax relief for those living in million-pound mansions. In our own way, we refused the mansion tax and refused to charge full rates on mansions in Northern Ireland. If we were prepared to ask those who can afford to pay more to do so, we could mitigate the impact of some of the changes. Until proposals come from the Executive, asking those who can pay more to do so and ensuring that the Assembly does what it can to mitigate the worst impacts

of the cuts from Westminster, I cannot support the Bill.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the amendment.

I realise that my colleague Mickey Brady has already laid out why we tabled it. I was reading some back issues of Hansard, as far back as 2007, and they show that Sinn Féin not only raised questions on the serious impact of welfare reform on those most in need in society but brought a number of motions on a number of aspects of welfare reform, including direct payments to landlords, work-related interviews and changes to housing benefit. We are debating some of those issues again in this version of the Welfare Reform Bill. We have also debated the issue of sanctions and, I believe, had a motion down opposing their introduction. More recently, there has been the question of shared room allowance. Our opposition is not new found.

We have serious problems with what is proposed in the Bill and the impact that it will have on many thousands of people across the North. That belief was strengthened after listening to George Osborne yesterday laying out his ideological vision on how an additional £10 billion could be cut from benefits. However, even more disgusting was his statement on what can only be described as social engineering, which points in the direction of having children only if you can afford them or are rich enough to pay for them.

Therefore, we do not make our decisions lightly. We make them in an attempt to protect those whom we represent. We would be poor representatives if we did not speak up for those who will lose out as a result of the Bill.

Underoccupancy proposals have the potential to make many thousands of people homeless. The proposal to fine people because they may have additional rooms in their home will result in their inability to pay the top-up in housing benefit to cover their rent. They are being penalised because they live in a two- or three-bedroom house with empty rooms. We are not opposed to the reallocation of housing to better reflect housing need. We are against the imposition of financial penalties on people, especially when no suitable alternative accommodation is available that would enable families to be housed.

The Bill takes no account of the profile of housing stock in the North. It also fails to take into account the legacy of segregation. How would the Minister react if hundreds of people

asked to be considered for the many empty houses in certain areas of north Belfast? He would be up in arms. However, that is the reality of housing in many parts of the North of Ireland. People will be penalised through no fault of their own.

It is widely accepted that there is a real possibility of a significant rise in homelessness due to underoccupancy rules, and no amount of dressing that up will get around that fact. The accommodation is not available to deal with this, and, given the financial constraints, it would take decades to build up the level of housing required. Having spoken to many housing providers, it is my understanding that they are ill-prepared to deal with this. Let us look at the size of some of the rooms that are prevalent in much of the older social housing. They are called box rooms, and, I believe, they measure 6 feet by 8 feet. People are lucky to fit a single bed into those rooms. The Minister should declare that those are not rooms but storage rooms for the purposes of determining underoccupancy.

We have also seen the implications of the shared room allowance, which is just starting to impact on many young people. We have been told by the Minister that discretionary housing payments will take care of that, and that it will be increased to meet the increased need. If he is being fed that information by his Department, I think that he should demand resignations. Discretionary payments are just that: a payment made over a short period. It will put back for months the inevitable, which is that people will not be able to afford to pay their rent. People will get a payment for 13 weeks at full rate. Then, if another application is made, there will be an additional 13 weeks paid at 80% of the rate. After that, people will be paid nothing.

In fact, when underoccupancy begins to bite, it has the potential of requiring tens of thousands of people to apply for discretionary payments. I understand that housing association tenants and Housing Executive tenants will be eligible to apply for those payments from next April. Those in the advice sector and the voluntary housing sector have said that, even with the increases proposed by the Minister, they will not meet the expected flood of applicants under the underoccupancy proposals. It was estimated that between 5,000 and 6,000 people would be affected by the shared room allowance, and that would see an increase every year. That is before underoccupancy kicks in.

The Minister has the chance to be the champion of those most in need. He has the

opportunity to say to those who are being hit by shared room allowance and facing underoccupancy penalties that he hears their cries for help and will do something about it. The proposal will not be cost neutral. Likely, it will lead to increased rent arrears, which, in turn, will increase the risk of homelessness and the prospect of a significant number seeking rehousing. There is also a concern that it will impact on family life.

On the proposals for monthly benefit payments, our argument all along has been that there are major differences between here and what happens in Britain. We are a community still suffering from the effects of conflict, and we live in a society that has low pay. Monthly payments do not reflect the labour market in the North of Ireland. A monthly payment will hit a substantial number of families who are on lower incomes and paid weekly or fortnightly. Many will find their money running out one or two weeks into the proposed monthly cycle. They will be forced to go back to social security offices for crisis loans to see them through. Many will end up in the hands of moneylenders, because they need to feed or clothe their children or themselves.

11.15 pm

The work capability assessment is another of the issues that we raised back in 2007. We stated then, and we repeat now, that decision-makers need to be trained to a calibre that allows them to deal with the various types of illnesses that people on ESA have.

We also believe in the primacy of medical evidence. It is not good enough to say that assessors in Atos are healthcare professionals. That does not state the field of healthcare in which their expertise lies.

It is my understanding that, in Britain, the cost to the public purse of dealing with the increasing number of appeals has been about £150 million over the past two years. Many organisations and individuals have said that the system is flawed. In Britain, between 2009-10 and 2010-11, tens of thousands appealed the assessors' decision to refuse their claim for benefit. That number will continue to rise, and, unless we deal with that soon in the North, it will spiral out of control.

We are storing up serious problems for the future. Anyone who has followed some of the recent programmes about Atos, which is the company that runs the work capability assessments, will see that former workers have said that they were advised to rush through as

many sick and disabled people as possible in the shortest time. It makes no difference to Atos if seriously ill people or those with disabilities are wrongly declared fit for work.

The British Medical Association's Scottish General Practitioners Committee said of the work capability assessments:

"These assessments can have a devastating effect on our patients' mental and physical health."

The BMA's local medical committee conference in May this year also voted unanimously for the end of the work capability assessment with immediate effect. It went on to say that:

"The inadequate computer based assessments that are used have little regard to the nature or complexity of the needs of long term sick and disabled persons".

Sanctions are wrong, and, under the present proposals, many will be punished by having their benefit removed for up to three years. Many of the higher sanctions are mandatory and often involve the total loss of benefit. They start at 91 days, progress to 182 days and then to three years for a third failure to abide by the rules. There is an inadequate recognition of people's requirements and a failure to allow for the difficulties that some people face, especially those suffering from mental health illnesses, such as bipolar disorder or depression, or those with learning and functioning difficulties, such as autism and dyslexia. They will fall foul of these proposals, especially with attached compliance sanctions, which, it has been said, have resulted in a number of suicides and attempted suicides in Britain.

It is unclear how the imposition of loss of benefit sanctions, particularly over a protracted period, can be reconciled with the obligations to protect the most vulnerable and tackle child poverty. The reduced single household payment will have an impact on the whole household.

Benefit fraud is best dealt with by the criminal justice system.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr F McCann: The imposition of additional sanctions on those who are convicted undermines the tenet of everyone being equal before the law. I have heard it said that universal credit is bringing 30 benefits together, which must be a good thing. On the face of it,

you would say yes, but when you consider the cuts that will be applied in the run-up to its introduction, you will see that most people will have already had their benefits cut to pieces. The social security advisory committee, which has a statutory duty to advise the British Government's Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Social Development, has advised that the different circumstances that exist here should be taken into account when considering the impact of welfare reform in the North.

When all is said and done, this is a Tory-driven agenda. It is nothing to do with reform. It has at its heart the belief that those who are on benefits are scroungers and cheats. They have set out to criminalise those who are on benefits, and, by and large, much of the media and many people have bought in to that message. We have an opportunity to send out a message that we do not buy in to that lie and that we are willing to show the leadership that is required to protect those who are most in need. The only way that that can be done is by supporting the motion.

Just before I finish, I want to say that there has been a wide and varied debate here tonight. A lot of opinions have been shared. I believe that everybody in the Chamber opposes most aspects of the Bill. People differ on the way that it should be brought forward. Over time, Sinn Féin has had quite a number of meetings with individuals and organisations with serious concerns about the passage of the Bill. With that in mind, and on behalf of my party, I intend to table a motion tomorrow invoking Standing Order 34, which allows for the obtaining of advice from the Human Rights Commission on whether the draft Welfare Reform Bill "is compatible with human rights", including those under the European Convention of Human Rights.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. He will recall that, earlier in the debate, I made it very clear that, as part of our party's considerations, we looked at a number of options, not least vetoing the Bill going to the Executive at all. We opted to take the Bill to the Assembly so that we could table a reasoned amendment and have further discussions with the British Government to resolve the outstanding matters. You referred to Standing Order 34. If the reasoned amendment is not passed tonight, or tomorrow morning, perhaps, I will certainly consider invoking Standing Order 35, which provides for the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee, to ensure that the Bill is looked at from the perspective of whether it

complies and conforms with the equality requirements that we addressed earlier.

Mr F McCann: Thank you. In conclusion, it is vital that any legislation passed in the Assembly that impacts on the most disadvantaged — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr F McCann: — should meet a standard that does not violate human rights, so Alex is right.

The tenor of the debate has been good, and our proposals have been fairly reasonable. We tabled a reasoned amendment out of grave concern for those whom we represent and how the Bill will impact on them. We ask Members to support our reasoned amendment.

Mr McCausland: Mr Speaker, quite often, the long series of speeches that we heard today covered the same ground. Therefore, rather than respond to each individually, I intend to deal with a number of issues in a generic form.

One issue is that of flexibilities, which has been at the core of the discussion today. It was raised at the start of the debate by the Chair of the Social Development Committee, Alex Maskey. Let me repeat that the discussions on flexibilities are ongoing. I have already put that on record and referred to it again this morning. I am already pursuing split payments, direct payments to landlords and more frequent payments. Lord Freud has already indicated that he is sympathetic to those concerns and is considering them. I cannot be any clearer than that, but I will be in a better position to comment after my meeting with him next week.

Another issue that Alex Maskey raised at the beginning of the debate was that of the social fund being devolved, and a number of Members referred to that later. There seems to be a great deal of confusion and misinformation doing the rounds. The discretionary elements of the social fund, which Members referred to repeatedly today, will be abolished at the end of March 2013. In Great Britain, those elements will move from the social security system to local authorities. It will be for the Executive to agree on any successor scheme here. The Welfare Reform Bill has provisions to facilitate such a scheme, and we need Government amendment at Consideration Stage. However, the detail of the new scheme will be spelled out in the regulations. My officials will shortly brief the Committee on the outcome of the consultation on the discretionary scheme. Again, the key point is that, without the

legislation going forward, come the end of March 2013, there will be no scheme.

The next issue concerns split payments, frequency of payments and direct payments. The Bill, as it stands, already allows for each of the flexibilities requested in exceptional circumstances. As regards direct payments to a landlord, as the Bill stands, there are safeguards and triggers built into the system, whereby, if a claimant fails to pay their rent, there will be an automatic intervention and the rent will revert to direct payment to the landlord after six weeks' arrears. There is provision as regards household payments in that a couple can nominate who will receive the benefit. We want more than that, but those are things that are already in there. What we are going for is the flexibility in the three areas that all the political parties have agreed are the key issues.

Mr F McCann: With regard to the payment of housing benefit to landlords, whether in the social sector or the private rented sector, we have been led to believe that you are paid in arrears. By the time you get to six weeks' arrears and they start to go into it, you could end up 12 to 14 weeks in arrears before anybody gets brought in, and the arrears could run to £1,500 to £2,000, which puts people in terrible debt.

Mr McCausland: That is why we are pressing David Freud. We will continue to do that, and we will see him again next week. We have been pressing him consistently, and the Member will be well aware of that, on the issue of direct payments to landlords. We believe that that is the option that is desired by, and required by, a substantial number of people in Northern Ireland and that the situation here is different from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Michael Copeland made comments about budgeting money monthly. We recognise that not all families will be able to budget and manage their money on a monthly basis. That is why my officials, together with colleagues in DWP, are looking to identify a range of products that will help people to budget. In fact, in recent weeks, DWP issued a prior information notice — an invitation to tender — inviting companies to come up with a range of helpful tools, such as jam jar accounts, which automatically put money for specifics, such as utility bills or rent, into a form of direct debit. That would ensure that all household overheads are paid without the client getting at the money. That is a good thing, but, in addition to that, we are asking that there should be the possibility of fortnightly payments and monthly payments.

Michael Copeland also raised the issue of the benefit cap. My officials are working to identify the number of claimants likely to be affected. The initial research that was done indicated that it was under 1,000. There were suggestions at an earlier stage that a huge number of households might be affected. However, when it was looked at more closely, it was clear that the vast majority of those that were originally talked about would not be affected. The work is now coming to a close regarding the precise number, but it is under 1,000. That was an upper limit, but it is substantially below that. We will work with the claimants who might be affected to help them to change and improve their circumstances so that they are not impacted adversely.

Comments were made by a number of Members about the current work capability assessment. We do not know yet who would be doing the assessment for the transfer from DLA to PIP. However, Professor Harrington said that it was a mistake to simply rubber-stamp medical reports. The assessment is about the ability to work, and that includes a medical assessment, but it also includes other factors. So, there is a constant refining of that system to get rid of any defects that are there, and that work will be ongoing. He has carried out three assessments, and the work will be ongoing.

As regards the question of people having access to the details of the regulations, they are almost saying that they are being given a pig in a poke: we do not know what is going to follow on from this, therefore we need to know the details of the regulations. The Department has already advised the Committee that it will provide copies of the DWP regulations that are in the public domain. Members should understand that we cannot share anything from DWP that is not in the public domain in case we compromise, undermine or damage in some way Westminster parliamentary scrutiny. However, my officials will, in so far as the detail is available, provide the Committee with whatever such detail they can, and that will be made available as soon as possible.

11.30 pm

Again, Members asked why they have not seen the detail of the regulations. The whole purpose of the primary legislation is to create an enabling framework that allows regulations containing matters of detail to be made later. My officials have already talked to the Committee Clerk about submitting draft regulations once the Final Stage is reached and in advance of Royal Assent. That is highly

unusual, but I have authorised officials to do that because I want to give Committee members plenty of time to scrutinise all the regulations. Mark Durkan and Michael Copeland also spoke about the regulations. Clause 44 sets out the Assembly controls in place for scrutinising the regulations. That list includes regulations on housing costs, sanctions, hardship payments, etc. Those will all be subject to confirmatory procedure, which, as the Member knows, means a debate after six months. That will allow all of us time to get an idea of how the regulations are working on the ground. Furthermore, a number of regulations will also require Executive approval, and my officials will let the Committee have a list of those regulations.

Patsy McGlone took up the issue of Scotland and Wales. Although Scotland and Wales have devolved Administrations, they do not have devolved authority over social security matters in the way that we do in Northern Ireland. The changes, which the Member referred to, to ease the impact of the reforms in Scotland and Wales are precisely what I am urging Executive colleagues and the Assembly collectively to join me in implementing — changes to our discretionary support systems, to childcare and to programmes that support and help individuals back into work, to budget better and to take responsibility for their destiny. In other words and in simple terms, change the things we can to support reform and, like Scotland and Wales, accept that change is needed and that it is needed now.

The Member also mentioned the Consumer Council. I point out to him that the council is actively involved across Departments, in particular with DETI and DE, on budgeting initiatives such as Money Matters, which is gradually being rolled out, and on debt advice.

In the midst of all those speeches, there were some that really stood out. Michael Copeland's was obviously one such speech. It was — I wrote down these words — comprehensive and exhaustive. I also found Caitríona Ruane's speech interesting. She was obviously on a roll, as she was in full flow and full flight against all the evils of the Tories. I was just waiting for her to burst into a couple of choruses of 'The Red Flag'. It was quite clear that, in the midst of all the rhetoric, she did not get the core point. She kept saying that we have time, but we do not have time. We have run out of time. We have used up all the time that we had. We have run of time and road. How many ways can I say that to make it absolutely clear? There is a timetable for getting legislation through the Assembly. We are now at the point

today where we can just about get it through with all the extra work being undertaken by the Social Development Committee in extra meetings. Indeed, I think that it is sitting over the Halloween recess. Even then, it is very tight. This is as tight as it can get. There is no more time. There is also a tendency by some folk to ignore the consequences of delay, which I have spelt out already, in respect of the impact on the social fund and, therefore, the loss of support for the most vulnerable in our society, the fact that that endangers 1,500 jobs, and the long-term costs, which I will return to.

I was also interested by Conall McDevitt's contribution, although after his performance on the radio this morning, I thought that he might have gone into hiding for a day or two. He was asked a question about the issue of equality, which is near and dear to Conall McDevitt's heart. The question put to him by Stephen Farry was what contribution the Social Democratic and Labour Party made to the equality impact assessment that was published in April. What did the SDLP say because they are so passionate? Dolores Kelly and Conall McDevitt were passionate about equality. So, I looked on page 22 of the report, which gives a list of all the consultees who responded. I went down to the letter 's', for SDLP. We have Save the Children Fund and then it jumps to Simon Community. What do you find? The SDLP did not bother to comment.

Obviously, Conall had difficulty remembering that earlier on; did not want to remember the fact that his party said nothing about it; and did not want to acknowledge the point that Stephen Farry made. That is why I made sure that we got a copy.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No. After his performance on the radio this morning, there is nothing that Conall McDevitt could say that would bring any benefit to any discussion tonight, I can assure him of that. We have got enough humour out of Conall McDevitt today already. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister must be heard.

Mr McCausland: I thought some of the language he used was a little bit out of order, particularly his comments about his party leader.

A Member: Was that the surrender monkey?

Mr McCausland: It may have been that. It may also have been the double-jobbing issue. Certainly, I thought that that was most inappropriate. Maybe it was as part of his bid for the party leadership that he was going down that road.

He spoke about this committee that he wants to see set up. The reality is that we have a Committee — the Social Development Committee. It may not meet the standards of Conall McDevitt. He may not value the contribution that his party colleague makes to that Committee. He may feel that Mr Durkan is not up to scratch on the issue but surely that is a matter that should be sorted out and settled behind closed doors by the party rather than exposing poor Mr Durkan to that sort of ridicule and criticism.

He also spoke about those who want to sacrifice the most vulnerable. The point that I have made repeatedly is that those who want to delay, defer and prevaricate are the people doing the most damage to the most vulnerable in our society.

I am getting near the end because the hour is late. Dolores Kelly and Steven Agnew placed such emphasis on, and have such trust in, the Children's Commissioner's report. They will recall that, at the time, I said that it was fundamentally flawed. It was a report that they had commissioned from Goretti Horgan of the Socialist Workers' Party. It was a report that she produced and they published. However, it was fundamentally flawed because it was based on information that was already out of date. As a result, I asked my officials to meet the Children's Commissioner. I met her myself, in fact, in due course. The officials were able to go through with her the details of the report, explain the fundamental flaws in it, and set the record straight. So, the things that people are putting forward —

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just to have the record straight, the report was commissioned by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the University of Ulster. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Minister to continue, please.

Mr McCausland: What we need to do is avoid that sort of irrational suggestion. I remember some elements of that report that were quite alarming. That is the sort of scaremongering that we heard again today.

Steven Agnew did not understand why 1,500 jobs might go. The fact is that it is very simple — incredibly simple — for DWP to take a contract that provides 1,500 good jobs in Northern Ireland and move it across to some part of Great Britain. There is no difficulty, hindrance or obstacle to them doing that.

Mr Agnew: Why would they not do it now?

Mr McCausland: If Steven Agnew cannot understand why on earth they would do that at the slightest opportunity, I despair at his political insight.

Mr Humphrey: He is very green.

Mr McCausland: That is true.

If they are able to give jobs to people in their own constituencies, of course they are going to favour doing that. That is why the point has been made repeatedly that it is absolutely crucial that we safeguard the jobs of people in Northern Ireland, that we do not play fast and loose with people's livelihoods, that we do not play fast and loose with the social fund and that we do not play fast and loose with a cost of over £200 million.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Right, OK.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister clarify how many jobs will be lost through the imposition of universal credit.

Mr McCausland: The question is as incomprehensible as it could possibly be. It is almost as incomprehensible — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not debate across the Chamber. It has been a long debate, and all Members who wanted to make a contribution have done so. *[Interruption.]* Order. The Minister is concluding the Second Stage, and he should be allowed to do so. *[Interruption.]* Order, Members.

Mr McCausland: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It seems pretty clear that some of the points that are being made are getting near the knuckle, which some Members find difficult.

We are talking about real jobs. We are talking about really vulnerable people. We are also talking about a real hit through money having to be taken away from the Health Department and other Departments. These are real issues.

In conclusion, I am on record as stating that I have held and will continue to hold discussions with Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smith and others concerning the operational easements that I consider necessary to effectively implement welfare reform in Northern Ireland.

I urge Members to reject the amendment, take account of the wider financial picture of our benefits system, and recognise that it is simply not an option for Northern Ireland to operate a benefits system independent of the rest of the UK. Apart from the logistical and IT difficulties that that would pose, we simply could not afford it.

Failure to implement the Welfare Reform Bill will cost Northern Ireland around £1.5 billion over the SR 2010 and SR 2014 periods. The rules that govern how Northern Ireland is funded by Her Majesty's Treasury allow reductions to the Northern Ireland block where local decisions made on social security spending do not maintain parity. Northern Ireland will see the removal of moneys allocated to Departments of £61 million in resource and £18 million in capital. Northern Ireland Executive-managed funds could be reduced by future controls on AME spending that are not delivered of around £1 billion, and Northern Ireland universal credit customers will not get the increases in benefit spending, which would amount to around £334 million, and which would ensure that they can keep more as they move into work. In other words, we would rob people of the benefits of universal credit. The core principles of universal credit are good principles, and that aspect of welfare reform is the good aspect. It would be wrong of us if we were to deprive people of those benefits.

The cost of administering different systems would be borne by Northern Ireland, including the higher costs of complex and expensive IT systems that the Department for Work and Pensions will be changing under welfare reform. Also, there will be more expensive delivery methods. In addition, £41 million of income a year for delivering services to Great Britain will be at risk. That is the 1,500 jobs and the income that we are getting from that for Northern Ireland. That £41 million out of the Northern Ireland economy would be a very significant hit, and one that people would be very foolish to ignore.

11.45 pm

So, we would simply lose that money because, as GB benefits change, Northern Ireland would no longer be placed to deliver them.

I think that I covered all of these things fairly thoroughly this morning and that I have touched on the main things tonight.

Mention was made of the social fund. I looked at some of the things for which people get payments from the social fund: people who need bedding, clothing, or a cooker. Perhaps they need a washing machine because they have not one. Maybe they are moving into new accommodation and need help with a range of very basic things like that. Payments could also be made for food. We are talking about the basic things of life.

Do Members want to create a situation whereby, on 1 April next year, the vulnerable, who have access to the social fund for those particular things, will be denied them? I think that that would be totally and utterly wrong, but that is the direction in which deferral would take us.

I hope that I have addressed the main points that were raised. I commend the motion, that the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be agreed, to the Assembly.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Towards the end of the debate, Mr Maskey indicated that, if this Bill passed its Second Stage, he was minded to bring a motion under Standing Order 35(2) as Chairman of the Social Development Committee, to refer the Bill to an Ad Hoc Committee on equality issues. Could I ask you to rule that, under Standing Order 35(2), he can only do that with the authority and approval of his Committee?

Mr Maskey: You do not need to be a barrister to know that.

Mr Speaker: Order. There has been some discussion with parties who have come through my door over the last few days on that issue. I am absolutely clear that that can only be done with the approval of the Committee. It would be the same for an Executive Minister. A motion can only come to the House with the approval of the Executive, not by a Minister acting alone. That is absolutely clear. Over the last few days, we have been making that absolutely clear to whatever parties have come through the Speaker's door.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You also are aware, a Cheann Comhairle, that I am also aware of that — just for the record.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us move on.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 42; Noes 60.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, 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 Brady and Mr F McCann

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 60; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig,

Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

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

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, 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 Noes: Mrs McKevitt and Mr Rogers.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] be agreed.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine atá anseo anocht. Táimid ag plé anseo le hábhar an-tábhachtach: comhionannas agus oideachas ár bpáistí. I thank everyone for staying here tonight — or this morning. We are dealing with very important issues: equality and the education of our children.

This morning, we are dealing with post-primary education in Kilkeel. Over 1,500 young people are educated in three schools: Kilkeel High, St Columban's and the Louis Grammar. Kilkeel High has 696 young people. It is an all-ability co-ed school providing a high standard of education, and I welcome that. It does not carry out unnecessary private testing; it does not tell some children that they can come in and others that they are not good enough; and it does not operate social selection or academic selection. It has a very high percentage of young people who achieve 5 A* to C grades — some 76.6%. I commend it for the work that it does and the leadership that it shows in relation to education.

We have two schools providing education for the Catholic/nationalist community. St Columban's is an all-ability co-ed school suffering the impact of demographic decline. Throughout the North, we have 30,000 empty desks, and, despite the best efforts of many of our secondary schools, they are left dealing with the adverse impact of that. St Louis in Kilkeel is a Catholic grammar. The Louis order is a religious order. I went to look at the history of the Louis order. The Sisters of St Louis Ireland website states:

"The Sisters of St. Louis have been in Ireland since 1859, when the first three Sisters came to Monaghan from the French Motherhouse" ... "near Paris. Post-famine Ireland had great need of education,

especially for poorer people, and the Sisters' influence was felt in local schools. As St. Louis Sisters increased in numbers, they met requests to staff several primary and secondary schools and new foundations were made. By the end of the nineteenth century St. Louis Convents and schools existed in: Monaghan Town; Bundoran, Co. Donegal; Ramsgrange, Co. Wexford; Middletown, Co. Armagh; Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan; Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo; Clones, Co. Monaghan".

In the 20th century, schools were added in Balla in Mayo, Rathmines in Dublin, Kilkeel in County Down, and Ballymena, County Antrim, among others.

I have a strong connection with the Louis order. It provided education in Kiltimagh, in Mayo. My mother and father were natives of Kiltimagh. My mother was president of the past pupils, my auntie godmother taught in their school, and I attended one of their schools in Dublin as a child. I have enormous respect for their ethos in the South of Ireland for the services that they have provided to education. It gives me no pleasure to say that I am very disappointed by their failure of leadership in the North, in Kilkeel and Ballymena. I was saddened to see that they went against departmental advice.

12.15 am

Mr Storey: Will the Member explain what she means by their failure in Ballymena? If I am not mistaken, St Louis Grammar School in Ballymena has an arrangement with St Benedict's College in Randalstown and St Patrick's on the Broughshane Road. Where is the failure on the part of St Louis Grammar in Ballymena?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he would let me continue, I was saying that they went against departmental advice on Transfer 2010, and, despite knowing that academic selection is educationally unsound, morally wrong and socially divisive, two of their schools were still testing children. I hope that both those schools change and that they stop testing children and dividing them, which I find very socially divisive. *[Interruption.]* I hope that that is the case, and I hope that the Chairperson of the Education Committee will use his influence to ensure that that happens, not only in Ballymena but right across the North of Ireland. *[Interruption.]* He may laugh, but I respectfully say to the Chairperson that this is no laughing matter. Tonight, we had over 50 parents, teachers, support staff and students

from Kilkeel. One parent told me that three of her children went to three different schools. What does that do for a cohesive community? What does that do for a family?

I attended a parents' meeting, and parents in the Kilkeel area are leading from the front. Parents, by and large, whether their children go to the Louis or St Columban's, want one co-ed all-ability school in the Kilkeel area. Many of the parents are bewildered and ask why one of their children is good enough to go to a certain school but their second or third child is told that they cannot go to the same school.

This is an issue of equality. There is no need for two Catholic schools in Kilkeel. There should be one school, and the two schools should amalgamate. There is a big banner outside St Columban's that says "Amalgamate, don't discriminate". To give the school its due, its representatives are not saying that it should be kept open at all costs. They were with me recently to meet Minister John O'Dowd, and I welcome the fact that the Minister met them. They were very clear that they were putting children first. I applaud that. They are putting the needs of children before their school. The Sisters of St Louis, who founded schools in very disadvantaged areas of post-famine Ireland, would want to see the same leadership from their schools. I hope that we see that.

Anyone who doubts the social selection argument should look at the statistics. We have heard loads of excuses from both parties on the opposite Benches, who are trying to say that this is not social selection. It is. You just need to look at the statistics. At St Columban's College in Kilkeel, 29.6% of the children are entitled to free school meals; at St Louis Grammar School, the figure is 12.1%. Statemented children account for 21.3% of the children and young people at St Columban's, as opposed to 3.6% at St Louis. That speaks volumes. It shows the inequality. What makes this worse —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will, yes.

Mr B McCrea: There is always the question of the selective use of statistics. One of the arguments that comes across when you talk about social mobility is that all people who get free school meals get the opportunity to rise further up the social welfare scheme if they get an education that is appropriate to their needs. So, just because you bring statistics about what

it means at the moment does not mean that is the way that it will turn out in the future.

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his intervention. Go raibh maith agat, Basil. I am not a statistician, but what I do know is that, when you have 3·6% special educational needs in a grammar school, 21·3% in a secondary school, 12·1% free school meal children in a grammar school and 29·6% in a secondary school, it shows where the mobility is. The social —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I have already given way to the Chairperson of the Committee. He will have his opportunity to speak.

Those statistics are stark, and you cannot argue against them. It is made even worse by the funding model that we have in our schools. Given that St Columban's is bearing the brunt of demographic decline, that schools get money per child and teachers per number of children and that that school has a higher percentage of free school meals and a much higher percentage of special needs children, who obviously need targeted intervention, the unfairness is even more stark.

There is also an equality argument in relation to staff and teachers. Because of the refusal to date of the Louis to amalgamate — I hope that that changes — the staff in St Columban's are not being treated fairly. There is something so wrong about that, and there is deepening anger in the Kilkeel area about it. People want to see equality for support staff and teachers in both schools.

Economically, it does not make sense. Children pass each other like ships in the night. They are going from Newry to Kilkeel, Warrenpoint to Kilkeel, Rostrevor to Kilkeel, Kilkeel to Newry, Kilkeel to Warrenpoint, Kilkeel to Loughinisland and Loughinisland to Kilkeel. *[Interruption.]* Sorry; I did not interrupt you.

Who pays for that? The public purse. The public purse is bussing children from all over, and they pass each other in the night. Instead, there should be one school catering for the Catholic community in Kilkeel. Kilkeel High should continue the good work that it does, and one Catholic all-ability, co-ed school should be working very closely with Kilkeel High to provide the entitlement framework. That is what should be happening. It does not take a rocket scientist to work it out; it just takes a little bit of common sense.

I will quote from a document headed "Catholic bishops call for an end to academic selection", a statement by the Catholic bishops on the future of academic selection signed by Bishop McAreavey and all the bishops in the North of Ireland, including the cardinal.

"Many share our conviction that transfer to post-primary education by academic selection, known popularly as the '11-plus', is failing our young people and their parents. It can seriously distort the focus of learning and teaching for children in Primary Six and Seven. It artificially divides children into two distinct school groups, even though all schools must offer their pupils access to the same curriculum entitlement. It does not do justice to the way in which the skills and abilities of children develop at this critical stage of their lives. Further, it has a disproportionate and unacceptable impact on the educational opportunities of the most socially disadvantaged. As Catholic educators our outreach to these children and young people is particularly important."

I call on all parties in the House to support the amalgamation. I call on all parties to ask schools throughout the North that are still going against departmental guidance and testing children at 10 and 11 to stop doing that. The SDLP needs to talk stop talking out of both sides of its mouth. I hope that it will get off the fence on this one. I hope that it comes out publicly and states that it supports the amalgamation. I have yet to hear that from it.

I welcome the fact that Basil McCrea and John McCallister from the UUP are here tonight. I hope that they tell schools to stop testing. Indeed, they know the benefits of Rathfriland High School — past pupils and all that — and how well it is doing and how well Kilkeel is doing. It is unfortunate that Jim Wells could not stay, but I have no doubt that he will read the Hansard report of the debate. I welcome the fact that the Chairperson of the Education Committee is here. We need to stop high-stakes testing of children. In Kilkeel, we need one co-ed, all-ability school that serves the Catholic/nationalist community and works closely with Kilkeel High.

I thank the Deputy Speaker, Loretta and the other officials who are here for this morning's debate. It was also good to have the parents, teachers and support staff here tonight.

Mr Storey: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to this debate, but I think that it has more to do with the proposer, who is the failed Education Minister of the Northern Ireland

Assembly, trying to hide her embarrassment at the fact that she has to stand up in the House and give us the same old failed rhetoric. Nothing changes. I will, at least, give the Member this: she is consistent. She is consistently wrong. We have heard all of this before when she was the Minister. What an admission of failure. She was the Education Minister who told the world that she had ended academic selection. She did not. She actually created a situation where it is now sectarianised, with a Catholic test and a Protestant test. Why did she not end it? It is because, legally, she did not have the power to bring it to an end. That is the reality, and that is the truth.

The former Minister talked about equality. It is very interesting that, in this debate, she talks about the amalgamation of two schools in one sector so that they can come together for the provision of Catholic education in Kilkeel. By the way, she says, let Kilkeel High School remain as it is. There is no mention of looking at a plan that might ask whether we need three schools in Kilkeel. The Minister knows that she has to pursue a policy that still pays lip service to the segregated education system in Northern Ireland, which is compounded by the fact that there are schools that are based on religious divides more than educational divides.

I was interested to note that the former Education Minister did not quote the statistics for free school meals in Kilkeel High. We are always told that free school meals are only the domain of those who come from socially disadvantaged areas and that the numbers are always lower in grammar schools. It is funny that, in Kilkeel High School, the percentage of pupils who receive free school meals is 10·8%. That is lower than the figures she gave for the grammar school. I do not know how she would explain those figures. She will probably say that Protestants do not apply for free school meals, and that will be her way of getting out of the issue.

Rather than the party that secured the Adjournment debate coming up with something that is inventive and supportive of parental choice, that party is saying that you have to ignore parental choice. I find it sweet to hear the Member talking about children travelling to Newry or from Newry, given the record of the former Minister and the way in which members of her family travelled from another jurisdiction to Newry.

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate that a Member is speaking about children? First, that is incorrect,

and, secondly, for the tone of the debate, our children should not be brought into it.

For the record, my daughter goes to a co-ed, all-ability school in north Louth.

12.30 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should not make personal remarks.

Mr Storey: History will prove that to be the case. What happens now and what happened in the past are two different things. We do not need to come to the House to be lectured about transport or about parents making choices. Parents are right to make choices and to do so on the basis of what is educationally right for their children. I am quite happy to talk about my children, who were able to avail themselves of different provision through choice. Why? It is because my three children are all different. Let us dispense with this absolute nonsense that you can somehow build one big school, put all the children into it and they will all turn out the same. That is an absolute educational fallacy, and it does not work. The reason why it does not work can be seen quite clearly when we look at Members on the opposite Benches, some of whom availed themselves of grammar school education while others did not. It is exactly the same on this side of the House. I do not believe that any parent should be denied that right or choice.

I commend Kilkeel High School. We must remember that it does not use academic selection. It is a successful school, and it proves the point that schools that do not make that choice can be successful. However, it has made that choice. Equally, the maintained sector has made the choice to ensure that it retains the right legally, as it can, to have a choice of provision that meets the children's needs. I get tired of the continual downing and reference to failure. The proposer of the topic and the party that she represents do nothing for the community, given that they continue to use those types of descriptors for young people who deserve the opportunity to have a good education. If her colleague the Education Minister focused on the schools that need assistance and support, the numbers in the school in Kilkeel may not be falling. I have heard nobody — I do not think that I will hear it tonight — give reasons why there has been a decline in the numbers in the school that the Member refers to. However, I know from my own experience that numbers in a post-primary school in Ballymena declined because previous Education Ministers allowed other schools,

such as those in the integrated sector, to be opened. That is never mentioned.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Storey: That is never given as a reason. Therefore, I trust that the Education Minister will listen to the issues on parental choice and will continue to allow that choice of education provision in Kilkeel.

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

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate, although it would have been preferable at a slightly earlier time. I begin by apologising for my DUP colleague Jim Wells. His absence will allow me to use one of his favourite lines. When speaking in a debate such as this, he usually says in his press release that he addressed a "hushed Assembly". At least I can maybe steal that line for my press release later on.

I want to pick up on several issues that have come up in the debate so far. I do not want to get completely bogged down in a debate about selection; the two Members who spoke previously did that. Ms Ruane said that I went to Rathfriland High School. I was proud to go there. However, I confess that I failed my 11-plus, which is the reason why I was at Rathfriland High School. Believe it or not, it is now over 30 years since I did it, and I was not that badly scarred by the whole experience. I got over it relatively quickly. I would also point out in selection —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr B McCrea: Was the Member more scarred by that or by the events of the previous week?

Mr McCallister: I am rapidly getting over both of those major traumas, although, no doubt, my suffering continues as I head to the OFMDFM and Finance Committees.

I would add that, with regard to the points about selection — and as my colleague Mr McCrea has talked about before — selection very often reflects inequality: it does not create it. Inequalities can be created much earlier in life, and that is the point that many of us would like to see focused on. Indeed, I remember, in the year that I spent as a member of the Education Committee — I think that we had just been

presented with the 0-6 strategy — being disappointed that it was not an all-embracing strategy and that a huge amount of work was needed on it.

The main substance of what we are debating tonight is, effectively, the future of St Columban's school. I had the privilege of visiting the school a few weeks ago and talking to the staff about the issues and difficulties that they need to address, and listening to their concerns. Certainly, some of the NICIE recommendations that have come to Kilkeel have not offered them partnership, co-operation or any type of amalgamation. Also, in the details of whether there was to be some sort of amalgamation, was there likely to be a newbuild? The Minister will, perhaps, be able to answer whether that is likely to be on the agenda, and whether it is in his budget, or in his forward work programme. There would be time, over a set period, to work towards that.

There are the links that St Columban's could have with other schools. Mr Storey and Ms Ruane talked about the excellent work of Kilkeel High School. In the whole of the selection debate, Kilkeel has been one of the slightly quirkier places in Northern Ireland, in that it has a very successful nursery school, primary school and high school set, effectively, in one unit. It has produced some excellent educational results, with very few opting to leave the area. That model has worked well in that area. I do not think that any political party has ever proposed changing something that is working in an area. That should, possibly, be looked at and replicated in the maintained sector. If it is to work, that is something that I would like to see working there as well. Of course, we, as a party, support parental choice.

Therefore, perhaps the Minister can look at the role of reports and deal with getting any amalgamations or collaboration between St Columban's and St Louis. Is that work ongoing? Is there likely to be an outcome quickly? Is there likely to be any prospect of a newbuild? Of course, there is a huge worry among the staff and the pupils who attend St Columban's. What is going to happen to the staff? Sometimes, in any situation, if a school starts to get a reputation that things are not going well and that there is no long-term future, it starts to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is a danger that we ignore the excellent work that is going on. I accept that — Ms Ruane quoted some of the statistics — there are issues, and that they are dealing with twenty-something per cent of special needs. Therefore, there is a need for that school in the area, and there is a need for the work and the

education that it provides. We, and the House, cannot ignore the fact that that need has to be met. We cannot move this out of Kilkeel and send kids all over the place. That need has to be met, and I am sure that, in the Minister's response to the debate, he will be keen to answer those questions and lay out for the Assembly what he sees as the way forward, and the reassurance that he can give to pupils, to staff and to prospective pupils as to how you best manage post-primary education in the maintained sector in the Kilkeel area to have the best outcomes for our children in that part of our constituency.

Mr Rogers: Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this tonight. The Member who has just spoken did not use the word "sleepwalking" once. I would have excused it tonight.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: Yes.

Mr McCallister: I learned my lesson.

Mr Rogers: Before I begin, I would like us to remember two members of staff of St Columban's who died in recent weeks, Marian Hughes and Ray Carville.

I suppose I should declare an interest as a past pupil of St Columban's, past principal of St Louis and the only Mourne man in the House tonight. I welcome those in the Public Gallery and those, perhaps, who are suffering from insomnia and watching proceedings on TV. I also thank the students who have e-mailed me over the past week or two.

The title of the debate is "Post-primary Education: Kilkeel". It could quite easily read "Education in Mourne", because the longer that this matter remains unsolved, the greater effect it will have on all our schools.

Only tonight, at a meeting in Longstone, were fears expressed about our primary schools and the effect that it will have on our society in general. When a young couple decides to settle down and have a family, education is a very important issue. We all want the best for our children. This will not affect schooling alone, but every aspect of what happens in the Mourne area.

Yes, I failed the 11-plus and went to St Columban's. Did I feel socially excluded as a consequence of that? No, it probably increased my resolve to achieve my potential. What do I attribute my success to? To a supportive

home, good teachers and, most of all, hard work. I took one path, and others went a different way. I think specifically of a gifted tradesman who spent his latter years passing on his skills to his students. At that stage, it was probably the minority who followed the academic route.

Many years later, St Columban's pupils follow similar paths. At 16, many go to the Southern Regional College and enter the trades; others transfer to St Louis and other schools to follow the A-level route, and then to university. Over the years, it caused me great anguish when St Louis could not take some of the local children at 11, because of the admissions number, but that was replaced with genuine delight when they came back after their GCSEs. They brought that work ethic, contributed to the extra-curricular life, be that on the stage or on the field, and got good A-level results. They are today's nurses, social workers, vets and engineers.

As previous contributors mentioned, parental choice is extremely important and must be respected.

What of the future of post-primary education in south Down? I have consulted widely over the past six months. I have met trustees, governors and the principals, and listened to parents and pupils from both schools. What has happened since the post-primary review in February 2012? Basically nothing, much to the frustration of both schools. A vacuum has been created, which is not good for the community of either school.

When I listen to parents, I hear that they want to see the high academic standards of St Louis maintained. They want to see it continue to attract children from a wide south Down area to one of the best schools in the North. Parents of St Columban's pupils want to see good education, and they are happy with the education that their children are getting at St Columban's. I think that that happiness is very important. Creating that happy atmosphere is so important for our children, because if we do not get that right, education does not happen.

Parents want to see opportunities for all our young people who desire to follow a vocational route. We have a strong trades culture in Mourne. Those paths are equally important today. Our students must have the right skills when the opportunities arise, be that in the traditional trades or in developing opportunities in offshore energy, tourism or agrifoods, but, most importantly, parents need a guarantee that there will be places for all children from the

feeder primary schools in the parishes of upper and lower Mourne.

When times were tougher than they are today, our parents and grandparents contributed in their weekly church collections to the building of Catholic schools. It is imperative that future generations are guaranteed high-quality Catholic education, whether academic or vocational, in the Mourne area. I would like to see the voluntary principle maintained. I want to see the ongoing development of cross-community work and our schools working together. At this stage, I commend the work of Mr Cunningham and the staff at Kilkeel High School.

12.45 am

Can all the things that I want done be done in one school? Yes, they can; in one all-abilities school, to meet the needs of all our children. I have every confidence that it can happen, but it will take time. It will take time to plan; this cannot be thrust upon us, it must be agreed. I welcome the statement from the St Louis trustees and board of governors, as it acknowledges that pupils may enter the school via a route that is not necessarily academic. That is only the start. I look forward to the conversations between the representatives of both schools about the best way forward. It will take time to develop a strategic development plan; a plan that will satisfy all stakeholders.

I do not think that we should narrow this to Mourne or Kilkeel. I believe that the learning experience of our local children is enriched by mixing with those from Warrenpoint, Rostrevor, Newcastle, etc.

We need time to build a new school. Look at St Columban's and St Louis. There has been an absence of investment. St Columban's is basically the same school that I attended in my new green uniform, nearly 50 years ago. I have had first-hand experience of St Louis. As principal, I expected to cut the first sod of the new school six years ago. So did my predecessor. But children are being educated in rooms of a convent that is 90 years old. Did that affect the quality of teaching? No, it did not. It was always easier to fix the leaking roof.

Why, Minister, has the newbuild proposal been allowed to gather dust, or should I direct that question to the previous Education Minister? Minister, it is an essential building block to the realisation of our dreams. I extend an invitation to Minister O'Dowd to visit both schools and experience for himself the strong support therein.

I come now to the words of some of the pupils who have e-mailed me over the past few weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Rogers: Look at the schools in Newry. Millions of pounds have been spent on them. Why should Kilkeel not have a brand new school of its own, rather than two old buildings?

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

Mr Rogers: In the meantime, St Columban's should be kept open —

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

Mr Rogers: — until the new building is ready, and all pupils can go to the new school together. I urge the Minister to take that on board, not just my views, but those of the children who have e-mailed me.

Finally —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Mr Chris Hazzard.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my party colleague Cairtriona Ruane for tabling the debate tonight. Far from being a failed Education Minister, as portrayed by the Member opposite, my party colleague was indeed the Education Minister who resigned the 11-plus to the history books, and I am very proud of that fact. I put that on record before I start.

Moving forward with effective and inclusive education provision is a vital task facing the Assembly. Therefore, it is an appropriate and pertinent subject to raise. I hope that it illustrates the urgent need for a collaborative area-based approach to the provision of education in the Kilkeel area.

I pay tribute to the staff, parents and, indeed, pupils who travelled to Stormont, late tonight, to engage in the debate. Their commitment and passion for inclusive and innovative education in the Mourne area is testament to their status as community leaders. I have no doubt that their tireless efforts and ongoing campaign for education equality are appreciated by hundreds, if not thousands, of families across the constituency.

In recent weeks, we have spoken at length in the Chamber of the need to drive forward change in our education system. Tonight's debate is no different. As we continue to build education provision fit for the challenges of the 21st century, we must empower our young people with education policies designed to raise standards and eradicate inequality in the system.

I stood in the Great Hall this evening, and listened to young people from the Mourne area speak passionately about the barriers that have been placed in front of them. I listened as they pleaded with me to help them in their ongoing campaign to challenge such inequality and eradicate such blatant elitism. Not everybody gets over those hurdles in the way that was portrayed in the Chamber tonight.

Despite my obvious respect for these young women marching into Stormont tonight and demanding change, I was genuinely saddened by what they had to say. They spoke of the negative effect that such elitism has on their mental health, the daily effects of academic exclusion and the long-term disadvantages facing them in the job market as a result of perceived educational inequalities. This is sheer and unadulterated academic apartheid, and it must not be tolerated. Given the right environment and support, every single young person across this island can and should be a success. Every one of our children is an individual with unique talents and abilities. It is the task of the education system to identify and encourage every child, not just some of the children, not merely a minority who are considered easier to teach.

Just this week, the eminent British scientist Professor John Gurdon was awarded the Nobel prize for his groundbreaking work in the field of bioscience. There can be no doubt that this man is one of the finest scientific minds in the world. However, above Gurdon's desk in his Cambridge office is a framed school report from his days at the elitist Eton College. It reads as follows:

"His prepared stuff has been badly learnt... He will not listen, but will insist on doing his work in his own way. I believe he has ideas about becoming a scientist... This is quite ridiculous. If he can't learn simple biological facts he would have no chance... It would be a sheer waste of time, both on his part, and of those who have to teach him."

That succinct snapshot demonstrates exactly why we need to build a fit-for-purpose education system. The old rigid traditionalism

of the elite sector was not flexible enough to identify the dynamic scientific ability of that young pupil. He apparently could not learn facts and was wasting his teacher's time. I repeat: he is one of the foremost scientific minds in the world today.

At such an early stage, Gurdon was deemed a failure. There can be little doubt that Gurdon was no failure. Indeed, there is even less doubt that he was the one who was failed by a system of division and exclusion. Thankfully, that young pupil was able to find a suitable environment in later years and went on to have a fantastic career. Unfortunately, however, not all children get that second chance. Shamefully, the barriers and hurdles placed in front of our young people remain insurmountable throughout much of their lives. We are not only failing these young people, we are failing their families, their communities and our society.

Just yesterday, we stood in this Chamber and welcomed the Executive's investment strategy, a strategy that acknowledges the huge importance of education in building our society in the years ahead. As it outlines, a peaceful, fair and prosperous society has at its heart a well-educated population with the skills to engage fully and positively in society and in the economy. The skills base of countries and regions is increasingly the key determinant of relative economic growth, competitiveness and productivity, which are factors that are vital to support higher living standards in an increasingly globalised economy.

Children are central to those considerations. A modern educational environment that cherishes and nurtures all our young people should be at the very core of our vision for restoring economic prosperity in our local communities. That is a vision shared by educationalists and stakeholders throughout Ireland and further afield.

A recent OECD report into student performance across the world heaped praise on students in Shanghai and Hong Kong when it said that their educational performance seems to be as spectacular as the country's breakneck economic expansion. Although that achievement cannot be attributed to any particular reform, the OECD was unequivocal in stressing that Shanghai got rid of the key school system that had previously concentrated resources only on supposed top students and elite schools. They initiated educational reforms, which resulted in a system that focuses on the majority and not the elite

minority. Such educational changes have been instrumental in economic growth.

The overwhelming evidence quantified in those international reports illustrate beyond all doubt that the best schools throughout the world are those schools that provide high-quality education to all abilities. We cannot extol the virtues of expanding economies throughout the world, yet stay blind to the educational measures that propel such excellence. Without a determination to deliver real and substantive change, we set our young people an impossible task in the face of such challenges in the 21st century.

I would like to relay the challenge that was put to me tonight by the girls out on the steps of the Great Hall. They wanted me to put this on the record tonight and say the following to those who advocate discrimination in our education system, "The higher you build your barriers, the taller I become. The more you refuse to hear my voice, the louder I will sing."

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

Mr Hazzard: Those words, of course, are inspired by the elitist apartheid that built barriers and divided communities in South Africa for generations. The elitist division and exclusion of young people in Kilkeel and throughout the North is academic apartheid. It always has been and will be wrong. The provision of education must empower and unify our communities, not degrade and divide them.

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

Mr Hazzard: It is time that we put our children before our buildings. To those involved in the debate in Kilkeel, I say this: amalgamate, do not discriminate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mrs McKevitt: I, too, would like to thank the officials and the Minister for staying here into the early hours of this morning to hear this very important discussion. I welcome the opportunity to discuss post-primary education provision in the Kilkeel area.

It should be noted that the three Kilkeel post-primary schools of Kilkeel High School, St Columban's College and St Louis Grammar School cater for over 1,500 pupils. St Louis is fully subscribed, but there is capacity in the other two schools for a further 440 pupils. So there is an opportunity for continued

collaboration between all the schools. I believe that a number of initiatives already exist between the schools, and the local community has been the lead driver in all of those.

Amalgamations and forced mergers do not work. That was not part of any proposal. The important thing to point out at this stage is that all the schools that are oversubscribed use a form of selection. Not all pupils can get into their school of first choice, irrespective of whether they use academic selection or selection by other means.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mrs McKevitt: No.

That leads me on to the elephant in the room, or should I say the elephant in the Chamber? If the political parties around the Chamber cannot resolve the long outstanding issues around selection and testing, any proposals around integration, amalgamation, consultation or restoration are premature. The position of the horse and the cart would need to be re-evaluated. The lead will come from the education providers themselves. They consult on and share ideas and are meeting the needs of pupils in the greater Kilkeel area by offering joint courses through their area learning communities and other initiatives. We, the politicians, must not be an obstacle to their progress.

The misinformation surrounding the proposals for Kilkeel has been most unhelpful. St Louis, which is a regional school and is the only co-educational grammar school in the area, draws pupils from Kilkeel and the wider South Down area. I was very encouraged by the recent press statement issued by the board of governors of St Louis Grammar School in which it reaffirmed its support for the recommendations of the post-primary review and the SELB area plan and, more importantly, outlined its desire to move towards a situation where some will gain entry to the school by means other than academic selection.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mrs McKevitt: I am not going to give way. It is very late, and I have five young children at home.

However, it cannot expand and increase its enrolment in the present building. Unfortunately, a newbuild approved by the Department of Education in 2006 has not

materialised, and almost £300,000 has been spent on its development to date. It is perfectly justifiably that the school wishes to remain a voluntary grammar school, with a focus on academic excellence as set out in its entrance criteria until such times as there is political agreement on transfer. We and in particular the Minister of Education must listen to the schools. They need our help and support with their development plans, consultation and financial planning, and I, for one, will pledge that support.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Chomhalta Caitríona Ruane as an ábhar seo a ardú inniu. Nochtann sé tábhachtacht na ceiste dá cheantar. Creidim go bhfuil géar-ghá le fócas na gComhaltaí tofa a bheith á dhíriú ar réiteach na faidhbe sa cheantar.

I thank my colleague Caitríona Ruane for securing the debate tonight — or the early hours of this morning. The importance that Members place on the matter is reflected in the fact that they are prepared to stay until the early hours to debate education provision in the Kilkeel area.

1.00 am

Let us study the debate and the concerns raised by Members across the Chamber. It was mentioned that the Catholic sector had already provided its post-primary review. I have put in place an area planning process, which is ongoing and is to be concluded by 26 October. I am content for Members and communities to respond to that process. This evening, I received a petition from St Columban's College on its concerns about future education provision in the area. I will work towards a resolution of all outstanding area planning issues. However, the important thing is that we plan on an area basis and not on an individual basis.

The debate took a number of directions. Understandably, it raised the issue of academic selection and the differing views on that. My view on that subject is clear: there is absolutely no requirement for it in terms of area planning or educational outcomes. The Member opposite, the Chair of the Committee, has shared his views on academic selection. He pointed out that all children are not the same, and he is absolutely right: individualism and uniqueness are great things about children. He did not answer the question of why we needed to divide children to educate them. That is the core issue. No one is suggesting that we put all

children into one school and just meet the needs of that group. Education is about meeting the needs of individual children through the curriculum, through the provision of good teachers, as was pointed out, and by giving them ambition and a hope of moving forward. Through area planning, I need and want to provide that.

Concerns were raised that perhaps the Kilkeel issue was not debated among the partners in that area as robustly as it should have been. I have no difficulty with the Member opposite putting forward a proposal for Kilkeel High. If Members or the community in Kilkeel wish to bring forward proposals on issues concerning the three schools in that area, I will study them closely. At the moment, the only proposal that I am aware of is one to amalgamate St Louis' and St Columban's on one site.

Sometimes, I am concerned when I hear people saying, "We need time to resolve the selection issue", "Someone else has to resolve the selection issue" or "We need political agreement to resolve the selection issue". That is a cop-out. The debate did not start in 2002 with my colleague Martin McGuinness or when my colleague Caitríona Ruane was Education Minister. It started five decades ago. Five decades ago, those who supported academic selection were saying that they needed time, and they have not shifted an inch since. In fact, Mr Storey may say that they have strengthened their position through the actions of the DUP at St Andrews. I do not buy into the notion of "We need time". We need decisions, leadership and people who are prepared to step forward and make crucial decisions on education that will improve educational outcomes for all our young people.

I think that it was Mr Hazzard who said that the OECD had pointed out that children of all abilities who are educated in the one setting do better. The academically gifted perform better, and those with fewer academic skills perform well in the academic world. International evidence points us towards all-ability schools providing excellent education to all our young people.

I also become concerned when I hear it said in defence of academic selection that grammar schools will provide academic excellence to their pupils. Under the Every School a Good School policy, all schools have a responsibility to provide academic excellence to their pupils. That is not the preserve of any one sector or group of schools. All schools have a duty to provide academic excellence to the young people they serve. All schools teach the same

curriculum, and all teach to the one exam system. Therefore, I do not buy into the notion that academic excellence requires separation at the age of 11.

In the months ahead, as the consultation closes, we will allow the boards to assemble the consultation responses, go through them and prepare a report for me as Minister. I will then make a decision early in the new year about area planning. I will make it on the basis of the terms of reference for area planning, my departmental policies and what is good for the young people in an area.

I urge Members to assist communities in debates around the future direction of travel for education. There is no easy road for a leader in a community, and all elected representatives are leaders in a community. At times, it takes that extra bit of courage to step forward and say exactly what you believe, to stand by your party policies in some instances and say that there is another way to do this and that we can provide academic and educational excellence to our communities in a different way.

I can understand the connection to and relationship with a school or a school identity. That emotion is built up over generations, with parents and grandparents going through a particular school. However, we have to look to the future. We have to create a sustainable schools estate that serves the needs of future generations.

It is nice to reflect on our own educational journey. It is well known that I did not sit the 11-plus. My educational journey, which was 30 years ago, took place in different circumstances, in a different era and with different outcomes from those of the young people who are going through the system today. We have to learn from the past five decades of debate and the international evidence that is before us. We have to give our young people every opportunity to succeed not as clones or robots but as individuals, and we have to prepare them for the challenges and opportunities in life. I will be making the defining decisions in the months ahead, whether around Kilkeel or elsewhere.

The debate in Kilkeel may not be at as advanced a stage as I am being told. I acknowledge the recent statement from St Louis', and I understand that there has been communication with parents etc. If that is fed in to me directly, I will also take that on board when I make my decisions around area planning. However, it is vital that elected representatives are involved in the education

debate in local communities and provide leadership on the way forward. As someone who is opposed to academic selection, I acknowledge that we have to convince parents who have concerns about their young people's education suffering as a result of all-ability schools. We have to convince them, and convince them we can, because all the evidence is there. All the evidence is there to convince those parents that we are interested in their children's education, in excellence in education and in academic excellence. All those things are provided throughout western Europe without academic selection. That is a job for us all, and we have to bring those parents along with us. Do not buy into the notion "We need time". They have had five decades to make up their mind, and they are digging in. I am not referring to the Kilkeel circumstances in this case, but in other areas they are digging in to protect what they have instead of looking around their area to see what they need to provide in education.

I am sure that, like me, all Members want to go home. That goes for staff and everyone else, so I will conclude. I welcome this opportunity to debate area planning. I welcome the opportunity Members have had to project their views about Kilkeel. I will take them on board as part of my decision-making process about future outcomes for Kilkeel. I encourage Members to get involved and to take leadership positions when moving forward with area planning, whether in Kilkeel or elsewhere.

Adjourned at 1.09 am.



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