
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Educational Format

Tuesday 11 December 2007

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr McClarty] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that there will be no lunchtime suspension of today's sitting because the Business Committee is not scheduled to meet.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on the recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is mian liom an tuarascáil seo a leanas a dhéanamh ar an chéad chruinniú de chuid na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid earnáil oideachais ó cuireadh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin agus an Tionol ar bun arís. D'aontaigh an tAire Edwin Poots MLA leis an tuarascáil seo. Tionóladh an cruinniú in óstlann St Helen's Radisson SAS, Baile Átha Cliath ar 14 Samhain 2007.

I wish to make a report on the first North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in education sectoral format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly. This report has been agreed with Edwin Poots MLA. The meeting was held at the Radisson SAS St Helen's hotel in Dublin on Wednesday 14 November 2007.

I represented the Executive as Minister of Education, along with Edwin Poots MLA, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Education and Science, who chaired the meeting.

Déanfaidh mé achoimre ar na príomhphointí a tháinig aníos ag an chruinniú; cruinniú a dhírigh ar an réimse aontaithe i dtaca le comhoibriú Thuaidh/Theas san earnáil oideachais.

I shall summarise the main points of the meeting, which concerned the agreed areas of North/South education co-operation.

The Council welcomed progress in addressing educational underachievement, including successful initiatives to promote literacy and numeracy in schools. Officials were requested to develop proposals for consideration at the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

The ongoing co-operation in the area of school, youth and teacher exchanges was welcomed by the Council, and it was noted that a formal review of co-operation on education exchanges and supporting mechanisms, including the North/South Exchange Consortium, was shortly to commence, with a view to identifying a range of options for future progress in the light of current and future funding availability.

Rinneadh plé ar shainriachtanais oideachais. Chuireamar fáilte fosta roimh thuarascáil ó phríomhfheidhmeannach agus ó chathaoirleach an

ionaid barr feabhais um uathachas sa Bhaile Láir. Rinne an tuarascáil cuntas ginearálta ar an dul chun cinn suntasach a rinneadh go dtí seo ar ionad barr feabhais a bhunú sa Bhaile Láir agus ar na pleananna atá ann chun próiseas comhairliúcháin a dhéanamh le gach páirtí leasmhar lena gcur ar an eolas faoin dóigh a soláthrófar na scríbhí. Thacamar leis na pleananna don ionad sna toadhchá; pleananna a chuimsíonn soláthar seirbhísí oiliúna/comhairleoireachta agus seirbhísí eolais/taighde agus oideachais, agus seirbhísí foghlama agus tacaíochta atá réidh le tosú chomh luath agus a bheas an obair thógála críochnaithe.

Ministers welcomed a report on the establishment of a centre of excellence for autism at Middletown. The chief executive and chairperson of the centre outlined the significant progress made to date, and informed the Council of a consultation exercise, involving all stakeholders, to determine how services would be delivered. The Council endorsed the centre's future plans, which include training, advisory and information research services and education. Learning and support services will come on stream when building work is completed.

The Council discussed proposals for a 2008 joint conference on autistic spectrum disorder, and welcomed the distribution of parent-teacher videos, CD-ROMs and guidance material on autism and dyslexia.

Moreover, the Council discussed other joint projects in the field of special educational needs, including the cross-border school and parent community partnership programme, which was supported by the EU Peace and Reconciliation programme, and co-funded by both Departments of Education. The project began in September 2006 and will run until August 2008 and takes a cross-border schools-parents-community approach to the education and socialisation of children with special educational needs.

Rinneadh plé ar cháilíochtaí agus aoisliúntas múinteoirí. Rinne an Chomhairle suntas den dul chun cinn atá déanta ag an ghrúpa oibre um cháilíochtaí múinteoirí agus go mbeidh na comhairlí teagaisc ag comhoibriú ar na saincheistanna san am atá le teacht de réir mar is cuí.

In respect of teacher qualifications and superannuation, the Council noted progress made to date by the teachers' qualification working group, and that teaching councils will co-operate on the issues, as appropriate, in future.

The Council recognised the significant changes to Irish language proficiency requirements for teaching posts, and that a specific professional development programme, funded by the Department of Education and Science, and developed in Marino College of Education, Dublin, has been introduced to address the needs of primary school teachers who take the scrúdú le haghaidh cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge, the Irish proficiency examination.

Ongoing co-operation between the inspectorates of both Education Departments in relation to sharing of best practice and research was welcomed by the Council. Furthermore, the Council acknowledged the outstanding contribution made by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS), which provides support for all-island conferences; social, scientific and environmental education; initial teacher education; citizenship education; special educational needs; and for cross-border research projects.

Faoi choimirce na hEagraíochta um Chomhar agus Fhorbairt Eacnamaíoch, reachtáil an dá Roinn Oideachais comhdháil de na tíortha rannpháirteacha i mBaile Átha Cliath ar 7 agus 8 Samhain 2007. De thairbhe na comhdhála, fobrófar comhthionscnaimh taighde, agus é mar aidhm aici ceannairí scoile a mhealladh agus a fhorbairt.

Déanfar iniúchadh ar an tsaincheist a bhaineann le comhchláir ghairmiúla forbartha do ghrúpaí aontaithe.

Under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development — the OECD — the two Education Departments hosted jointly a conference of participating countries in Dublin on 7 and 8 November 2007. As a result, a joint research initiative that is aimed at attracting and developing school leaders will be developed. Joint professional-development programmes for agreed groups will also be explored.

The Council discussed the issues that relate to teacher superannuation, particularly the question of transferring superannuation entitlements between both jurisdictions. It noted the decision that the North/South Ministerial Council made at its meeting in institutional format in October 2007 that the Council's joint secretariat will convene a working group of officials from relevant Departments, including Finance Departments, to consider the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis. That working group will report to a future meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. The Council also agreed that officials from the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Education and Science will participate in that working group and will report back to the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format on issues that are relevant to the education sector.

In closing, we agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should take place in spring 2008. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I make it clear that, where it can, my party is more than happy to learn from good practice in other countries.

I notice that the Minister's statement referred to successful initiatives that have been undertaken to address

educational underachievement. During the past six months of the Minister's term in office, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has published a report on the poor performance of the numeracy and literacy strategy; the Committee for Education has identified that of the 660 teachers that have been trained in reading recovery, only 160 are being used in schools; and unrealistic targets have been set for numeracy and literacy in the Programme for Government. Given those circumstances, can the Minister tell the House what successful initiatives she discussed with her counterparts in the Irish Republic? What good practices did she learn from the Department of Education and Science that could be applied to the serious problem of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I thank the Member for that question.

Learning from other countries was useful, and the OECD conference was wonderful because we heard from people from Finland, Norway and other countries that have very good education systems. It is useful for us to learn from those systems, and that is why it was so helpful for Mary Hanafin and me jointly to chair and host the all-island conference for people from different parts of the world.

The Member mentioned literacy and numeracy and educational underachievement. Those are key areas for my Department and for my counterparts in the South of Ireland. The Member will be delighted to know that yesterday evening, Conor Lenihan, who is the Minister of State with responsibility for integration policy in the Department of Education and Science and who liaises with different Departments, and I launched 'A Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School'. That toolkit will examine the issue of integration and deal with the special needs of newcomer children. We in the North need to examine that issue. I can certainly ensure that the Education Committee receives a copy of that very good pack. We can learn a great deal from the South, and the South can learn a great deal from us.

The Member will know that in recent months, my Department has been reviewing the school-improvement policy and the literacy and numeracy strategy.

We take very seriously the number of children who are being failed by our education system. That is why I announced last week that the last transfer tests will take place in 2008. At the moment we are failing 4,000 young people every year. In the debate later today on the transfer procedure, I will bring more figures to the Assembly.

10.45 am

It is essential that we get our strategies right; that we make sure that every school is a good school; that we deal with the tail of underachievement. We will learn from the South, and it can learn from us. We will also

learn from countries that have non-selective systems. There is tremendous work being done in Finland, which tops the OECD league. I hope that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education reads carefully the report of that important OECD conference. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler.

Mr Butler: I do not have a question, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr K Robinson: It is interesting to note that the Sinn Féin representative is speechless this morning. Perhaps his notes have not arrived.

I note this morning's statement; however, I want reassurance that educational progress rather than political positioning is the driving force behind the Northern Ireland Minister's focus in that recent meeting in the South. I notice also that there is no mention of the pre-school sector in the statement. Since she has introduced the transfer procedure, I must point out to the Minister that children do not suddenly fail at the age of 11 — they are failing before they reach that age. Will she assure the House that at the next ministerial meeting she will raise the issue of pre-school and early-years education, so that if there are systems in the Republic of Ireland that work, we can learn from them?

I reiterate what my colleague Sammy Wilson said: we need to get to grips with literacy and numeracy. We cannot allow the Minister's fixation with the transfer procedure to cloud over the underachievement. That is there from the beginning.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I agree that pre-school education is essential. In fact, every time I rise in the House I mention the importance of early intervention and pre-school education. It was not one of the areas discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council because there were agreed topics in place. I will certainly ask officials to explore how we might get that subject on the agenda of the next NSMC meeting in education sectoral format.

I assure the Member that work has begun in my Department on formulating a new early childhood education and care strategy, which includes the time from birth to the foundation years of primary education — the nought-to-six age group. In fact, when I brought forward my proposals on 4 December, I talked about the nought-to-six, six-14 and 14-19 age groups. Those are key educational periods in children's lives.

The nought-to-six strategy will bring Sure Start, pre-school and the home childcare agendas together in a cohesive way to support the integration of service delivery, taking into account all relevant factors and the effect that those changes will have on the lives of children and families. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that a solid framework is in place for early-

childhood care and education to enable children to enter school well prepared educationally.

Initial stakeholder consultations with the early-years sector emphasised the need to base the strategy on evidence-based research, and we will certainly learn from any good practice in the South of Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh céad maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire agus gabhaim buíochas léi ar a shon. Tá ceist agam di ar an chóras malartaithe maidir le scoileanna, daoine óga agus múinteoirí.

I want to ask the Minister — *[Interruption.]* I thank my colleague from Newry and Armagh for his vocal support. Obviously, his grandfather's influence is coming to play on him again today.

Mr Kennedy: Great-grandfather.

Mr D Bradley: Great-grandfather; I stand corrected.

What plans does the Minister have to address the reduction of funding for North/South teacher and youth exchanges in 2010? That is when the funding, which accounts for over 40% of the total, is to cease. Taking into account also the reduction of funding under Peace III — a further 40% — which is already having a devastating effect on projects and organisations that address cross-border co-operation in this area, what concrete plans has the Minister formulated to make up the shortfall? Will the Minister commit herself to giving this area of co-operation the same priority that it was given by the North/South Ministerial Council before suspension?

Chomh maith leis sin, a LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom fiafraí den Aire an inseoidh sí dúinn ar phléigh sí lena comhghleacaithe i mBaile Átha Cliath pleananna le haghaidh oiliúint tosaigh agus oiliúint inseirbhíse do mhúinteoirí ó Thuaisceart Éireann do scrúdú cáilíochta na Gaeilge sna coláistí oiliúna anseo sa chaoi is go n-éascófar an bealach do mhúinteoirí ó Thuaisceart Éireann ar mian leo teagasc i bPoblacht na hÉireann.

Will the Minister tell us what discussions she has had with her counterpart in Dublin about plans for initial and in-service training of teachers for the Irish-language teaching qualification to be available in Northern Ireland colleges in order to facilitate North/South teacher mobility on the island? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. While listening to the second question, I forgot what the first question was. Gabh mo leithscéal. Cad é do chéad cheist arís, a Dhominic? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Would you like to repeat the question?

Mr D Bradley: What plans does the Minister have to address the reduction of funding for North/South teacher and youth exchanges in 2010? That is when the IFI funding, which accounts for over 40% of the total, is to cease. Taking into account also the reduction of funding under Peace III — a further 40% — which is already having a devastating effect on projects and organisations that address cross-border co-operation in this area, what concrete plans has she formulated to make up the shortfall? Will the Minister commit herself to giving this area of co-operation the same priority that it was given by the North/South Ministerial Council before suspension?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask those who have their names down to ask questions to keep those questions as short as possible. They should not be the same length as the Minister's statement.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. First of all, I am very committed to North/South co-operation. As I have said before, we have a lot to learn from each other. I have met my counterpart in the South regularly, and we have done joint launches together on many different issues. The Member will know that both Departments are committed to making progress on North/South exchanges. We need to look at it in terms of the environment that we are now in. The Member is right to say that some funding is coming to an end. We are reviewing the North/South work that is being done. Obviously I cannot go into detail while the Budget is out for consultation, but we will be coming forward with plans.

I have not had discussions with my counterpart in the South on teacher training. We had a very full agenda; no doubt that subject will be on a future agenda.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Minister's statement; it is good to see the level of co-operation between North and South on these matters. My question was to have been along the same lines as the one that Sammy Wilson asked, so I will not repeat it. I will ask, however, about the reading recovery programme. Does the South have a similar programme? Have there been cross-border discussions about the value of such programmes? There is a lot of concern up here about the future of it; maybe there is something to learn from the South in this area.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. The issue of literacy and numeracy is very important, and reading recovery is one of the many methods that are used to deal with underachievement and children who have special educational needs.

Special educational needs is one of the most prolific areas of North/South co-operation. The South also uses the reading recovery programme, and we are working together on best practice. CDs have been produced, which will be used in every school, North and South. Yesterday, we launched a toolkit for children with

additional language needs. The Department of Education is currently reviewing the entire area of special needs. A report will be published shortly on all the issues that the Member mentioned, including reading recovery.

Miss McIlveen: Can the Minister tell the House how much the Middletown centre of excellence for autism has cost the Department of Education to date, the estimated total cost and the annual operational cost? What input have the relevant stakeholders had in the development of this project, in particular, its location?

Ms Ruane: In May 2007, I visited the Middletown centre of excellence for autism with Martin McGuinness. At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in Dublin, there was a report on the centre, which I am pleased to say is moving forward. The Department of Education, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science, is taking forward the arrangements needed to establish the Middletown centre of excellence for autism.

The chief executive, the senior management team and the board of directors are working on the provision and phasing in of services, beginning with the training, advisory and information research services. The educational assessment and learning support services will come on stream when the building works are completed, which is expected to be in 2008-09. The senior management team is currently meeting education providers North and South to ascertain needs. A number of training courses is taking place in newly refurbished accommodation on site, and the centre will soon undertake a consultation exercise with relevant stakeholders who are involved with children and young people with autism.

Funding for the purchase and running costs of the centre at Middletown has been provided on a 50:50 basis by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science. The Department of Education spent £1.5 million on purchasing the property. If any Members have seen the property, they will agree that it is value for money and a wonderful building.

The annual running costs of the centre are estimated at approximately £2.97 million per annum and will be shared equally between the two Departments. The refurbishment costs were estimated at £3.5 million over two years; they are to be split equally between the two Departments. In line with general increases in building costs, the estimates have risen, and officials are currently working through the detail.

The Department of Health and Children in the South is also funding half the therapy and care costs. The Member will be delighted to know that the programme includes a two- to three-day multidisciplinary educational assessment and a five-week residential multidisciplinary education and learning support programme.

This is a North/South project, so the location is perfect. Children will travel from all parts of Ireland — Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Galway, Coleraine and Antrim — to visit the centre. Members will be glad to know that children in the North will spend less time travelling to the centre than children in provinces such as Munster or Connacht. The centre is a very good project, and I am proud that our Department is associated with it.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister for this morning's comprehensive report. I thank her for her update on the Middletown centre of excellence for autism, about which I had intended to ask a question.

The Minister referred to children for whom English is an additional language. As the migrant worker population grows, right across the island, does the Minister agree that teachers could share good practice, perhaps by organising a conference? We must ensure that all children have equal access to education and equal outcomes.

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree with the Member. It is difficult for people to leave their own country and arrive in a new one, so it is important to welcome newcomers into Ireland.

The Member will be glad to know that a conference has been held in Cavan that involved primary-school principals from across the island. Yesterday, primary-school principals and representatives from non-governmental organisations and education centres across the island came together to launch a toolkit.

As I have said, I shall ensure that the Committee for Education receives copies of that toolkit, which is the result of 10 years' work and best practice, North and South. The South has a greater number of newcomer children than we do.

11.00 am

I praise teachers and principals for the work that they have done, but the strong message that came out of last night's launch, and out of the conferences that were organised, is that education cannot do everything on its own. A joined-up approach that involves all sectors of society, including health, is needed. That said, some tremendous work is being done to integrate newcomer children and those who are learning English as a second language.

Mr Storey: At the risk of tiring the Minister, I wish to put some questions to her. Given the financial constraints in the current budgetary round, the funding pressures that have been brought to bear and the fact that she still has no financial structure for her blurred vision, which she announced in the House last Tuesday, can the Minister explain to the House how she has been able to commit funding to school-, youth- and

teacher-exchange programmes and to pensioner provision, and how she plans for those to be funded?

The Minister said in her statement that we can learn a great deal from the Republic of Ireland. On this occasion, I agree with her, having read a report that appeared in yesterday's 'Irish Independent'. I hope that the Minister has read the article, which stated that the Republic's Department of Education and Science's planning and building unit has proposed that no new second-level Irish-language schools be built. In the light of that proposal, how can she submit spending plans to the House and make more financial commitments when she has not even worked out the finance necessary for her blurred vision? Furthermore, what is she doing about transient children, especially those from families from the British Army community, and not those from families from any other army with which the Members opposite were associated?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I do not accept that I have a blurred vision. I ask the Member to go out and about in his own community and talk to educationalists. He may learn something about education and about the tail of underachievement in certain areas. I visited areas that he represents, where I met with local educationalists. Your vision might be a bit less blurred were you to talk to people and listen to them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, when replying, please make your remarks through the Chair, not directly to the Member.

Ms Ruane: Gabh mo leithscéal. At present, the children of British Army personnel are at 1·2 units on the local management of schools (LMS) funding scale. I think that that is the answer to the Member's question.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement, but what actual progress has been made in dealing with underachievement that distinguishes the return of devolution from the previous period of care and maintenance?

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's question, which is a very important one. There is an enormous amount of North/South co-operation, and there was a sense of palpable excitement last night in Dundalk at the launch of the toolkit, a copy of which every school on the island of Ireland will receive.

Members will be glad to know that I am going to Scotland today to talk about how we can learn from what is happening there. It is important to ensure that we deal with underachievement in education and that we achieve academic excellence in the North. We can learn from the South and from England, Scotland and Wales.

I have been all over the island of Ireland. I have met with different Ministers to discuss the Irish language, education and ways in which to remove obstacles to

mobility, so it is good to see that progress is being made. A much more proactive approach is being adopted now than was the case when care and maintenance was in operation here, and we shall only be stepping up our efforts.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire ar an chruinniú de chuid na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid earnála oideachais.

I welcome the statement and the report from the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

My question relates to the special needs sector, and to educational psychology services in particular. I am mindful of one pupil who lives in Lifford, County Donegal, and who attends school in Strabane, County Tyrone. The current rules mean that that pupil is not entitled to the full range of support from educational psychology services, and I would like to know how that matter is going to be remedied.

Ms Ruane: Since 1999, the number of educational psychologists in training at Queen's University has been increased from five to 12 each year through the provision of additional resources. That increase in trainees has been sustained following the move to a three-year doctorate course, which has replaced the one-year Masters course in 2006. The Department of Education supports 24 placements each year at Queen's University. The Department has also been working with the education and library boards and with Queen's University to consider future staffing requirements and help to ensure that future supply matches demand.

The Department has also provided additional funding in recent years to all education and library boards to enable them to recruit additional educational psychologists. In addition, the vacancy control measures that have been in place because of the review of public administration have been lifted in relation to the recruitment of permanent educational psychology staff due to the unique situation of the educational psychology service.

I was at a North/South institutional meeting in which we looked at obstacles to mobility: where those exist, we need to identify and deal with them.

Mr McCausland: I note that the Minister travelled to Dublin on 14 November and discussed a wide range of topics, such as youth exchanges. Will she explain how she found time to travel to Dublin to hold a cross-border meeting when she could not find time to meet the youth committee of the Belfast Education and Library Board? The chairman of that committee wrote to the Minister on 1 November, and received a reply dated 20 November stating that her diary was too full to meet them.

Is the Minister aware that that committee was appalled by her answer and her arrogance and that members of her own party made no attempt to defend her?

Finally, having found time to travel to Dublin, will the Minister find time, in her very busy diary, to meet with the Belfast Education and Library Board in the next month to discuss the very important issue of the funding of youth services in Belfast?

Ms Ruane: I am delighted that the Member is concerned about my time management skills. I welcome his question and I will be sending him a copy of all the meetings, and launches, I have attended in relation to youth services.

Mr Attwood: The Minister referred to removing obstacles to mobility on the island. Indeed, in her statement, the Minister referred to one of them: consideration of the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis. There is meant to be a report coming back to the NSMC in due course. We have been down this road before with respect to policing. Patten recommended that there should be lateral entry between the Garda Síochána and the PSNI, which has still not happened after eight years because of issues around the transfer of pension rights.

If the Minister is committed to mobility then she must be very vigilant and dedicated to making sure that this matter gets resolved quickly — otherwise, we could have the situation in the years to come in which the transfer of pension rights might not get adjusted and corrected by the Irish Government and the Government in the North in future. Will she also reassure the House that she will be dedicated to getting that issue across the line?

I would like to ask the Minister another question; and I would not normally raise this matter during a statement on a North/South meeting, but the Minister mentioned it on the Floor this morning. She said that there would be no transfer test after 2008. Will she explain to the House why Sinn Féin has tabled an amendment to Sammy Wilson's motion in this afternoon's debate?

The motion states that the deadline for the creation of an alternative transfer test is 31 January 2008. If that is the case, why does the Sinn Féin amendment follow the phrase "alternative transfer test" with the words "if needed"? Is the Minister in a state of confusion or contradiction, given that the commitment that she gave to the House last week that there would be no transfer test after 2008 has already been changed to include the words "if needed"? Can she explain to the House how she reconciles her statement last week with today's Sinn Féin amendment?

Ms Ruane: The North/South Ministerial Council met in institutional format in October. We agreed, on behalf of the Executive, to convene a working group of officials from relevant Departments, including finance

Departments, to consider the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis and report to a future Council meeting. I am glad to say that all four parties in the Executive, including the Member's party, will work to ensure that obstacles to mobility are removed so that all our people have equal access to different jobs on both sides of the border.

I will deal with the Member's second question in this afternoon's debate.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to ask the Minister a question. She has waxed loudly again this morning about underachievement. However, if there is underachievement, it is ministerial underachievement, and there is concern about that in all sectors of education.

The Minister's statement reminded me a bit of our house: there was not much in it. It failed to include any reference to the Irish-language qualification required by the education authorities in the Republic, which specifically discriminates against Northern Ireland-trained teachers and prevents them from obtaining jobs in that jurisdiction. What discussion took place at the joint ministerial meeting on that subject, and can we expect any progress on that long-standing problem in education North and South?

Ms Ruane: The meeting identified the Irish-language requirement for recognition as a primary-school teacher as one of the obstacles to cross-border teacher mobility from North to South. Lack of proficiency in the Irish language represents a shortfall in the range of qualifications of primary-school teachers that must be made good. Significant changes have been made to the previous requirements for proficiency in the Irish language in respect of teaching posts, such as the limitation of the requirement to teachers in primary schools and second-level teachers in Gaeltacht schools who are required to teach in the medium of Irish, and the ending of previous differential rates of pay, pending the acquisition of a recognised qualification.

The Member will know that the Irish language is the national language of Ireland. It is taught in every primary school in the South of Ireland, and respect should be given to it. Significant obstacles to teacher mobility have been removed. I brought the Irish-medium education review team to the Gaeltacht area to see the Irish language in its natural environment. There were people there from many different communities; I met a young Hindu girl who was learning Hindi, Punjabi, Irish and English, and was nearly fluent in them all. I do not know why people here are so worried about learning different languages. Surely we need to learn different languages and respect different cultures, instead of always trying pathetically to put the Irish language down.

11.15 am

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pensions Bill

Final Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):
I beg to move

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] do now pass.

The Pensions Bill represents a major step in legislating for long-term reform of our pensions system, and it is appropriate that I comment briefly on what has been achieved. As a champion for older and disadvantaged people, I am pleased to have had an opportunity to introduce measures that will provide real help, in particular to women and carers, but also to pensioners in general.

The Bill introduces a complementary package of reforms aimed at improving the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension, simplifying private pensions and providing for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority. The reforms flow largely from recommendations made by the Independent Pensions Commission and they respond to demographic and social trends that the commission identified as creating challenges for the future.

The state pension reforms recognise the different ways in which people contribute to society and they will particularly benefit sections of society such as women and carers. The effects of labour market differences between men and women and the impact of caring responsibilities will be addressed by reducing the number of qualifying years required for a full basic state pension to 30 for men and women and by introducing contribution credits for parents and carers.

These measures will provide significantly enhanced opportunities for accruing state pension entitlement. By the end of the next Parliament, at the latest, the basic state pension will be uprated in line with earnings rather than prices. That will ensure that the basic state pension keeps its value in relation to earnings and will provide a solid underpinning to retirement income.

The standard minimum guarantee element of pension credit, which provides a safety net for those who do not build up sufficient state and private pension entitlements, will continue to be uprated in line with earnings. Members will recall that during the second stage of the Bill I was much charged with the need to ensure that pensioners and the more elderly members of our population receive the benefit to which they are entitled,

hence my recognition of that and the fact that I introduced the benefit uptake campaign earlier in 2007.

The second state pension will be reformed and simplified, and entitlement to a category B pension, which is based on a spouse's national insurance record, will cease to be conditional on the spouse claiming their pension. Inevitably, given the cost implications, there are trade-offs. For example, in order to meet the demands of an ageing population, the state pension age will gradually increase from 65 to 68 by 2046. The abolition of adult dependency increases of category A and category-C retirement pensions will simplify state pension rules and remove an increasingly outdated concept of dependency.

A number of measures will help to simplify private pensions. Over time, layers of regulation have produced an extremely complicated system. The reforms will provide a degree of clarity that does not exist at present.

The Bill also provides for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal accounts system to enable people to save for retirement.

The Bill aims to ensure that the state pension system remains affordable in the short and the long term and to remove existing inequalities in the system. The reforms form an integrated package and, as a whole, will provide the foundation for a new pension settlement for the twenty-first century — a settlement that will allow everyone to plan with confidence for retirement.

When I attended the Committee for Social Development, its members expressed reservations about the use of accelerated passage for the Pensions Bill. I spoke at length to the Committee about our need to maintain parity with Great Britain on social security and pension matters, and the advantages of our doing so. I addressed Committee members' concerns, and I will further discuss with them how I deal with social security legislation and the issue of parity.

If the Bill did not receive accelerated passage, there could be no guarantee that the Department would have the necessary power to uprate the pension credit standard minimum guarantee in Northern Ireland in line with earnings from April 2008, and that is an important aspect of the reform package.

There is a statutory requirement to seek to maintain a single social security and pensions system in Northern Ireland and Britain. That creates tensions between the Assembly's desire to scrutinise proposed legislation in depth and the need to ensure the parity of timing that is inherent in single systems. I recognise that tension, and I acknowledge the comments of the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Social Development. I have agreed to consider further with the Committee and its Chairperson how best to handle parity legislation for social security issues.

I thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for Social Development, and MLAs in general, for their positive approach and support in progressing this important Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): As the Minister indicated, the issue has been the subject of some discussion in Committee, and I formally support the Bill being given its Final Stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister wish to make any further comments?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Chairperson, on behalf of his Committee, for his contribution and supportive comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

FIFA Eligibility Proposal

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must report that a valid petition of concern on the motion was presented on Friday 7 December. Members who wish to inspect the petition may do so in the Business Office. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion has 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis, whereas the vote on the amendment requires only a simple majority.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I draw to your attention a matter that arises from my having seen the petition of concern in the Business Office. One of the Sinn Féin names listed is that of Mr Gerry McHugh, who is an erstwhile member of the party. It appears that Mr McHugh signed the petition of concern, but his name has now been scored out. Did Mr McHugh score his name out or was that done by his former party colleagues, who feel that he is now unworthy of putting his name to the petition of concern? Will you rule on whether any such interference would invalidate Sinn Féin's contribution to the petition of concern?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The petition of concern only bites at the point of the vote; therefore we can continue with the debate. I will give a ruling on the matter when the vote is due to be taken.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly opposes the recent eligibility proposal outlined by FIFA; believes it has the potential to cause serious harm to international soccer relations on the island of Ireland; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to assist the Irish Football Association in opposing the ratification of this unfair and unjust proposal.

It is regrettable that a sporting issue, particularly one that impacts on our country's only international competitive team, is to be blocked by a petition of concern that is deliberately being used to ensure that a cross-community vote will prevent us from supporting our national soccer team — Northern Ireland. It would have been far better had a cross-community vote been used to give the team a ringing endorsement and perpetuate its future. Instead, a pre-emptive sectarian strike has been launched against the team, using the petition of concern mechanism to divide the House,

with unionists and others going one way and nationalists and republicans going the other.

There seems to be an assumption that Catholic players from Northern Ireland will automatically opt to play for the Irish Republic. That assumption is not only ill-advised, but highly emotive. It is wrong to bring that issue into the debate, albeit that that is how things will probably end up if FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) proceeds with its proposal. For the sake of soccer, and the players and supporters of Northern Ireland, let the Assembly remove such a wicked assumption from the equation. If we do nothing else, let us make no contribution to Catholics only playing for the Irish Republic and to Protestants only playing for our country — Northern Ireland.

We are two separate countries: two separate individual competing soccer nations. Religion has nothing to do with the representative honour of playing for the country of your birth. This debate, which has been generated by FIFA, demands that we concentrate on the tampering of eligibility that is being forced on the Irish Football Association. How helpful it would have been had the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) stepped in with an unqualified rejection of this inflammatory FIFA proposal.

In our efforts to stabilise our country, we have stretched the art of compromise almost beyond belief in this place. We have even confused ourselves to the extent that we have almost outwitted each other in pursuit of some hybrid definition of an Irish person, which meets the deeply held convictions to be both Irish and British at the same time, or only Irish or only British.

As a unionist, I have no longing for Northern Ireland to manifest itself in a way in which an allegiance to the country of one's birth is diluted by creating an opt-out clause, or in the way in which someone is bound to playing for a country to which they have no allegiance. It is called "playing for the shirt" — a pride instilled when players put on their jerseys, go out on to the pitch to do their best, be part of a team and want to win, even against teams such as England, Germany and Brazil, or, in our case, the Irish Republic.

Regrettably, the FAI did not do the honourable thing and reject FIFA's proposal. On the contrary, it only proceeded to raise the bar and, lamentably, took the opportunity to stick the boot in. In a move more typical of a striking poacher, the FAI welcomed FIFA's proposal, because, in its selfish view, it would then have a larger pool for team selection. How sad that is. The FAI suggested there was a principle involved, in that players born in this country could choose to play for the Irish Republic if they so wished. Let us first establish that there is no such country as Ireland for any sportsman or sportswoman to represent in competitive or friendly international events.

This island is not divided without the consequences of that division impacting on sport. We are as we are, and we are likely to stay that way for a long time. We are also told that Northern Ireland is a country that is moving on from the horrors of its past. In the momentum of moving on, it is implicit that we leave some things as they are, without mischievous overtures from our neighbours and crass interference from our partners in Europe. Soccer in Northern Ireland fits into the category of "leave alone" — leave it as it is. If politicians cannot leave soccer alone, attempts in the Assembly to move on and build a new future together are put at risk.

11.30 am

I want to build the new Northern Ireland that all Members crave. However, if soccer representation is kicked out in a shoot-out over eligibility, the goodwill that Members work to produce, every day that the Assembly stays in business, will be undone. Let us not test soccer on the issue; let us not open a divisive loophole to be exploited as a contribution to a political agenda or added to an already embattled political arena; let us set examples, instead of tests, for soccer — let the First Minister and deputy First Minister set a good example and show joint support for the Northern Ireland soccer team.

It is understandable that a Northern Ireland-born player not deemed good enough to play for his country will look favourably at another country that is willing to play him in international competitions. However, that is a luxury that is seldom open to Northern Ireland. We need every player that we can get. We do not need — or want — the FAI to act as a surrogate organisation that dangles the attraction of a match like a magnet pulling a player away from putting on the Northern Ireland jersey, which is his as a right.

Neither can we allow FIFA to engage in a preposterous game of fantasy football by imagining that the Belfast Agreement mark I — superseded by mark II at St Andrews — through the consent principle, in some way enshrines consent to tear up the basis of an international footballer's birthplace.

I hope that FIFA is listening to the debate because it will hear, no doubt, those in favour of its proposal studiously, and defiantly, avoid calling Northern Ireland by that name. FIFA will hear its cheerleaders in the Assembly talk offensively about the North, the Six Counties and the Twenty-six Counties instead of Northern Ireland or the Irish Republic. That is because they do not use the term "Northern Ireland" in the House. Sadly, that will be the sum total of the contribution by republicans to the debate, as they strive to be divisive in applauding FIFA. I hope that FIFA sees through that and does not allow its foolishness to be exploited by so-called Irish republicans who are bringing their ideology into sport.

Fortunately, that is not how most unionists, nationalists or Alliance Party supporters behave. The issue is soccer, which is our national game. It is not about coercing a player, turning him inside out over his identity on the pitch or chasing him from the game that he loves and from which he earns his living. I urge Members to support the motion and not sit back and watch FIFA introduce something that they know that they will regret. I know the Minister's position on the issue, and I urge him not to hesitate in forcefully putting the Northern Ireland soccer team's case against this pernicious, malicious and incredibly foolish FIFA proposal.

I say to my colleague Pat Ramsey from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that the FIFA proposal is divisive and too hot to be given endorsement by the House.

On this issue, Pat Ramsey has talked of Ireland as a single country, when clearly, on a football and international basis it is not.

Mr P Ramsey: It is the case in rugby.

Mr McNarry: No it is not. I will not use the yarn, "Did you hear, Mr Blatter, about the Irish man born in Australia who could play for the Irish Republic but another fella from Londonderry who could not", as Pat Ramsey did. How good it will be for Northern Ireland football, not only when the FIFA proposal is thrown out, but when all teams with their home ground in Northern Ireland play their games in the Irish League — I will welcome that.

If the only message sent to FIFA from the Assembly is that of a House divided, so be it. The message of a divided House means that FIFA cannot rule: to do otherwise would be unsafe and totally unrepresentative.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after 'by' and insert

'the FIFA legal committee; expresses concern at the undue political pressure exerted on FIFA by the Government of the Republic of Ireland; and offers its support for the Irish Football Association's campaign to ensure that a cross-community team continues to represent Northern Ireland.'

It is unfortunate that the circumstances have arrived that require the above motion to be brought before the House. One would think that everyone who has the best interests of sport and football in Northern Ireland at heart would not only want to see a good or better Northern Ireland team, but the best Northern Ireland team that can possibly be assembled for the future. One would also think that people in Northern Ireland would want to see footballers of the ability that we undoubtedly have — and we have seen them nurtured and brought on in recent years — continue to play for their own country.

It galls me that FIFA, and others, have attempted to propose a directive through the FIFA legal committee to the overall FIFA organisation — and thereby to

international associations — that would result in good-quality players feeling the need to play for a country that is not their own. Such a proposal would be more than disconcerting; it would be divisive, as the mover of the motion said. I thought that Members would be working to create the best team possible.

I was a lover of sport and football long before I became involved in politics. I support football, and I have followed Northern Ireland for many years, as many thousands of people continue so to do. They follow Northern Ireland irrespective of the community or religious background of any of the players. That must continue to be the case, but, unfortunately, it will not be so if the suggestion from the FIFA legal committee is enacted.

Some people will decide to play for their own country: Martin O'Neill, Pat Jennings and others, rightly, played for their own country and were applauded and lauded for doing so. Some of them are among the best footballers that Northern Ireland ever had. However, there will be others who will feel the political pressure not to play for their country — that is not just sad, it is appalling.

Some argue that we should be trying to get the best team assembled on the pitch, and they argue that we could get a better team from a population of almost six million from both countries — Northern Ireland and the Republic. The logic of that argument is that we could have a team of world-beaters if there was an United Kingdom team. Unfortunately, England has found out that it does not work like that. England might have a population of 50 million, but it did not qualify for the 2008 European Championships: it came as close to qualifying as did a small nation of 1.7 million people.

England has shown us that the argument that a bigger population leads to a better team, thereby qualifying for more tournaments, is not correct. I look forward, then, to hearing those who make that argument go on to say, "Let us have a UK team." However, I hear only silence; they do not advocate that. For some politically inspired reason, they want to have a larger population to draw upon, provided it is drawn in a particular way that suits their political agenda, and that is deeply unfortunate.

The other issue is the precedent that this would set, which Mr McNarry mentioned. With political boundaries being redrawn in the Near and Middle East, the same scenario might unfold there: people born in one jurisdiction or country might, because of an emerging political climate, choose to play for another as a result of this ruling. Those are the cans of worms that could be opened if FIFA proceeds down that route.

I am opposed to politicising sport — it should remain totally separate, so that all of us can support anyone who plays for Northern Ireland. I do not care whether they come from west Belfast or Crossmaglen;

if they score for Northern Ireland, we should cheer them. Before the result of the game against England was known, a political representative who now holds high office was asked whether he would be cheering for Northern Ireland or England. Despite the fact that that representative despises England with every ounce of hatred in him, he could not bring himself to say “my own country, Northern Ireland”, because he did not know which he hated most — England or Northern Ireland. I refer to the man who is now a junior Minister, Gerry Kelly of Old Bailey fame. Unfortunately he could not bring himself to make a decision on which team he preferred, or which hatred he held most dear in his heart.

Let us put all of that to one side, get behind our own country and team, and ensure that the best talent from anywhere in Northern Ireland, regardless of religion, politics, or background, plays for their country. That is what the FIFA ruling will prevent.

I thank Mr McNarry for supporting the amendment and hope that, even at this late stage, the House will unite behind the only sensible, pragmatic and positive step forward, which is to abandon this ludicrous proposal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to be cautious in their remarks.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First of all, republicans do not have any hostility towards the Northern Ireland football team. I recently met Howard Wells and a number of officials from the IFA (Irish Football Association) to see whether Sinn Féin could help them, and obviously we discussed this issue. Today's motion is offensive to a lot of nationalists in the North, who see themselves as Irish citizens and regard the Republic of Ireland football team as their team. That is the reality.

This issue has arisen before in the case of Darron Gibson from Derry, who simply did not want to play for anyone other than the Republic of Ireland. Today's motion is divisive, and if FIFA officials heard the debate they would consider it as being all the more support for their compromise proposal, which is to allow people from the North of Ireland to play either for the Northern Ireland football team or the Republic of Ireland team. Likewise, people from the Republic can play for the Northern Ireland football team. That seems like the best message for this Assembly to send out.

No other sport on this island is subjected to this debate. I challenge anyone on the other side of the House to name one. Cricket, GAA, tennis, rugby, cycling; all those other sports are not subjected to this debate. Why are we causing division — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ross: Does the Member admit that there is a Northern Ireland volleyball team? In the sports that he

refers to, such as rugby, cricket and hockey, the flag that is used is not a national one, because there is no national team. They play for the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU), and they use the IRFU flag; in hockey, they use the Irish Hockey Union flag; and in cricket, they use the Irish Cricket Union flag.

11.45 am

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, since we are on the issue of flags, tell me this —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. When you are making remarks —

Mr Butler: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please refer all your remarks through the Chair.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does that ruling apply to all Members on all sides of the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I imagine that that is a rhetorical question. Yes, of course, Mr Maskey, it refers to all Members.

Mr Butler: On the issue of flags, will the Member tell me why the Northern Ireland football team is the only team that flies the Union Jack and plays the national anthem? Scotland plays its local anthem; Wales plays its local anthem; even England does not play ‘God Save the Queen’. Northern Ireland is the only country to play it. What does that tell us? Does that not send out a political message to nationalists in the North that they are unwelcome?

A lot of good work has been done by —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: No.

The IFA has done a lot of good work in trying to eradicate sectarianism in football here, and I welcome that. When we met Howard Wells recently, we praised him for that. The proposals from FIFA's legal committee are the only sensible way to deal with the issue. It is ridiculous for unionists to try to tell nationalists in the North that they must play for Northern Ireland and no other football team. It will not add up. That is why Sinn Féin has presented a petition of concern.

The Chamber must send out a message of compromise based on the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement enshrined people's identity here in the North so that they could be British or Irish. If people accept that — and everybody in the Chamber signed up to the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — they should accept what FIFA is saying. It is the only logical, imaginative and sensible way to deal with the proposal.

The unionists lobbying on this issue need to face the realities. Many nationalists do not accept Northern Ireland as their national team. At the same time, and whatever people's religious or political background, if footballers want to play for Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, then they should be allowed to get on with that. Nobody should stand in their way or deter them.

Members should look at the example of Derry City Football Club. It plays in the Republic of Ireland's league, and its policy is that if people want to play for the Republic of Ireland then no one will stand in their way. Likewise, if any of the players want to play for the Northern Ireland football team they are given every opportunity to pursue that course, and that is the compromise that Members should send out. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: At the outset, it is important to put on record that the SDLP understands why the Irish Football Association wants to oppose the FIFA proposals. The IFA is concerned that they will reduce the number of players that it has to choose from, and its opposition is understandable. However, the issue of playing for one's country, or one's international team, is complex. Unionists see Northern Ireland as a country — some even see it as a nation. Therefore, from their perspective, it makes sense to have a national team called Northern Ireland.

Irish nationalists, on the other hand, see the Six Counties of Northern Ireland as a state with complex relationships between Britain and Ireland, but which is geographically — and, for many of us, socially — part of the island of Ireland. Coming back to what Mr McNarry said, it would be a ridiculous situation if an Irish citizen, born to Irish parents in any country of the world, be it Boston, Bangkok or Australia, could play for the Republic of Ireland under the previous ruling, but someone born in Derry, Bangor or Belfast could not. That does not make sense.

People may shake their heads, but that was the ruling prior to FIFA's advice. Hopefully, that advice will be supported at the weekend.

I support Northern Ireland. When the team does well, the communities in Northern Ireland do well and there is a feel-good factor. Similarly, in nationalist communities, there is a feel-good factor when the Republic of Ireland does well. People must respect and honour that.

David McNarry said that we should leave it alone. Gregory Campbell said that sport should be separate from politics. The crux of the problem is that, if sport is separate from politics, why, two years ago when Darron Gibson and Mark McCrystal were asked to play for an under-21 select team, did the IFA insist that they carry British passports? Is that leaving sport alone?

Mr Campbell: Does the Member accept that that is not the case now?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes, I fully accept that. However, I say directly to Gregory Campbell that the problem is that that was an own goal by the IFA because it —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Nothing should be said directly to another Member — only through the Speaker.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Deputy Speaker, it was an own goal by the IFA, which bombarded FIFA with communications about player eligibility. Over a period of two years, 10 years ago, 10 players from Derry City Football Club played for the Republic of Ireland. There was not a word then. This situation is a consequence of the mess due to the passport issue and the negativity of the IFA.

Although many nationalists enjoy watching Northern Ireland and hope that the team wins because the players are local, we do not consider it to be the national team. Given that the Irish Constitution has an inclusive approach to Irishness, covering people born in Ireland and those of Irish decent who were born abroad, nationalists do not consider the Republic of Ireland team to be representative of the Irish nation. The emphasis should be on Irish people rather than on the territory of the Republic of Ireland or the island of Ireland.

Ultimately, the SDLP wants politics to be removed from the debate and a single team to represent all the people on the island — as happens in other major sports. Such a team would have the potential for tremendous success on the field, and one could argue that such a team would be multinational because it would comprise British and Irish players. The same argument could be made for the Members of this House, because everyone who was born in Northern Ireland is a citizen of two nations.

Given the complexity of Northern Ireland, which is not the same as most other states or regions, the FIFA proposal offers a liberal approach that is sensible and wise. A player's allegiance would be left to the individual, and I fully support and defend an individual's right to choose.

For far too long in Northern Ireland, we have been telling one another what we are and we have been forcing one another to be something we are not. It is time that we allowed ourselves the freedom and space to be what we want to be — British, Irish, Northern Irish, or any combination of those. Frankly, it is none of the Assembly's business which team a player chooses to play for; and, given the complexity of the relationships on these islands, the Assembly should be protecting the freedom of individual players to choose for themselves.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party supports the motion and has no problem with the amendment. We regard

the debate as an opportunity, once and for all, to clarify the status of Northern Ireland sportspeople.

Members should note that the FIFA decision has been taken only at committee level, and that the IFA and the Minister have the opportunity to make a case against it — and I hope that they will.

There are several reasons why the proposal is slightly baffling. Although a person's eligibility to represent their country was based on birth, lineage or residence, FIFA's proposal would base eligibility on citizenship. Across Europe, that has the potential to open a can of worms that would have implications way beyond Northern Ireland. I do not know whether this debate will be broadcast in Bosnia. If it is, the Bosnian football association is sure to take notice because it is in danger of losing Bosnian-Serb players to Serbia. In the same way, Romanian-born, ethnic Hungarians might opt to play for Hungary — and so it would go on.

However, those are not the reasons why the Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment. Based on what Members have said this morning, there is now a risk that the distinction between our international teams will become purely sectarian.

Northern Ireland will become a team for Ulster Protestants, and the Republic will become a team for Irish Catholics. The ongoing community work of the IFA will go to waste; the recent success of our religiously mixed Northern Ireland team could be endangered in the future, and we will have another source of division.

We have come a long way in taking sectarianism out of soccer, and I applaud the work of the IFA community-relations office and the amalgamation of supporters' clubs. However, we must recognise that there is still a delicate work in progress. The problems for young Catholic players have been evident for years, and they go way back. I am sure that Pat Ramsey remembers John Crossan and the abuse that he received at Windsor Park in the bad old days. In his case, the sectarian abuse was reasonably good humoured, and, as it happened, he took it in good spirit.

However, Neil Lennon was a vital part of the Northern Ireland team for some years. His acceptance on the team would have represented a major step forward. However, when he joined Glasgow Celtic, he became an outcast. All the old prejudices surfaced, and, as we all know, he was driven out of the Northern Ireland team by disgraceful sectarian abuse at Windsor Park. Although, that example is an exception, despite the excellent community-relations work done by the IFA and the supporters' clubs, we have not managed to eliminate sectarianism completely.

The authorities need all the help that they can get to continue that work. They do not need FIFA's interference, which has the potential to destabilise the situation. If we are to produce a Northern Ireland team that welcomes

players and support from all Northern Irish men and women, we will not be helped by having a decision foisted on us by FIFA, particularly a contrived decision that flies in the face of its normal approach, common sense and logic, and which has nothing constructive to offer, but which has the potential to produce two codes — one Roman Catholic and one Protestant.

The Alliance Party particularly respects the part of the motion that refers to the potential for relations between the FAI and the IFA to be harmed. It is a pity that the issue was raised in the first place, but we are where we are. We should recognise co-operation between the associations, not only at the obvious level of competitions, such as the Setanta Sports Cup, which is very successful, but at youth-development level and elsewhere. We should not support moves that could poison that work.

We accepted formally in 1998 that anyone born on the island of Ireland is entitled to Irish citizenship. However, eligibility for an international soccer team has not previously been determined in that way; it has been determined by birth, residence or lineage. We also accepted in 1998 that the Assembly is responsible for Northern Ireland, and that that responsibility extends to soccer. My party's vision is of a broadly supported, mixed-religion Northern Ireland team performing successfully at a new stadium — preferably at the Maze site — by 2011. Therefore, I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment. I have been a supporter of the Northern Ireland football team for a very long time — since I was a wee boy, and that was not yesterday.

I remember going to matches as a teenager, when I dreamed of possessing the skills of those on the field, but, although I had dreams, I did not have the skill. As I grew older, I took the level of support higher. I followed my team to Spain in 1982 and to Mexico in 1986. I had passion for the game and a desire to see my country excel. The 1982 and 1986 teams represented the entire community, as does the team of 2007.

As I grew older and raised a family, I had the pleasure of seeing my boys going to watch the matches, and passionately cheering their team to victory.

I have seen the team go through bad times as well as good times. I have always been there; the role of true supporters is to support their team when it is not doing well.

12.00 noon

It is a pleasure to see how the philosophy of Football for All, which has been implemented by the IFA, has brought football back to being a family game. Grandfathers and grandmothers can now bring their grandchildren to matches with no fear of them learning

behaviours, and perhaps lyrics, that they would not like them to learn, and with no fear of violence.

Football in Northern Ireland has come a long way, not simply on the international stage, where Northern Ireland is now one of the best teams in the home countries and is no longer thought of as an easy three points, but on the home stage, where both sides of the community find themselves able and willing to support their home team — our home team. We can be proud of the progress that has been made in recent times.

Northern Ireland supporters — known as the green-and-white army — have been crowned European supporters of the year and received the Brussels International Supporters Award in 2006. Therefore, to come that far, and to bring so many along with us, to now having sectarianism brought into the game from the highest level cannot be tolerated.

If FIFA makes the ruling that has been suggested, it will mean that only Protestants will ever play for the Northern Ireland team, because any Catholic who wants to play, and has the ability to do so, will be pressured into playing for the Republic of Ireland — whether or not he wants to. Not so long ago, the Republic of Ireland team were known as the “England B team”. I am sure that that sent shock waves through the Republic of Ireland supporters and players.

To subject football to something that we have fought so hard to move away from is not the way forward. That is why it is the Assembly's duty to stamp out sectarianism, even though it comes from the highest realms of FIFA. It is absolutely ridiculous that people who have no idea of the problems that we have overcome in this sport are thoughtlessly trying to push through rulings that will only encourage division in communities once again. That is not the way it should be.

Recently, Northern Ireland's footballing hero David Healy — who comes from Killyleagh, incidentally — took part in a football skills day in Newtownards, which was attended by thousands. Kids came from all arts and parts of the community to take part in the event, which was hosted by the Ulster-Scots Agency. Kids from Portaferry played footy with kids from Portavogie, and there were no issues or problems.

The reason for that is that children are coming to the stage where the love of the game is overtaking all other factors, and it is that drive that we need to keep in motion so that our children can keep playing the game that they love with others — regardless of their background. We should try to encourage that as part of a shared future. We hear comments about a shared future over and over again. If Members believe in a shared future, they should prove it today in the Assembly for the future on the football field.

Surely it is the duty of all Members to support that ideal in its entirety, not just when it suits them to prove

a point. It is about skill, ability and passion, and it is about the country that people choose to play for and why. This is not a recipe for the shared future to which some Members have referred; it is a recipe for an old meal that has gone mouldy and bad. We do not need to serve that again.

As I have said previously, we are a small country with a big heart. However, our small numbers cannot be further stretched by lessening the choice of those who play. It is not simply that Catholic men will not want to play for their country and wear the Northern Ireland shirt but that they will be expected to play for the Republic; they will have no freedom of choice. That cannot be accepted.

In conclusion, the FIFA mission is to:

“Develop the game, touch the world, build a better future”.

That will certainly not be achieved in Northern Ireland as FIFA tries to drag us back to sectarianism and politics. We have left that behind — where it belongs. The DUP supports a shared future for all. I support the motion and the amendment, and I urge all Members to do likewise.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion has been tabled in an attempt to split the House in a controversial manner. That is why the joint petition of concern has been lodged.

On many occasions, I have heard it said that politics should not be brought into sport. However, Members of the Assembly have tabled the motion in order to do the exact opposite. The core of the argument goes against the Good Friday Agreement, the same agreement to which the Members who tabled the motion signed up. What is going on there?

The issue of what teams people play for is a matter of choice for the individual. Fair play to those individuals who are good enough to play for either team; they must be congratulated on their achievements. Instead of allowing people to choose which team to play for, Mr Kennedy and Mr McNarry are playing silly games with the motion and should be given the red card for their foul play.

I have heard MLAs suggest that, were more players from the North to choose to play for the Republic, sectarianism could creep back into the game in the North. What a load of nonsense; what drivel. What proof has any Member that that could happen?

I ask Members to recall Neil Lennon and Anton Rogan. Every time that they kicked the ball while playing for Northern Ireland, they were booed. They were jeered off the pitch, because they played for Glasgow Celtic. *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: It never happened.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr P Maskey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If some of the Members opposite were to watch archive footage of Northern Ireland matches in which those players participated, they would be proven wrong.

I am already on record as having commended the great work that Michael Boyd and others in his team have done to reduce sectarianism in soccer. Fair play to him and his team on that success. However, this debate should not be about sectarianism but about players' rights to play for the team of their choosing. How can an individual perform to the best of his or her ability if that individual does not want to play for a team?

Mr Dodds: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: I will not. Are we not in favour of improving our teams, of showing leadership and of giving our young players every opportunity to compete at the highest level? If the answer is yes, we should accept FIFA's recent draft proposal on eligibility.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: Certainly. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McElduff: I have come on as a sub, go raibh maith agat.

I am curious about the repeated use in the debate of the word "country". The Six Counties is variously described as a "country" or a "nation". Sometimes it is called a "region", a "state" or a "province". Unionists cannot have it five ways. What is it? Does it constitute a nation, a country, a state or a region? In my eyes, it is two thirds of a province and about a quarter of a country.

I prefer to follow Gaelic games, but I must say that the only way in which our soccer players will be able to compete on the world stage, or even to have a competitive edge, is as part of an all-Ireland soccer team. Unionist members opposite are afraid to taste success with a truly national football team.

I want to draw attention to the Minister's comments

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am unsure as to whether Mr McElduff's contribution constitutes an intervention or a speech, but it seems to have gone on for an extremely long time. If it sets a precedent that a Member can stand up and speak for as long as he wishes during an intervention, there is little point in Members putting their names down on the list of Members who wish to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Interventions are allowed at the discretion of the Member who has the Floor. In this case, the Member has allowed the intervention.

Mr McElduff: At the discretion of Mr Maskey, I continue.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, will you explain to the House why, if

an intervention is allowed at the discretion of the Member who has the Floor, that Member is compensated for interventions with additional time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is convention that a Member is compensated with additional time only when a contribution is to last five minutes or less.

Mr McElduff: I refer Members to the statement that the Minister of Culture, Art and Leisure made to the House on the strategy for sport and physical recreation on 9 October. He said:

"it is important that people can fulfil their desires to participate for the team that they wish, whether that is the Great Britain team or the Ireland team." — *[Official Report, Vol 24, No 6, p263, col 2]*.

Mr P Maskey: I thank the Member for his points, and I hope that the Minister will deal with some of them.

I have posed two questions: do we accept the current draft FIFA proposal, and do we commend FIFA for it? The FAI has said that it is pleased that FIFA has once again upheld the principle that players who are born anywhere on the island should be free to choose whether they wish to play for the Republic of Ireland or for Northern Ireland. The FAI has shown leadership, for which it should be commended.

Howard Wells of the IFA has said that he was staggered by the FIFA decision. However, I urge him not to bring politics into sport. Unless he has read the Good Friday Agreement, he should be careful about commenting on the matter, because it is about people's rights as well as being a sporting issue.

Therefore, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I urge all Members to kick the motion into touch. Let us not score an own goal by supporting the motion or the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank Lord Morrow for reminding me about timing, but I was aware that the Member was allowed up to one minute extra for an intervention.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The clock was stopped during the intervention. Is it to be the case during an intervention that the clock is stopped, a minute is added, and as much intervention time as desired is taken? That seems quite bizarre.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The clock was stopped during the point of order, and at no other time during the Member's speech.

Mr A Maskey: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You said that you had been aware of the time, despite Lord Morrow's having reminded you of it. Can you advise the House why you did not remind him that he was interrupting a contribution by another Member?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is part of the cut and thrust of debate in the Chamber.

Lord Browne: I support the motion and the amendment.

I shall begin with a quotation:

“The world is a place rich in natural beauty and cultural diversity, but also one where many are still deprived of their rights. FIFA now has an even greater responsibility to reach out and touch the world, using football as a symbol of hope and integration.”

That is part of FIFA’s mission statement and promise. I strongly contend that the proposal to allow players the choice to play for Northern Ireland or for another foreign county is a contradiction of that mission statement and promise.

FIFA states that:

“the world is a place of natural beauty and cultural diversity”.

Northern Ireland is certainly a place of natural beauty and cultural diversity, but at a time when we endeavour to work together and respect each other’s cultural differences, FIFA is proposing to divide our community by allowing players to choose between our country and another.

Mr Dodds: Not only is that proposal wrong for Northern Ireland, but it is wrong in respect of FIFA’s rules, and dangerous for world football. If we follow the logic of the previous contributor to the debate, who said that footballers should play for whichever country they like, that would mean that Germans would be able to play for Italy, and Italians would be able to play for France. That is exactly the same principle as allowing people in Northern Ireland to play for the Irish Republic. That completely undermines everything that FIFA stands for, as well as world football in smaller developing countries. Who would think for one moment that Premier League footballers — such as Didier Drogba — whom certain African countries may call on, would not be more attracted to playing for the bigger teams? That is why the proposal is dangerous.

Lord Browne: I agree that the FIFA proposal could open a can of worms. There is political instability in many countries that have sizeable ethnic minorities; for example, there is a large Russian minority in Ukraine, and there are Algerian and African ethnic minorities in France. Where would this ridiculous proposal end? Should it become reality, it would not be difficult to predict which country one section of our community would choose, and which the other section would choose. That would have the effect of dividing our soccer players and our community into two separate camps that would support two separate national soccer teams.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Lord Browne: I have already given way. Some may argue that that already happens, which is probably true to some extent, but, recently, there has been a considerable increase in support for Northern Ireland’s soccer team from across our communities. In recent

years, the Northern Ireland soccer team has been a unifying symbol, but now the world governing body of soccer wants to create division.

FIFA’s mission statement states that it:

“now has an even greater responsibility to reach out and touch the world, using football as a symbol of hope and integration.”

The suggestion that players should be able to choose between two national sporting bodies without any criteria being applied will bring about the opposite of hope and integration.

12.15 pm

We need only look back to the recent European championships, when the Northern Ireland team, whose players hail from across the community, was able to compete for a place in the finals up until the last qualifying game, having beaten major soccer nations such as Spain, Sweden and Denmark along the way. The opportunity for the team to compete, and the hope that we have for football here, will be considerably reduced if the Irish Football Association has a smaller pool of players from which to select. There could be no better way to divide our community in sport than by FIFA’s suggestion, which completely contradicts the word “integration”, which is used in its own mission statement.

I agree with FIFA that soccer is a wonderful game. However, I urge it to steer clear of politics. I urge it to recognise the hurt and damage that its suggestion has already caused, and the potential for permanent damage that it would cause the community if it ever became a reality. I therefore call upon FIFA to adhere to its own mission statement and immediately withdraw its suggestion. I urge every Member in the House — and I mean every Member — to unite against FIFA’s divisive proposal and to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr K Robinson: I support the motion and the amendment. I believe that FIFA’s move on nationality rules for football in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is not only backward-looking but is also deeply offensive to the many fans who support the game from the terraces in all weathers. The health and future of football depends on those fans.

Since the defeat of England in 2005, there has been an increase in national pride in the Northern Ireland team, with the demand for replica kits and tickets outstripping supply, and with tongue-in-cheek songs, such as ‘We’re not Brazil; we’re Northern Ireland’, ringing around Windsor Park; followed, perhaps, by ‘It’s just like watching Brazil’, whether the team’s performing like Brazil or not.

In 2006, Northern Ireland supporters were awarded the Brussels International Supporters Award for their efforts to stamp out sectarianism, their charity work, their general good humour and their behaviour at home

and overseas. The IFA website, entitled 'Our Wee Country' says a great deal about the driving force behind the IFA. It also says a lot about the fans and their aspirations.

I have listened carefully to what has been said from the Benches opposite. I also note that the IFA has invested greatly in the development of young and promising players throughout the various echelons that lead ultimately to a place in the international squad. Will the IFA be denied the outcome of all the work that it has put in? FIFA would do well to take account of that if it is to live up to its primary objectives. In its mission statement, FIFA talks about how it aims to:

"Develop the game, touch the world, build a better future".

How can any step that has the potential fatally to undermine one of the constituent parts of FIFA, namely the IFA, adhere to that primary mission statement?

That scenario is exactly what will happen if FIFA's proposal to permit players who are born in Northern Ireland to choose to play for the Irish Republic goes ahead. This ill-considered move has the potential to fatally undermine the IFA, since the FAI will be at liberty to poach players who are from Northern Ireland, thus effectively disabling the Northern Ireland squad. That flies in the face of fair competition. It will also have the effect of undermining football in the Province, which has become a beacon of success for the community during many dark days of the past 30 years, and despite the relatively low population base.

My colleague Danny Kennedy will raise an important issue later in the debate. He will describe FIFA's move as being overtly political. The Assembly must consider the political context of the move. The blurring of the nationality rule flies in the face of all that the Assembly has done.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr K Robinson: No. It is based on the outdated political thinking that lay behind the 1937 Irish Constitution. One article in that constitution that caused great offence to unionist-minded people in Northern Ireland was the claim to what was described as the "national territory" of Ireland, which, under the terms of that enactment, meant the whole island, including Northern Ireland. That claim stood in the way of political progress here for decades and introduced an element of irreconcilability into politics. It entrenched that negative spirit in the law.

The Belfast Agreement, and the Assembly that flowed from it, were partly based on the renunciation — by politicians and the ordinary voters in the Irish Republic, in a referendum — of that claim to the territory of Northern Ireland. Following that, a new principle of consent was introduced, whereby the

future of Northern Ireland would be decided by the voters in a border poll, thus reassuring unionist people that they could not and would not be coerced into a united Ireland.

Political progress here is based on the common shared Northern Ireland identity, which, for one side of our community, has a subset of nationalist aspirations, while the other side has unionist aspirations. That Northern Ireland identity is expressed in many ways: it is expressed in our shared Government in Northern Ireland; in our joint approach to economic and social problems; in the way we worked together in New York and Washington in the search for inward investment for Northern Ireland plc; in our working together in the Assembly; and in football, which is a major leisure activity and a major icon for identification right across our community.

People identify with our Northern Ireland football team. They identify with the shared fun and shared values of football. To unpick the Northern Ireland team, which will be the result of the FIFA proposal, is to undermine one of the ways in which we hold our communities together. That must be, at the very least, bad for our sense of community cohesion. It is bad for a confident Northern Ireland that is seeking its long-awaited place in the sun.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá ag an tús go bhfuil mé in éadan an rúin agus in éadan an leasaithe chomh maith.

I am opposed to the motion and the amendment.

The Good Friday Agreement, in the section that deals with constitutional issues, recognises:

"the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland."

Mr McCartney: I am mindful of what you said about the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, and I heard Lord Browne referring to FIFA's mission statement. Article 15 of FIFA's own rules states that:

"Any person holding the nationality of a country is eligible to play for the representative teams of the Association of that country."

When that is coupled with the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the case is closed, lads.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Good Friday Agreement clearly recognises the situation that exists in Northern Ireland whereby we have two communities with varying national and political aspirations, both of which are equally legitimate when pursued by wholly peaceful and democratic means. That principle is recognised by all sides of the House. The question of nationality in

general has been settled by the Good Friday Agreement. Individuals may choose which passport they hold.

We should all agree that no one should be forced, in any way, to accept a nationality to which they do not aspire and with which they feel uncomfortable. People in Northern Ireland have a choice. They can choose to describe themselves as Irish, British or both. That clearly reflects the political and cultural realities on the ground, and ensures that no one is bound by a designation that does not reflect their outlook.

The FIFA ruling reflects the realities of the Good Friday Agreement, which is, after all, an international agreement between two sovereign Governments, supported by the political parties. The FIFA ruling allows players, as individuals — subject to certain provisos — to choose the team for which they want to play, according to their own preference. That is how it should be. It is wrong to deny players that choice. That would be tantamount to denying them that which the Good Friday Agreement offers them — the choice of expressing their nationality, as they see it. The agreement is concerned with giving people that choice, and not denying it to them.

We should not pre-empt the choices that players may make. Players from every side of the community will make decisions for themselves, and they should be free to do so. Some players may make their choices on the basis of nationality, while others may choose the team that best suits their career prospects. We must remember that footballers are professionals; football is a career to them, and, ultimately, many of them may be more influenced by where their professional interests lie than by any other consideration.

Cibé bunús atá lena rogha, is é an rud is tábhachtaí ná gur leo féin an rogha agus go bhfuil said saor leis an rogha sin a dhéanamh gan cháineadh.

Whatever the basis of the choice, the important factor is that it is their choice to make, and they should be free to make it without any censure whatsoever. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I welcome the opportunity to debate the recent FIFA eligibility proposal.

Members will be aware that, for several years, there has been considerable public concern about the state of football in Northern Ireland in general. In the past few years, my Department has striven to help football to address those issues through its soccer strategy initiative. As part of that initiative, DCAL (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure), in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland and the IFA, has been working to bring about improvements in the game across a number of areas, including governance, administration, facilities, youth development and, importantly, community relations.

In recent times, we have witnessed signs of a revival in the state of our game, which has given all of us increasing grounds for optimism. The success of the Northern Ireland football team is perhaps the most obvious sign of that improvement. Good results, great performances, and the record-breaking feats of David Healy have resulted in a rise in the team's FIFA ranking, from a low of one-hundred-and-twenty-fourth in 2004, to our current position of thirty-second in the world. For a nation of its size, Northern Ireland is right at the top of its game.

That, in turn, has brought about a feel-good factor right across the community, which is best evidenced by a rise in attendance at international matches and a huge demand for tickets that far exceeds the capacity of current facilities. A great deal has been done to improve the image of the sport across all sections of the community. However, that is not the whole picture, and considerable changes lie ahead.

The recent consultants' report on the state of Windsor Park raises concerns about the staging of international football in Northern Ireland in the future. To help the IFA to address that concern, DCAL has developed proposals for a new state-of-the-art multi-sports stadium capable of meeting all the requisite standards for international football. Such a facility would position international football to make a further contribution to improving the image of football and of Northern Ireland, given that the stadium could be shared with other sports. Members will be aware that a decision will have to be made on that matter in the very near future.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister accept that there is a unique situation in Northern Ireland, in that Derry City Football Club plays in the League of Ireland? Furthermore, if a young man from the Minister's own constituency played in the League of Ireland, was not called up for any of the Northern Ireland junior sides, but was eventually called up for the Republic of Ireland, would the Minister respect and acknowledge that young man's contribution and his right to choose what he wanted to do?

Mr Poots: I met Derry City Football Club last week, and, during our discussions, I encouraged the club to come back home to the league to which it belongs. That would be very good for football in Northern Ireland and in the city of Londonderry, because it would give the team a far greater opportunity to play games locally and the fans a greater opportunity to go to see matches. The Member has made a very good case for Derry City Football Club's returning to the Irish League.

12.30 pm

Considering the pressing issues that Northern Ireland football faces, and its hopes for the future, it is most unfortunate that FIFA's legal committee has unexpectedly

produced a proposal that seriously threatens the identity of our national team. I believe that that proposal has emerged on foot of undue political pressure that has been applied to FIFA. That is disappointing.

It is particularly disappointing that people who are involved in the Assembly on the basis of seeking to build a better Northern Ireland should undermine that aim in respect of football. Those people are undermining the good work that is being done by the Irish Football Association to develop a cross-community football team, and theirs is a path that would sectarianise the Northern Ireland football team. All of that serves to drive against the shared-future agenda. Those people were supposed to have signed up to that; however — clearly — they are not as committed to a shared future as they have said.

Mr McCartney: Has the Minister sought legal advice in respect of the Good Friday Agreement's bearing on the FIFA proposal?

Mr Poots: By making the proposal, FIFA are stirring up a hornets' nest. Members have mentioned other countries in Europe. A high number of Russians live in the Baltic states. Large numbers of Hungarians live outside the borders of their country, in south-east Europe. We must also consider the position of the ethnic Albanians, Croats and Serbs. FIFA is engaging in politics in a dangerous way if it goes down that route.

A person whose parents were born in Ireland and had moved to Australia can play for Ireland. That is a completely different situation from that of people who have been born and brought up in Northern Ireland, and whose parents have lived in Northern Ireland for generations. Northern Ireland is a legal entity, and it is part of the United Kingdom. Irrespective of whether people like it, Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom.

I am fully aware of the considerable debate among FIFA, the IFA and the FAI. Officials from my Department have been in regular contact with the IFA on this matter since it arose. As a result, I understand that the IFA had strongly advised FIFA to be cautious on this matter, and that FIFA representatives had, in response, as recently as October, assured the IFA that it intended to uphold the principle that players born in Northern Ireland should represent the Northern Ireland team. That was before undue, unwarranted and very wrong political pressure was applied on a sporting matter, when others decided to introduce politics into sport.

It was, therefore, disappointing to learn that the FIFA legal committee now proposes that players born in Northern Ireland and entitled to hold UK or Irish nationality should be eligible to play for either the IFA or the FAI.

Miss McIlveen: Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland is in a unique position? Not only are we one of four football associations in one country, but a foreign country had a claim on our territory, and now willingly hands out its passports to our citizens to justify stealing our players.

Mr McCartney: Read the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Poots: We are in a unique situation, and all four countries that make up the UK have independent football teams. That is partly due to the fact that the UK is the home of football, and we have been given some leeway in that matter over the years. I trust that that will continue. I am sure that Members opposite would not wish to move to a situation whereby everyone in Northern Ireland who reached a certain standard would have to play for a United Kingdom football team, and that that would be their only choice.

I firmly believe that the FIFA legal committee's recommendation, if accepted by FIFA's executive committee, would have serious implications for the future of international football in Northern Ireland. Perhaps that is the agenda that some people follow. That would undermine the credibility of our international team among its fans and supporters. That will also lead to confusion about eligibility and representation, and could well have other more significant repercussions for the wider structures of football in Northern Ireland.

Although I fully understand the desire of the Republic of Ireland to poach Northern Ireland players, given the current standing of both teams, it is still not right. If footballers are allowed to choose which country —

Mr McCartney: Read the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Poots: I hear a Member who keeps getting agitated about a political agreement. We are talking about sport. We should be attempting to separate politics and sport, but some people keep trying to drag politics back into it.

If footballers were allowed to choose which country they represent, there would be a real danger of Northern Ireland losing some of its most promising talent. We have only to look back at the late 1960s and 1970s, when certain Members encouraged young people not to apply to join the RUC, but to apply to the gardaí. We do not want to go down that route when it comes to sport. We must keep politics out of sport, and allow Northern Ireland's sport, and sporting heroes — from whatever background — to develop.

The FIFA proposal could undo much of the good work of the IFA, as well as of the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs in an effort to stamp out sectarianism at international football matches.

It is worth noting some of the achievements of those bodies. The IFA's Football for All project has worked to provide anti-sectarian and anti-racism training support for football clubs and community groups, using football

to celebrate diversity. With significant financial backing from UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), the Football for All campaign has been extended across our society to incorporate activities to tackle exclusion, and to ensure that football is welcoming, safe and inclusive — regardless of age, gender, ability, disability, ethnic background or religion.

In September 2006, delegates from UEFA and the EU awarded the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs the Brussels International Supporters Award for its efforts to stamp out sectarianism. More recently, on 31 October 2007, the IFA and the amalgamation were runners-up in the volunteer category of the UK-wide International Sports Event Management and Security Awards, in recognition of their efforts to give sectarianism the boot at international matches.

It is sad that some people want to bring sectarianism back into football. I am amazed that Members should wish to create a single-identity football team. Moreover, I am concerned at the astonishing abuse of the petition of concern. That flies in the face of the principles of the shared future that was referred to earlier.

As the Minister with responsibility for sport, I have sought to reach out to bodies with which we may not, previously, have been involved — in particular, the GAA — which I commend for its good work. I encourage that body to be more cross-community driven, and to see how it can reach out to other sections of the community that may not have participated much in its sports. I find it sad that some politicians want to drive Northern Ireland football in the opposite direction, and remove its cross-community element. That is an absolute disgrace.

Once again, we can be truly proud of international football in Northern Ireland, on the pitches and the terraces. The recommendation that is under consideration by FIFA has the potential to undo or jeopardise much of the progress of recent years. I cannot foresee that that so-called freedom of choice will in any way benefit the development of international football in Northern Ireland — or Northern Ireland's sporting image in general — particularly when we are developing a biennial competition for the Celtic nations. Every other year, the Northern Ireland team will be in competition with teams from the Irish Republic, Scotland and Wales — yet there are people from Northern Ireland who want to undermine our team before the competition even begins.

Against that backdrop of concerns, and immediately after FIFA's announcement, I met Howard Wells, the chief executive of the IFA, and Raymond Kennedy, its president, to discuss the proposed recommendation of the FIFA legal committee.

Mr Wells believes that the recommendation flies in the face of FIFA's existing player-eligibility rules, as

set out in that organisation's circular 901. He advised me that the IFA will strongly oppose the legal committee's recommendation, and I fully endorse that position. Further, I offer the IFA whatever support it feels will be useful in having that recommendation rejected by the executive committee. I am conscious that this matter concerns a sporting organisation, and, given that I do not want to interfere inappropriately in the decisions of sporting bodies, I will take advice from the relevant sporting bodies on what I should do.

As the Minister for sport, I have written to the general secretary of FIFA asking him to review the recommendation of the legal committee as a matter of urgency and to stand by FIFA's long-standing principle that only players who are born within the territory of an association and who hold appropriate citizenship should be eligible to play for its international team.

In conclusion, I welcome the interest that the Assembly has shown in the matter through this debate. I confirm that I am totally opposed to FIFA's proposal, and I assure the House that I am doing all in my power to ensure that a satisfactory conclusion is reached as soon as possible. Further to that, I have asked Howard Wells to keep me informed of developments.

Mr Ross: Members' contributions have shown that this is a divisive issue. That should be a warning to FIFA that it should not proceed down this route.

When the suggestion was first mooted that players from Northern Ireland who have no family or blood ties to the Irish Republic should be allowed to, effectively, choose which international team to play for, I, like many others, felt that local football could be damaged. Such a decision could potentially create a dangerous precedent in international football. Many Members have mentioned that point this afternoon.

I have written to FIFA about the matter, and, through correspondence with the Minister, I know that he has done the same, as he has just confirmed. He has made representations to both FIFA and the IFA about the apparent inconsistency between this decision and FIFA's own rules and regulations. In his contribution to the debate, my colleague Lord Browne mentioned FIFA's mission statement.

I am aware that three Brazilian players wished to represent the state of Qatar, but were barred from doing so by FIFA. We are not Brazil; we are Northern Ireland, but the same rules should apply to each case. I am glad that nobody stole that gag before I was able to speak.

Mr S Wilson: Sing it.

Mr Ross: I am sure that the House would not wish to hear that.

Although many nationalists in Northern Ireland give their allegiance to a foreign football team, politics has no place in sport. It would be totally unacceptable for

foreign football associations to be allowed to effectively poach our best players. As the Minister said, Northern Ireland is now thirty-second in the FIFA world rankings, and striker David Healy has been breaking all sorts of goalscoring records for our national team, which is at an all-time high. Only a few years ago, it seemed impossible that our team could score anywhere near 13 goals in an entire championship, never mind a single player's doing so. The effect that David Healy has had on football in this country, and on its supporters, is phenomenal. The number of times that his name has appeared in Hansard in the past 48 hours alone will prove that.

In parallel with results on the pitch, we have also heard that Northern Ireland supporters have built up a reputation as being among the best in the world. They travel the globe loyally with their team. I was at Windsor Park on the night when we beat England, and that victory was one of a series of superb results in recent years. The atmosphere was electric, and it was an example of how great the fans are and of how far football in Northern Ireland has come.

In numerous debates since May, including today's, we have heard Members from both sides of the House talk about how sport can bring people together. Football, in particular, can bring the communities together and allow children to mix socially and grow together.

The IFA's efforts to stamp out sectarianism in local football must also be welcomed and, indeed, congratulated. However, FIFA's latest suggestion, which has been backed by nationalists in the House, would reintroduce sectarianism to local football. That is because Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland who come from the nationalist community may choose to represent the Irish Republic, shunning their own country to play for our geographical neighbours. The outplaying of that would be the creation of a Protestant team in Northern Ireland and a Roman Catholic team south of the border. Despite arguments to the contrary from Members across the House, we know that that would be the case. I do not wish to see people putting on a Northern Ireland shirt if they have no pride in the team or loyalty to the fans, but let us remember that many Roman Catholics have represented our wee country over the years. Many of those players faced pressure from their own community not to play, and they even faced abuse from a small minority of those attending matches.

Dominic Bradley said much about choice. I do not want to see circumstances in which Roman Catholics do not have the choice to play for Northern Ireland because they are pressured to represent the Irish Republic, rather than their own country. If FIFA goes down the route of allowing players from one country to play for another, where will it end?

12.45 pm

Miss McIlveen: If England had come along and tried to poach George Best or, more recently, David Healy, should we have just rolled over and allowed that to happen?

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that contribution. She is absolutely right. That is what we are talking about: should someone from Scotland, Wales or England be able to play for Northern Ireland if we grab them first? In fact, it could be argued that that makes more sense because we are, at least, all part of the United Kingdom, which is one state.

The proposal to allow someone to choose which international team to play for will make a farce of international football. We all remember the era when Jack Charlton was the manager of the Republic of Ireland team, and it seemed that anyone who ever drank a pint of Guinness was eligible to play for that country. It was a joke at the time, and it is still a joke today. That is what will happen if FIFA goes down that road.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Member not appreciate what happened in respect of the shared-future agenda when, just two years ago, the IFA insisted that two young players from Derry city must carry British passports? That situation arose from a FIFA ruling.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that, but, as he knows, that matter has already been dealt with by my colleague from East Londonderry. That ruling no longer applies.

I want to see people from all sections of the community being able to represent Northern Ireland. If we go down the route suggested by FIFA, that will no longer be the case. That is not good for football or the community in Northern Ireland. Players should play for the country in which they were born. That is where Mr Lunn's contribution made a lot of sense, and I am glad that the Alliance Party is adopting a sensible approach to the debate.

In conclusion, I support the amendment in the name of my colleague Mr Gregory Campbell and I commend it to the House.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate, even those who opposed the original motion and the amendment. I am happy to indicate that we accept the amendment and will support it. I also welcome the attendance of the Minister for the entire debate.

The reason for our bringing the motion before the House is that we believe fundamentally that if the proposal in question is carried and recommended by the legal committee of the governing body, FIFA, and allowed to proceed, it will do irretrievable damage to Northern Ireland football and reintroduce the spectre of sectarianism into football. It will also significantly

undermine the principle of consent, on which this Assembly and the Belfast Agreement are based.

The issue goes beyond football, and represents a degree of political interference that is totally unacceptable. One of the most important aspects of the Belfast Agreement was the renunciation by the Irish Republic of its erstwhile claim to the territory of Northern Ireland under its 1937 constitution. That constitutional change was sanctioned by a referendum. That was one of the gains of the Belfast Agreement and was the cornerstone of the new relationship of mutual respect between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It has since been reinforced by new nationality laws in the Republic.

The FIFA proposal flies in the face of that fundamental tenet of the Belfast Agreement and represents, therefore, not merely an ill-informed and ham-fisted, but a very old-fashioned attitude on the part of those who advocate it. The proposal also seriously interferes with and undermines international agreements among sovereign states, as well as the political process in Northern Ireland. The proposal is backward looking and reintroduces old arguments that belong to an Ireland of the past, and which should definitely not belong to an Ireland, North or South, of today.

FIFA's proposal is based on a concept of nationality that is out of step with the times and with political realities. In many ways, it opens up old wounds that have been healing since the enshrinement of the principle of consent in the Belfast Agreement and since the abandonment of the territorial claim in the associated referendum. It appears that some people are still living in 1937.

Soccer matters to a great many people. What happens in football will affect —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry: I do not have time. What happens in football will have an impact that goes far beyond its role as a sport. What happens on football terraces has implications for public order. The removal of sectarianism from the terraces is an important part of the removal of sectarianism from society. What happens in football governance has implications for the well-being of the political process, especially if it breaches or flies in the face of the so-called founding principles of our political process or of the ground on which political progress has been made.

Northern Ireland can be proud of its football record. On 27 November 2007, Kate Hoey, a Labour MP who hails from Northern Ireland, was able to write in 'The Daily Telegraph' that:

"When a player dons a Northern Ireland or Scotland shirt he looks forward to the game; he wants to play for his country and he raises his game; he knows he has the backing of the supporters; he knows they know he cares. He is proud to play for his country".

Kate Hoey is entirely correct. The sense of identity and pride in Northern Ireland is a key component, not only in our football presence, but in our overall presence in the world. It does not deserve to be undermined by this crass move by FIFA, which is a blow to the new pride in and of Northern Ireland and to our shared identity, which has enabled us to present a new image to the world. In no way does that shared identity undermine either nationalist or unionist aspirations; rather, it enables us to live and work together. That has been the road of peace and reconciliation. The Northern Ireland football identity is an intrinsic part of that overall Northern Ireland identity.

It is under that banner that I had the privilege of accompanying the First Minister and deputy First Minister and others on a business-awareness trip to the United States last week. It is through that identity that we have made peace and are striving to build prosperity and a new future for our people. We are doing it together in the context of a new and mature relationship on this island and within these islands and that shared Northern Ireland identity. We do not need a blast from the past delivered by FIFA with the help of some in the background, including, it would appear, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Irish Republic, Dermot Ahern, who ought to be ashamed of himself. If that is the contribution that Fianna Fáil has promised to make to politics in Northern Ireland, we would be better without it.

FIFA's eligibility proposal has the potential to be deeply divisive and has the negative side effect of mixing sport and politics. Furthermore, it mixes sport with the politics of the past rather than with the politics of the present or the future. That is doubly negative. For many years, Northern Ireland players, from whatever political, denominational and aspirational background, have been able to turn out for Northern Ireland in international games. I suspect that the players would be horrified that the FIFA proposal has been presented in a political context with which none of them would be comfortable. The recipe from the world governing body —

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry: I do not have time. The recipe from FIFA is a recipe for chaos and confusion. It raises the spectre of creating sectarianism in football and of pressuring players from a nationalist or Roman Catholic background into playing for the Irish Republic rather than for Northern Ireland.

That is not only a retrograde step but a step that will undo much of the good work that has been done in breaking down barriers over the past decade. In recent years, the Northern Ireland team and its supporters have had an impressive record; the awarding of the Brussels International Supporters Award in 2006

confirms the view that Northern Ireland supporters are the best in Europe, if not in the world.

This move is deeply contradictory to FIFA's self-consistency. In 1946, when the IFA rejoined FIFA, the FAI stopped selecting Northern Ireland players for its national team. In 1950, that was reciprocated by the IFA. After partition, the IFA had attracted many talented players to Northern Ireland, including the likes of the great Johnny Carey. The reciprocal arrangement worked well, North and South. The current FIFA guidelines allow, and make it possible for, players whose parents or grandparents are of Irish extraction to play for the Republic of Ireland. It is important to point out that that facility has been in place for some years.

Northern Ireland's international performance in football has far outweighed our population base of 1.7 million people. Northern Ireland, as a whole, is proud of the team and its achievements. Raking over issues of nationality is harmful to the process in which Members are engaged. Every Member ought to consider that before taking a position on the issue.

I support the motion and the amendment, and I am deeply disappointed at the cynical professional foul that is represented by the petition of concern. I ask Members to endorse the motion.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the Minister's speech, I asked him for an intervention, which he kindly afforded me. I asked him whether he had sought legal advice on this matter. Dominic Bradley read from the "Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity" section of the Good Friday Agreement. The contention from this side of the House is that the steps that FIFA is taking are totally within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent legislative framework.

Mr S Wilson: The steps are totally against it.

Mr McCartney: Absolutely not. In all today's contributions, not once was it said that FIFA's position is in line with the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr McCartney: It is a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please take your seat.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to my colleague Mr Kennedy's point of order, I have an additional point of order necessitating your ruling on a petition-of-concern status against an amendment that becomes a substantive motion. Is a petition of concern invalid if the motion against which it was directed has substantially altered in the form of the amendment being accepted by the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The matter has been considered by the Speaker, and he is satisfied that the

petition of concern will apply to the motion, whether or not it is amended.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the debate, the Minister was asked whether he had sought legal advice. He did not answer that question, and I want to find out whether he sought legal advice regarding the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, that is not a point of order. I return to Mr Kennedy's point of order at the beginning of the debate, when Mr Kennedy asked whether Mr McHugh's withdrawal from the petition of concern invalidated the petition. Given that there are considerably more than 30 names on the petition, it is not invalidated. In fact, there are 36 names on the petition, not counting Mr McHugh's name.

1.00 pm

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In raising an earlier point of order, I drew attention to the fact that Mr McHugh's name had been deleted from the original petition of concern. Someone has taken the liberty of writing over his name. Was that done with Mr McHugh's permission, did Mr McHugh scribble out his own name, or was it done by others acting independently of Mr McHugh? I ask the Speaker's Office to investigate that matter and report accordingly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kennedy, that matter has been investigated. The deletion of the name does not affect the validity of the document. In fact, the name was deleted before the document was presented as a petition of concern.

Mr Kennedy: Is it known who deleted the name?

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, have we reached the stage at which a Member is now questioning the ruling of the Speaker? Is that appropriate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on the amendment, I remind Members that the vote requires a simple majority.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 52; Noes 40.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea,

Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan,
Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley
Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis,
Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

OTHER:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Lunn, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Elliott and Mr Hilditch.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan,
Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley,
Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler,
Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher,
Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly,
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney,
Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone,
Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan,
Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie,
Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P Maskey and Mr O'Loan.

<i>Total votes</i>	92	<i>Total Ayes</i>	52	[56.5%]
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	40	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	0	[0.0%]
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	48	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	48	[100.0%]
<i>Other Votes</i>	4	<i>Other Ayes</i>	4	[100.0%]

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived
(cross-community vote).*

Transfer Procedure

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

Four amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

1.15 pm

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has indicated that 31 January 2008 is the deadline for the creation of an alternative transfer test, which can be based on the revised curriculum; and, given the short timescale and the uncertainty which the indecision about the transfer procedure is causing, calls on the Minister of Education to present her proposals for the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school immediately.

Some Members — including the Minister of Education, during her speech later — might argue that the motion is unnecessary because, last week, after months of silence on this issue, the Minister spoke. She told the House that she was outlining a clear vision for the future and was showing the way forward, and that now was the time to start building. A vision must have an objective, and the person with the objective should have a clear idea of how to achieve it, and how to bring people along. It is clear from last week's events, and from what has happened and been said subsequently, that the Minister achieved none of those things. She did not have a vision; she did not even have a vague dream. She has left people in Northern Ireland with the same old nightmare of confusion and mess — to use her words — and a lack of clarity, as the newspapers said.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

If the Minister had offered a clear vision last week, I would have withdrawn the motion. The Minister and some of her acolytes are paranoid that Members on this side of the House want to conduct a witch-hunt against her because of her background, but let me be clear: I do not wish to make this issue a political football. I met the Minister before she made her statement in the House last week, and we made it clear that doors should not be closed. I do not expect her to bring forward my ideas for education, but I do expect that she, as a Minister in an Executive — in which she knows there must be some sharing of views, and some consensus — would at least have brought something forward on which there could have been discussion. However, she failed to do that.

That is not only my view; the media, last week, had a similar reaction. On 5 December 2007, the 'News Letter' described the Minister's announcement as a:

"Package that will create school chaos".

On 5 December 2007, the 'Belfast Telegraph' printed a report card for Ms C Ruane in which it awarded her a grade D for clarity; grade C for practicality; grade B for long-term vision; grade C minus for adaptability; grade C for choice; grade D for equality; and grade D for fairness. The comment at the bottom of the report card was, "must do better".

Mr F McCann: The Member is being selective in the articles from which he is reading. The newspapers from which he quoted also printed articles in support of the Minister's announcement. Does the Member agree that the DUP is completely out of touch with opinion in the wider education sector and among the public, where the Minister's announcement is fully supported?

Mr S Wilson: I have not finished yet; I have only read a couple of quotations. On 5 December 2007, the editorial of the 'Belfast Telegraph' stated that the announcement left parents, pupils and schools "in limbo". The leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan, said that the announcement was:

"short on detail and short of financial certainty."

The Minister herself was confronted by journalists in what was called a "heated exchange", but she could say only:

"Let's take this one step at a time."

She could not outline where she was going, or how she was going to get there.

For a Minister, whose vision is so unclear; who is so lost in her path and so dictated to by her own ideology that she would walk over a cliff before changing it, to ask anyone to follow her one step at a time — she has no chance.

One has only to look at the Hansard report of last week's sitting, in which the Minister was asked no fewer than 23 questions, some of which were asked three times, to see that she did not answer any of them. Indeed, the motion and the amendments are from different parties; therefore, in answer to the Member from west Belfast, it is not just the DUP and public representatives from the unionist side of the House who are confused about what the Minister intends for the future; it is all public representatives in the Assembly, including those in her own party. The motion is as relevant today as when it was tabled, before the Minister made her statement last week.

What is the source of the confusion, and what issues need to be addressed? First, the Minister told us — and although it was not her announcement, she claimed that it was — that she has said that the 11-plus will finish.

It was direct rule Ministers who made that decision, actually.

By 2011 we will have a system of 11-14 schools, 11-18 schools, or 7-14 schools — we do not know what the age limits in the schools will be, and they may be different in different places. We also do not know what will happen between 2008 and 2011. All that the Minister could say on that matter was that we should teach to the revised curriculum, as if that were sufficient guidance for teachers and parents.

What will the admissions criteria be for oversubscribed schools after 2011? A little hypocrisy creeps in here, because, according to the Minister, at that stage, admission will be based on community, geography and family — exactly the criteria that she would not apply to her own family. The Minister refused to send her daughter to a local school, choosing instead a grammar school — an elitist and divisive institution. Those are the same words that she used in her statement last week. The Minister chose to send her daughter to an oversubscribed grammar school in another country: so much for adhering to geographical criteria. Yet she has told parents in Northern Ireland that that is what she has in place for them at the end of academic selection.

Of course, the Minister is not alone in that hypocrisy: New Labour Ministers in England do exactly the same. They want to abolish grammar schools because they say that they are elitist, but those same Ministers make sure that they use their positions to get their youngsters into those schools. The Minister cannot divorce her choices from the restricted choices that she is giving to the parents of Northern Ireland.

The Minister claims that this is not an attack on grammar schools, and they will be allowed to continue. How will children be selected for those schools when their main thrust is teaching pupils with high academic ability?

Parents are confused about the future of the schools themselves. Which schools will become 7-14 schools, 11-14 schools and 11-18 schools, and how will that work across Northern Ireland? What might work in Craigavon, which the Minister has held up as an example, and where at least 30% of parents support such a proposal, but have the option of going to another system, will not work equally across Northern Ireland.

A viable school for 11- to 14-year-olds could not be implemented in rural parts of Northern Ireland without reducing the number of schools to about one in a 30- or 40-mile radius. Is that what the Minister is now saying? Is she going to introduce a system that will demolish half of the schools estate in rural parts of Northern Ireland and have youngsters travelling over half of the country?

The Minister has not given us any answers; instead she has said that we will have a discussion. This was meant to be the vision, the way forward, the plan. I am

not surprised at the reaction of the newspapers and the Assembly.

Finally, the Minister has no vision as to how she will deliver an alternative to the transfer test because she has ignored the political reality, and that is also causing confusion. How can she deliver on something that she has not got the ability to do? That is not an example of a Minister who knows her way. In the past, I have accused the Minister of being Nero —

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

Mr S Wilson: I will finish now. In the past, I have accused the Minister of being Nero; I probably did a disservice to Nero. He knew that the city was burning, and fiddled. She does not know that the city is burning, and is continuing to fiddle.

Mr Speaker: I wish to alert the House to the fact that the Minister of the Environment intends to make a statement this afternoon. The statement will be made immediately before the Adjournment debate. Copies of the Minister's statement will be made available to Members and, as far as possible, the Whips of all the parties will be alerted to the statement.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposals for the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary schools immediately; and to outline these in terms of Area Plans, based on sustainable schools policy, within the context of the draft Budget and draft Investment Strategy."

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I suppose that after last Tuesday's statement, which tried to cut this motion off at the pass, it was inevitable that today's debate was going to centre around the Minister's new visionary proposals — that is, if they are her own, if they are visionary and if they are new.

For the most part, those ideas have been around in educational circles in different forms for some time, and it does not take a forensic scientist to see whose fingerprints are all over them — certainly not the Minister's. No, Mr Speaker, she is only the ventriloquist's dummy: the words are those of others. Visionary, blue-sky thinking? I do not think so. If the Minister is telling us that this is her vision, I think that she has been daydreaming during class, and I only hope that her daydream does not turn into a nightmare for parents, pupils and teachers.

Many people have welcomed the ending of selection, including the SDLP. However, the Minister has been very coy about coming out and saying that academic selection has gone, full stop. Indeed, her colleague Mr Butler was at pains to underline to the Committee for Education that, during her briefing of the Committee, the Minister did not say that academic selection had ended. During interviews on television the Minister would not say that academic selection had ended: she

said only that she was not in favour of academic selection, not that it had ended. Perhaps she will clarify that point today and tell the House whether it has gone — and is gone for good.

Mr Butler's amendment suggests that Sinn Féin sees selection as continuing. Martin McGuinness made an announcement; this Minister has made a statement. When will we see action? The Minister has told us that there will be no 11-plus after 2008, and no one disagrees with that — not even the UUP or the DUP — but she has not spelt out how pupils will transfer from primary to post-primary schools. The Minister has simply said that pupils will go to their nearest local post-primary school based on family, geographical and community criteria. What will that mean in a city such as Newry, which has seven post-primary schools serving a city and a large rural hinterland far beyond the local area? Without agreed area planning in place, no one knows what will happen in Newry.

The Minister's indecision has heaped uncertainty upon uncertainty.

1.30 pm

The Minister tells Members not to get hung up about our constituencies. However, our constituents are asking how her proposals will be rolled out in local areas. Parents are asking which schools their children will be going to; school governors are asking how their schools will fit into the great scheme of things; secondary- and grammar-school teachers are asking how their expertise — built up over years — will be utilised under the Minister's proposals; and pupils are asking whether they will get to their chosen school.

If we look outside our constituencies, the answers are no clearer. There can be no reorganisation without area planning, and there can be no area planning without a sustainable schools policy. As we speak, neither of those steps is in place. That work should have been done by now.

Why has the Minister not acted or made up her mind on these issues? She has shied away from decision-making because she is out of her depth. On only two occasions did she show any sign of movement and, on both occasions, she was forced to do so by motions tabled in this House. She has been reactive rather than proactive.

It is not as simple as saying that children will go to their nearest local school. A system cannot be built on such vague and ill-thought-out theories. There can be no worthwhile practice without sound planning. The Minister has not done that planning, which is why she cannot describe the practical outworkings of the new system — she does not yet know what they will be.

The Minister has not consulted widely or built a consensus. She has simply flown a kite in an attempted pre-emptive strike against today's debate, and that has

blown back in her face. She has had more than enough time to consult and build a consensus. No wonder parents are asking what the Minister has been doing since last May. She has told Members that she would not be rushed, and she certainly cannot be accused of that. Not, at least, until last Tuesday, when, as soon as a critical motion appeared on the Order Paper, she rushed to the Assembly Floor to dole out reheated slices of half-baked ideas.

Regrettably, by the time she gets her consultation process under way and finished, she will have wasted almost a full year. She has earned the title of “Minister for Inaction”. The sustainable schools consultation process finished last Easter, yet no policy has been published. No one was asking the Minister to rush things; however, there is a happy medium between rushing and foot-dragging, and that happy medium is called action.

The Minister has accused other parties of stepping in and out of the Executive. What did she do? She did not even bother to take her proposals to the Executive. Rather, she wrote to her Executive colleagues half an hour before reading her statement, and then did a solo run up the wing, refused to pass the ball to anyone else, and shot wide of the mark. Undoubtedly, she is not a team player — perhaps she would be better off on the subs' bench.

The questions still remain for parents. In 2009, to which post-primary schools will their children transfer? What infrastructure will be in place to facilitate choice at age 14? Those are serious and legitimate questions, and parents have the right to answers. Has the Minister decided? No. She says that she will consult. However, without a sustainable schools policy and area planning, on what will there be to consult? Consultation requires a framework, and, as yet, there is no framework.

The DUP has admonished other parties in this House, telling us that we are part of a four-party mandatory coalition. The bursar, Mr Robinson, came to class to tell us all to be good boys and girls. Yet, what have we witnessed today? The two main parties in the coalition are at loggerheads. The rowdy pupils of the DUP have reverted to form — they are in the orchard cherry-picking the St Andrews Agreement, and they will be chucking the stones across the room at schoolmarm Ruane.

The headmaster and his deputy do not know what has been going on while they have been away on their field trip. It is time for this rowdy class to be called to order and for it to begin to show some discipline.

The Minister must act. There is work to be done and a course to be finished. The coursework is still only at first-draft stage, and the main assessment objectives and criteria have not been properly addressed. One wonders whether the Minister is in the right stream. At present, she is heading for a fail grade. There are many corrections to be made before a redraft can even be contemplated. A report on the Minister's progress would read: “Caitríona seems to be out of her depth. She must be more decisive

and put in the necessary hard work before there is even a chance of her sitting the exam.” Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposed process of formal structured election, including the process by which schools will be selected; to indicate what support will be offered to schools in relation to the proposals; to outline the policy for selection and allocation of teaching staff; and to further outline her proposals to avoid selection by postcode.”

As other Members have mentioned, there is a lack of clarity and detail in the Minister's proposals, and that is why we tabled an amendment in rather explicit terms. I want the Minister to explain, if I can catch her attention for a moment, what she meant last Tuesday when she said:

“a process of formal, structured election”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 2*].

That phrase seems to consist of words plucked from a dictionary and joined together — it does not mean anything. It would be helpful if the Minister would explain what it means.

It would also be helpful if we were to know by what process schools will be identified as serving 11-year-olds to 14-year-olds, 11-year-olds to 19-year-olds and 14-year-olds to 19-year-olds. Why was the age range of five years of age to 14 years of age not considered? Some people consider that to be a viable option.

In her statement last week, the Minister promised that she would support grammar schools, and other schools, that are not yet ready for the change. Will she outline what she means by “support”? Will that support be financial or will it involve human resources? Can she provide the House with some details?

Can the Minister give the House some detail on the policy that she plans to use for selecting the teachers who will have to move schools when new ones are built, or when existing ones change to cater for a different age range of pupils? Have the unions been consulted on that matter, and what do the teachers feel about it? How will headmasters or headmistresses be selected?

Finally, everyone agrees that selection by postcode is not acceptable — it is the worst of all possible worlds. Therefore, how will the Minister ensure that that does not happen?

Mr S Wilson: The only person to whom I have spoken who praised the Minister is a builder in the Member's constituency. He is building houses in the catchment area of a very popular school. Last week, he had 16 enquiries from people who already wish to purchase houses in that catchment area.

Mr B McCrea: The Member has raised a valid point that raises another question. Does one have to live in the house, or does one simply have to own it?

One could buy a house and rent it out, as many people do already. Those are the sorts of details that we want to understand. We are asking the Minister whether there is any flesh on the bones of the policy. Is there any substance behind her vision?

The Minister mentioned whether transfer should occur at the age of 11 or at the age of 14. I read her statement very carefully in Hansard, and what struck me, and which Dominic Bradley also mentioned, was that she was careful about what she did not say. She was careful to say that she was not talking about a one-size-fits-all system. She did not rule out academic selection but simply said that she was not in favour of it. There are many points on which we are not clear.

For example, on the question of age, she said that all people agreed that 14 years of age was an important age. It is an important age, but it is not necessarily the age at which academic selection should occur. The Minister is twisting words a little.

Why is there a problem about selection at 11 years of age or at 14 years of age? Research shows that boys aged 14 are further behind in their development than some girls aged 11. Therefore, age is a different issue.

There is also neurological development to be considered. There are bursts of activity in the brain at three different times — in the womb; prior to the age of four, and around the age of 10. The brain starts to develop different types of organisational skills during each of those times. Therefore, it could be argued on a neurological basis that those are the times when people should be changing schools.

You have made the argument that people are more mature and can make decisions about their future at the age of 14. I am probably not a good example, but at the age of 14, Minister, I had no notion that I would be addressing you in the Assembly today. That thought did not feature; I thought that I was going to be an astronaut, a fireman or have some such exciting vocation —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member to address the Minister by her full name or by the term "Minister".

Mr B McCrea: I stand corrected, Mr Speaker. It was an error.

The evidence does not support the notion that 14 is the age at which people should be making decisions about their future. When it comes to whether we need academic selection, again, the Minister is ambivalent and unclear. She comes up with the notion of matching children to suitable provision. How do you match children to suitable provision without some form of selection?

The fundamental issue is that parents will not send their children to schools that are failing, and you cannot force them to do that. They would rather leave the country than do that. Until all of our schools operate at a level

that is acceptable to parents, they will not send their children to them. The Minister knows that.

The Minister has said that there will not be a lottery of chance that is based on two one-hour exams. Selection and educational attainment are not based on two one-hour exams. By the age of four, children can be two years behind in their educational development. Even at that stage, pre-school teachers can pick out those children who are going to have problems. In pre-school, one child in three is at risk of having learning difficulties: when they leave pre-school, one in five is at risk. Therefore, the damage is done before children reach the age of five.

Has the Minister considered the problems facing children who are born during the summer; for example, in August as opposed to September or October? All the tests show that they always do worse because they are one year behind.

There are other issues. Parental involvement has a significant impact on cognitive ability and on literacy and numeracy. For children aged 16 and 17, parental authority is more powerful than family background, family size or the level of parental education. Those are the real issues, Minister, that are affecting the educational attainment of our children.

You say that you cannot ignore the fact that every year 4,000 children leave school after 12 years of compulsory education without adequate levels of literacy and numeracy. The real issue is that they should not be leaving primary school without reaching the appropriate targets. They should not even be getting beyond Key Stage 1 if they have not reached their targets. Resources should be put into those areas.

I feel strongly that academic selection is a red herring. The real issue should be about tackling cycles of social deprivation. Research on the factor that decides what school people will attend or what type of job they will get is clear — it is parental involvement, and they are the resources that Members can support.

Home environment, Minister, is more important than disadvantage during any years of a child's life. Child poverty is what really makes a big difference and determines whether children succeed in educational attainment. Twenty-two per cent of our children live in poverty. They do not have the necessary social infrastructure, parental infrastructure, facilities, aspirations or support. Those are the areas, Minister, that have to be dealt with. It is not about the 11-plus, it is not about academic selection; it is about giving people a good start in life. You have taken the entire debate in the wrong direction.

Minister, I do not understand why you have chosen to do what you have done in the manner in which you have done it. Why did you not bring this issue to the Committee for Education? Why did you write to the

Committee not two weeks before your statement and say that this was too important a decision to be rushed, and that you would inform us about it some time in the future?

Then she rushes out a ministerial statement —

1.45 pm

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not usually precious about these things, but earlier today a Member was reminded that he should speak through the Chair, rather than address another Member directly, just as Mr McCrea addresses the Minister now.

Mr Speaker: I agree with the Member's point of order. It is important that all sides of the House address all remarks through the Chair.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the advice all round, and will attempt to follow it.

Questions remain about the process by which we try to build consensus. I cannot understand how measures can be approved by the Executive or the Assembly without sharing information.

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

Mr B McCrea: I would like more detail on the proposals so that the process can be advanced.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move amendment No. 3: Leave out all after "test" and insert

“; further notes the statement by the Minister of Education on 4 December; believes that pupils should transfer to schools that best suit their needs and permit them to develop to their full potential; recognises that experience from elsewhere indicates that the practice of parents intentionally purchasing homes in the catchment areas of popular schools has contributed to reduced social mobility in these communities; and affirms that any new transfer procedure produced by the Executive must not permit children from disadvantaged backgrounds to be denied access to popular schools on account of their parents' financial or social circumstances.”

Let me make it clear, so that no one is in any doubt, that the Minister's proposals, as outlined in her announcement of 4 December, will not receive the backing of unionist members of the Executive, unionist members of the Education Committee or unionist Members of the House. I hope that the Minister received that message, loud and clear, from the exchanges following her announcement last week. It seems evident that, in their present form and given the lack of detail, her proposals would not receive the backing of the Alliance Party or the SDLP. Those points are quite clear from the sheer number of amendments tabled on the motion, and the clamour for more information.

One thing is certain: it is essential that the Minister deal with the concerns of the unionist majority. She must achieve cross-community support. She has singularly failed even to attempt to address those concerns: so much for her party's outreach to unionism. If she does not address them, she will not achieve anything.

I refer the Minister to the explanatory notes to the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. Paragraph 20 may help the Minister appreciate the situation. It states:

“In the event of the restoration of the devolved institutions on this date, the commencement of the provision abolishing academic selection would be subject to an affirmative resolution of the Assembly.”

I hope that that makes things clearer for the Minister.

The Minister must recognise that all children are not the same. Children have different abilities, and they develop academically at different times. Some will never be academically gifted but are skilled in other ways. The Minister has not told us how she will address that. She has told us nothing, other than that she wants to unilaterally scrap academic selection — which Members know she cannot do — and offer what she calls “choice at 14”.

The Minister has not told us how she proposes to deliver that choice, other than to say that it would be offered in accordance with area-based planning. She provided no costings for the delivery mechanisms of that choice, and I am quite satisfied that she did not discuss that with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, despite the fact that she is talking about radical reform of the school estate, with the potential to open new junior high schools. Just how does she propose to fund her vision, given the current budgetary constraints?

In her statement, the Minister acknowledged that:

“the capacity of our education system to deliver high-quality academic excellence is widely — and correctly — celebrated.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 1*].

She then went on to say:

“the system still fails a high proportion of our young people.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 1*].

Incredibly, instead of focusing on those aspects of the system that are failing and presenting proposals to enhance and improve education at secondary level, she shows her desire to dismantle that part of the system that is working.

She stated that there is a need to reform a system that was constructed more than 60 years ago; and I acknowledge that there is a need to reform the current selection procedure. The Minister's vision, however, has caused greater confusion and prompted more questions than answers. Her vision seems to be to dismantle the system and to rely on the principle that “nature abhors a vacuum”. That is no way to run a Department. We are constantly told that those who do not pass the 11-plus perceive themselves as failures, that they carry that burden throughout their lives and that that requires the system to be changed and academic selection scrapped.

I have heard those words from the Minister, but she did not go through our education system, so I will not take any lectures from her on that matter.

As someone who failed the 11-plus, I stand before the House with an honours degree, a masters degree and with the necessary qualifications to teach at secondary level. I advise the Minister that I have never felt a failure, and I hope that the Minister would not brand me as one as part of her sweeping generalisations.

It is those who claim that not being selected makes people feel like failures who label people as such. To paraphrase Joseph Goebbels, if one says something often enough, people will eventually come to believe it.

The Minister told us that her proposals are ambitious, but we do not know what they are. We are told that she has reflected long and hard for the past six months. That statement gives us an insight into her ability to do her job: to have reflected for so long and to have come up with so little is a sad indictment. She has created more uncertainty through her statements, and that shows a distinct lack of leadership.

Understandably, the people of Northern Ireland look to their Minister of Education for guidance when it comes to such matters. When the Minister says that she will make an announcement to outline her vision for our education system, it is natural that people should expect a well-thought-out plan of action, with precise reasoning that they can digest and comment on. Instead, we have been left with vagueness and aspiration. That is simply not good enough.

The Minister tells us that her proposals require further work at a detailed level. That begs the question: why did she make the statement before that was done? Surely, she should have waited until she had proposals to make.

Sinn Féin's amendment:

"calls for a positive response to her consultation exercise in relation to future transfer arrangements."

That means that there is to be a consultation period. Has the Minister not put the cart before the horse? Surely an announcement should not have been expected until after consultation.

In her statement, the Minister made much of the needs of all children to be equal and have equal access. That sentiment sounds noble but, in the attempt to outline her proposals, the Minister appears intent that our children should achieve the lowest common denominator, rather than have their ability encouraged. That will not create a world-class education system; it will create drones, instead of encouraging excellence and improving standards where improvement is required. The Minister commented that she:

"cannot — and will not — ignore the fact that every year 4,000 young people leave school after 12 years of compulsory education without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills." —

[*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 1*].

I am glad to hear that because the DUP has been demanding that the Minister tackle that issue from the

moment that she took up her post. However, the Minister's proposals do not tackle that issue because those skills must be developed before secondary level.

We are told that her vision is based on election rather than selection, a natural effect of which will be the movement of parents to be near the best-performing schools. Those areas will become the most desirable, and, as a direct result, house prices around those schools will rise astronomically. Where does that leave children who come from less advantaged backgrounds, whose families cannot afford to live near those schools? With academic selection, children from less-advantaged backgrounds who are academically gifted may access the best-performing schools that will nurture their development. Ironically, the Minister wants to limit choice. Will her proposals limit the choice of those parents in the Irish Republic who, like the Minister, choose to send their children to our schools, which she believes fail our children?

The Minister says that equality is her watchword. Does that mean that there is no place for merit?

Despite what the Minister has said, academic selection is not dead. Rumors of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. I hope — but unfortunately I do not expect — that the Minister will reconsider her position, focus her vision, present proposals for the future of our education system, and bring forward reforms that are acceptable to all sides for discussion, so that we may develop an education structure that will be envied more than it already is. If the Minister does that, she may find that the parties on these Benches will be much more accommodating.

In her statement, the Minister said that there is too much focus on academic selection. However, that was all that she focused on. The system must be examined as a whole. The removal of academic selection is not the magic bullet that will cure all ills. Indeed, if it were removed, more ill may be caused. For those reasons, I ask the House to support the DUP amendment.

Mr Butler: I beg to move amendment No 4: Leave out all after "test" and insert

" , if needed, and welcomes the statement by the Minister of Education on the 4 December 2007 that there will be no more transfer tests from primary to post primary schools, from 2010 onwards; and calls for a positive response to her consultation exercise in relation to future transfer arrangements."

I welcome the fact that so many amendments to the original motion have been tabled. It is somewhat surprising — although it perhaps does not surprise me — that Sammy Wilson did not withdraw the motion. He did not even speak on the subject of the motion — the transfer test and the revised curriculum — hence, he looks rather foolish. He talks about the Minister's not having a vision, yet, as usual, he appears to have come to the Chamber with tunnel vision. Yesterday, he

was jumping up and down and was described as a “jack-in-the-box”. Today, he is more of a court jester, having brought a bit of light relief to the debate.

I welcome the fact that none of the amendments, nor even the original motion, mentions the phrase “academic selection”. Therefore, I believe that the debate has shifted towards what Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education, has asked Members to do, which is to consider her visionary statement of 4 December 2007 on future transfer arrangements from primary to post-primary education.

In many ways, people out there, especially those in the education sector, are ahead — of the unionists, in particular — on that issue. Members can examine newspaper cuttings; for example, in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’, the principal of Millburn Primary School in Coleraine writes that he finds:

“Education Minister Caitríona Ruane’s vision for the province’s education system extremely refreshing.”

He goes on to say that:

“We are failing those children with the greatest need.”

Given that not a single change has been put in place to alter that system, he is, therefore:

“delighted to support the changes advocated by the Minister.”

Despite certain Members trying to tell the House that, somehow, Caitríona Ruane’s announcement has been dismissed totally out of hand, many people in the education system have accepted the need for change. The Minister has outlined her vision for that change. I hope that the Assembly has moved to a position where real debate can take place on the issue.

Sinn Féin’s amendment calls for a positive response to Caitríona Ruane’s consultation process. The motion mentions the CCEA’s indication that the deadline for the creation of a new test is 31 January 2007. I must clarify that the CCEA has never said that that must be the deadline: that emerged from a question that was asked of the Minister, and Sammy Wilson has now put it into a motion. The revised curriculum does not sit with any new academic selection test. It is about broadening the curriculum and giving teachers much greater flexibility to tailor their teaching to children’s needs.

Basil McCrea’s amendment calls on the Minister to give details of certain matters. Indeed, I agree that the Minister should provide details and clarification of those matters for the House and for the public. Sinn Féin supports Mr McCrea’s amendment. Therefore, I beg leave to withdraw amendment No 4.

With regard to a postcode lottery, to which Mr McCrea’s amendment refers, the Minister has outlined some proposals that Sinn Féin considers valuable, such as the introduction of family criteria, which would include circumstances when a child’s siblings already attend the school and when a child is an only child or

the eldest child in a family. Children who attend a feeder primary school would be considered under the geographical criteria, as, too, would children who reside in a named parish or catchment area and children for whom the school is the nearest suitable school in a particular sector.

There must be debate, and it should start in the House today.

2.00 pm

Mr S Wilson: The Member has outlined four criteria, which he has used to justify why the proposals do not amount to selection by postcode lottery. The catchment area of a school or a parish, and other criteria that he mentioned, will indicate the postcode area in which a child resides. Therefore, how can the Member say that that is not a postcode lottery?

Mr Butler: Sinn Féin is saying that it wants a real debate about that issue. Currently, we have a system in which popular schools must set some criteria as a means of choosing the pupils who will attend them. We must open up a debate about the issue. That is what Caitríona has asked us to do rather than indulging in rhetoric or engaging in a campaign of constant attacks on her. Caitríona was asked to bring proposals to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I remind the Member not to use Members’ Christian names.

Mr Butler: Yes. The Minister was asked to bring proposals to the Assembly, and she has done so. We are conducting part of that debate in the Chamber today. Many of the proposals that have been outlined by the Minister of Education are already happening. Most of our post-primary schools use a non-selective system. Many grammar schools have an intake of pupils with mixed abilities. Approximately nine of our 69 grammar schools accept pupils only with grade A passes. The remainder of those grammar schools take pupils with grades B, C or, in some cases, D passes. Therefore, demographics are undermining the concept of academic selection.

We should go down the road of matching children’s needs to suitable provision. The Republic of Ireland’s non-selective education system ranks sixth in the world for the attainment of the highest levels of literacy and numeracy. There is no talk in the Republic of Ireland of putting children through an academic selection test.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member accept that there is a significant private-education sector in the Republic of Ireland to which parents with money can send their children? Is the Member advocating the same type of solution for Northern Ireland?

Mr Butler: I am not advocating that system. I am saying that a non-selective system operates in the vast majority of schools in the Republic of Ireland, which has

one of the best economies and best education systems in the world. Those are the facts of the matter. There is consensus in the education sector that 14 years of age is a better age at which to make choices about schools and educational pathways. At that age, pupils will have gained three or four years' post-primary education, and with that — I hope — better literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Fourteen years of age will become the key decision time in a pupil's life: the future is 14.

Our 69 grammar schools educate approximately 42% of our pupils. That figure will rise to 45% by 2013-14. Therefore, it is in the interests of grammar schools to become involved in the consultation process. I know that the Minister will encourage them to do that and will tap into the ways in which schools attain academic excellence. It does not mean the end of academic subjects; it means that children can also take different pathways, whether professional or technical.

I wish to withdraw Sinn Féin's amendment to the motion. Our party could support the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: I am not sure whether the Minister's statement was prompted by the proposing of the motion, or whether that was just a happy coincidence. Nonetheless, this debate is necessary in light of that statement, which raised as many questions as it answered. The statement at least confirmed the end of the 11-plus and academic selection, and placed an emphasis on pupils making choices at the age of 14, which is very much in line with Alliance Party policy.

With or without the Minister's statement, the traditional structure of post-primary education is undergoing radical change. That is a matter of simple demographics. Our birth rate is falling rapidly — the 2001 census recorded more than 13,000 14-year-olds, but fewer than 11,000 one-year-olds. That trend of a declining birth rate has continued since then, and has resulted in empty desks in secondary schools, and grammar schools having an increasingly comprehensive intake.

Mr Butler has already mentioned that, this year, just 11 grammar schools in Northern Ireland took in only those with grade A at 11-plus. Like it or not, little by little, and year by year, the inexorable force of demographic change is turning grammar schools into comprehensive schools. Moreover, the rapid expansion of third-level education means that more pupils from secondary schools are attending university. The 11-plus system, which selects less by ability than by social class, is increasingly looking like a throwback to the 1940s, and we should be happy to see the back of it.

Many parts of Northern Ireland have either a delayed-selection model or schools that are comprehensive in practice. Much has been said about the Dickson plan, which operates in Craigavon. I see no evidence that children in that area are any less well educated than

children in the rest of Northern Ireland. It is always dangerous to single out schools, but I am sure that we can all think of non-selective schools that deliver a high-quality education to pupils of all abilities — Fivemiletown High School, St Catherine's College in Armagh, and Cross and Passion College in Ballycastle spring to mind. There are plenty more such schools across the Province.

As a member of the Alliance Party, it would be remiss of me not to mention the excellent work of the integrated sector in educating children of all abilities, religions and cultures to the highest standards. The Irish-medium sector also sees no need to select by academic ability.

With so many excellent non-selective schools successfully educating pupils of all abilities, including the most academically gifted, I honestly do not understand the argument that an end to the 11-plus will lead to declining standards or reduced social mobility. The evidence to the contrary in schools across the Province stares us all in the face. Therefore, the Minister's statement provides the right vision. I was particularly pleased to note the importance that she attached to area-based planning, which is the only way in which we can deal with a declining school population in a fiscally responsible way.

However, I must agree with other Members that the Minister's proposals are still dangerously sketchy. What will happen on 1 September 2009, when the first post-selection cohort arrives in secondary schools? To date, the Minister has simply not told us her views on that matter. A worthy vision is no compensation for the uncertainty that children, parents and teachers are all suffering at present. Many people fear that there will be chaos, and the Minister has given them no grounds for confidence.

Of the four amendments that were tabled, only three remain. It is lucky that the Alliance Party did not table an amendment — there would have been five. The SDLP amendment most closely reflects the Alliance Party's thinking on this matter, and my party is happy to support it. My party could also quite easily support the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which is a more realistic statement of principles, rather than a last-ditch defence of selection.

The original motion, the SDLP's amendment and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which in itself is at least slightly refreshing, all ask the same question of the Minister and encourage her to introduce quickly detailed proposals to remove the confusion that affects all schoolchildren, particularly those who are due to arrive at secondary level in September 2009.

Without the benefit of its own amendment, the Alliance Party makes the same plea to the Minister: get on with it. She has endorsed Alliance Party policy thus far, and we look forward to further meat being put on the bones as quickly as possible.

Mr Weir: Members will not be surprised to hear that the message from these Benches will not be that the Minister should get on with her plans.

As someone who has pressed the Minister about a number of schools in my constituency without much of a clear response, I should at least be grateful that she has outlined something. However, my level of gratitude stops there.

It is rare in the history of the Assembly that an announcement has been so eagerly anticipated. It has been trailed for several months, yet has produced so little. To paraphrase the Roman poet Horace, the mountains will labour and the mouse shall be born. Instead of a great lion roaring forward to set boldly out a vision for the future of education in Northern Ireland, we have had a mouse of a statement. Its effect makes it a mouse. As has been pointed out, the Minister did not deign to bring her proposals to the Executive, because she would not have received the required level of support.

It is clear that the Minister's vision — if that does not attach too much weight to the word "vision" — will not obtain the support of the House. The unionist Benches will not support an attempt to remove academic selection. The effect of her proposals has been to encourage the grammar schools to carry on. Academic selection is enshrined in law. The Minister can huff and puff as much as she wants, but she will not blow academic selection away. In her statement, she tried to bully the grammar schools by implying that money would be withdrawn from them. When questioned three times, she refused to clarify what she meant by that. She then said that any entry test used by the grammar schools would not be funded. Academic selection is here to stay: the Minister's statement was a mouse.

The Minister's statement was also ineffective with regard to its content. Where do we stand on a vision for post-primary education? Will children have to stay on at primary school beyond the age of 11? Will we have a system for 11- to 14-year olds, or 11- to 18-year olds? The result will be that a host of junior high schools will spring up across the country and there will be more diversity in the schools estate at a time when, as we are constantly reminded, school rolls are falling. Less efficient use of resources will not benefit pupils or the education system in this country.

The Minister's statement is ineffective in its result. Although there might have been room for improvement in selection by merit, it will be replaced with selection by money. The principal driver, as has been mentioned, will be postcodes. Those parents who can afford the big houses beside the good schools will simply take that option. Whatever its flaws, the current system not only produces the best in academic excellence but greater social mobility compared with anywhere else in the UK. Our universities have a much higher percentage of

pupils from socially deprived backgrounds than anywhere else in the UK.

As an alternative to the postcode lottery, the Minister seems to have introduced a "spermcodes" lottery. Families with children already attending certain schools will have an advantage. I attended an all-boys grammar school, but I do not have an older brother. Why should a child in primary 7 who has an older brother in second-level education automatically have an advantage when applying for a place in his brother's school? That is complete nonsense.

Mrs Long: Does the Member not accept that most schools, including most of the grammar schools, currently apply that factor as a tiebreak criterion out of practical concern for the parents?

Mr Weir: Most schools apply the advantage that I described on the basis that academic selection is the key driver. That principle is enshrined. The Minister wants to make that advantage the key criterion. She has derided the Education (Northern Ireland) Act 1947, but people of my parents' and grandparents' generations did not have the opportunities afforded by that Act.

They were deprived because they came from a background in which money could buy places. The Minister chastises us —

2.15 pm

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

Mr Weir: The Minister chastises us and tells us that we are not living in the twenty-first century, but the Minister is trying to drag education back into a nineteenth-century type of selection. That is why these proposals are dead in the water.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate. The tone of the debate has changed since the Minister's statement on 4 December, when some parties rejected her proposals before they had heard them. They even objected to the fact that the Minister was making proposals to the House, despite the fact that they had been lambasting her for the previous six months for not making any proposals. In fact, she had been going out and speaking to the people who matter in this debate: the education sector, parents, communities and everyone who is affected by education. She spoke to industry representatives, who require freshly educated recruits for new workforces.

When the Minister stepped forward to table her proposals, there was rejection. However, today's debate has shone a new light on that. The amendments that have been tabled by various parties also shine a new light on how the debate has moved. I suspect that political unionism has picked up on the fact that the views of many people in grass-roots unionism are not as dogmatic as those that were expressed in speeches in

the Chamber just over a week ago. That is an interesting element of how the debate has moved on.

Academic selection has failed. It has failed individuals, and it has failed the population generally. There is a new alternative for the way forward. The Minister has outlined her plans, which I endorse. She has correctly said how those plans will be fully implemented. The full detail of the plans will be laid out following discussions with the various sectors, including politicians. We should not condemn a Minister for that. It is important to speak to the various sectors again on how the programme will be rolled out. Despite the best attempts of sections of the media to state that confusion abounds and that the education sector has rejected the Minister's plans, when one reads the contributions of that sector in detail, one realises that that is certainly not the case.

Miss McIlveen told the House that the Alliance Party and the SDLP had flatly rejected the Minister's proposals. However, the contributions from those parties this afternoon did not flatly reject the proposals. The Alliance Party and the SDLP may have areas of concern to raise, and they may wish to have more detail. Some of that is about party politics and political debate, which is fair enough. However, it cannot be said that the majority of parties in the Chamber have flatly rejected the Minister's proposals.

A sensible debate on the required changes in education must continue. As my colleague Paul Butler said, many grammar schools now accept pupils with a grade D in their 11-plus. A school in my constituency of Upper Bann is in danger of closing because a neighbouring city takes more and more pupils into its grammar schools with grades C and D. My constituency might lose an education facility that is vital to the cohesiveness of a part of the community. That is not good for education or for the future cohesiveness and morale of that community. If local area plans can be set out around education, there will be an ability to build a role for the school in the example that I gave from my constituency.

There have also been questions over how the Minister intends to implement the proposals within her budget. In the House last week, the Minister stated that she intends to do that. I expected applause from the DUP for that. Miss McIlveen has set herself up as a spokesperson for the entire Executive in stating that the Executive will reject the proposals. I also note that she said on behalf of the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he had not been consulted. The Minister of Education has said that she intends to implement the plans within her existing budget.

Mr Storey: I sometimes wonder how Sinn Féin Members can come to the House and make such generalisations. The Member made a generalisation about what happens in the unionist community. We, on this side of the House, who represent that community,

are better placed to comment on it. However, I want to ask him —

Mr O'Dowd: I have the Floor. I accept where the Member is coming from, and I do not wish to be so arrogant as to speak on behalf of the unionist community. However, my point is that we must listen closely to what people are saying, because broad headlines will not work. People are demanding change, and the Minister's proposals can be broadly accepted by everyone.

Mrs M Bradley: During previous debates in the House on teachers' jobs and other educational matters, the Minister criticised Members for making unrealistic demands on the education budget. Given that the Minister's plans to restructure post-primary education were not provided for in either the draft Programme for Government or the draft Budget, it is she who is making unrealistic demands. The SDLP welcomes the Minister's belated confirmation that the 11-plus will end in 2008, but it would be good to hear why she has not been quite so forthcoming about the end of academic selection. Has she left room to make a late deal with the DUP?

For many years, the SDLP has called for selection at age 14. Unfortunately, despite having waited so long for it, the Minister's statement is short on detail and financial certainty. The Minister seems somewhat complacent about the numbers of children who will be able to attend their first-choice schools and believes that pupils will simply move to the nearest post-primary school.

The Minister may be naive enough to believe that it is as simple as that. However, those of us who have been familiar with the education system for longer than the Minister know differently. The potential implications have already been flagged up in the north-west, where the demand for schools outstrips the supply. The proposed criteria of community and geographical area, and what they will mean in practice, must be carefully scrutinised. The SDLP is particularly concerned about the possibility of disadvantage being reinforced by a postcode lottery. Most astonishingly, that important issue is neither addressed nor provided for in either the draft Programme for Government or the draft Budget. All the proposed changes and transitions will cost money, yet there is not one line in the draft Budget about that.

The huge implications for the future of the schools estate have not yet been reflected in the draft investment strategy. Given that that is the single biggest public-service issue, such an omission is astounding. It raises questions about the commitment of the entire Executive to delivering changes without creating adverse implications for other parts of the education budget.

The Minister must ensure that the "flexibility and agility" that she intends to introduce are not shorthand for unequal standards and inconsistent funding. There

must be clarity on how change on the ground will be delivered and when there will be plans to allow proper public scrutiny, rather than mere spin, on the subject. There are simply too many unanswered questions hanging in the air.

How much has been invested in post-primary education to offset the educational disadvantage that is caused by social deprivation? How will the Minister avoid a postcode lottery and the creation of housing hotspots around oversubscribed schools? The SDLP does not want a life lottery to be replaced by a postcode lottery. What steps will the Minister take to ensure equality of opportunity between rural and urban pupils? When will the sustainable-schools policy and the area plans be published, given that they are so necessary for the future?

Teachers and governors want to know what will be the intended role and make-up of the local groups that the Minister said can agree different arrangements in different areas. Will those groups allow individual schools to make their own arrangements and, perhaps, set their own tests? Or will the groups be convened to discuss only transfer and admission policies?

Will the groups have a role in planning the restructuring and possible relocation of schools to facilitate the new model? If not, how can they decide on or deliver anything? If so, what are the implications for the review of public administration if such mini-boards are established?

Mr O'Loan: As I remarked on 4 December, I was a mathematics teacher for more than 30 years. I taught mostly in Northern Ireland grammar schools, but I also taught in an English comprehensive school. I have seen my five children through the education system here, so I bring some personal experience to this debate. There are few policy issues that are more important.

There are many Members who come from humble backgrounds; therefore, we know the importance of education in climbing the ladder, and we know what our schools did for us. If we go back some years to a time when life was a lot simpler, the local school was a very important place in our community. Nowadays, education is absolutely central to providing the knowledge and skills base for our economy. We do not want to reduce education to its role in providing for the economic system: it is a richer and more varied thing.

I was fortunate to have listened to a programme on Radio Ulster last evening about Seamus Heaney and his visit to Anahorish Primary School last Friday. He talked about what his school days meant to him and about the rich reservoir that they provided for his later poetry. He recalled his early school days as the start of a fairytale, and he talked of his time at Anahorish as a dream life, on which he drew later.

Another writer, DH Lawrence, described the space between pupil and teacher as "holy ground". Therefore, our debate about the education system should be lofty in character, because we are dealing with human beings in all their richness and complexity. We explore that complexity at school among pupils and teachers.

For the most part, the debate about the future of schools has not been very lofty in character — it has been divisive. Very often, people do not listen to one another; they take sides and think that they are completely right. So far, the debate has not done justice to the issue. We need to quieten down and listen.

Like others, I am heartened by the change in the tone of today's debate, particularly characterised by the Ulster Unionist amendment. I hope that they will have the courage of their convictions and stick to that changed ground.

It is remarkable that such a large group of people believe that there is no need for change. I did not agree with the Minister when she said that we need to change the system, simply because it is 60 years old. If it were still a good system, we should stick with it. However, we need to change it because it is not working well enough. It is doing damage, as well as good.

I wonder whether people believe that a conspiracy lay behind the conclusions of at least two major reports — the Burns Report and the Costello Report — that change is required. The people who delivered those reports were not inexperienced or stupid. Perhaps they were brainwashed, or was it simply the case that the problem was examined and it became obvious that something had to change?

We live in a different world. The idea that there are two broad types of people — the academic and the vocational — is absurd. We need a system that provides for individual needs and potential, and, very often, the current system does not do that. The grammar school part of our system is not perfect either, but it is often treated in such a way. Of course, it produces great results — how could it not from such a pressure cooker? Underneath the surface, it is far from perfect, and there is a great deal of dysfunction.

We have made great progress on the curriculum. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has made great strides, and I compliment it on that. The revised curriculum and the entitlement framework provide a structure whereby every child can achieve his or her potential. It no longer makes sense to maintain a crude sheep-and-goat system.

The Minister needs to be mindful of the fact that she constantly mentions equality. It seems to be a Sinn Féin trait that if its Members say the word "equality" often enough, they will create a policy on any issue. All children are different, so they will not be served well by equal treatment. An emphasis on equality, used in that

sense, can suggest a reduction to the lowest common denominator. I understand why people react against that, because such language is not necessary. We are talking about the most appropriate provision for every child.

I agree with the Minister that the direction of travel is the right one. It is true that she is far from defining a new system. She concedes that point when she talks about further work “at a detailed level”. I place some fault with her for not making more progress, but she is not the only one to blame.

There are many people and groups that are resistant to change, and they do our children no service. The grammar-school lobby is very powerful and has argued its case strongly. However, it has not made any contribution to the debate on ensuring a better system for everyone. I ask all Members to work together on the issue — all our children deserve that.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Kennedy: While I was in Washington last week on Assembly business, I read the Minister of Education's statement with some interest, and not a little alarm. That statement was damaging to the image of the Executive and the Assembly. The public have witnessed confusion and mess, and there is understandably heightened concern among parents, teachers and principals throughout Northern Ireland. Consequently, I am grateful for the opportunity to support the amendment tabled by Basil McCrea.

In light of the rapidly approaching CCEA deadline, what does the Minister plan to do next? What assurances can she offer the parents, teachers and principals of Northern Ireland that our transfer procedure will not descend into a shambles next year?

I am still a little unsure about why the Minister made her statement in the manner that she did. Does she believe that the future of our education system should be changed and pushed around by maverick actions on a solo run? Considering that the statement came from a Minister in what has been termed a four-party coalition Government, the people of Northern Ireland deserve more, expect more and should be given more.

Will the Minister outline what a process of “structured election” is? Will she admit that, without further detail, schools in Northern Ireland cannot make plans for the future provision of education? Will she indicate the processes by which schools will be selected for transformation into either a school for children of 11-19 years, 14-19 years or 11-14 years? If she is able to provide that detail, what support will be offered to such schools to make the required changes?

Selection by postcode has caused grave concern to Members on all sides of the House. The Minister claims that her vision will create equality for all. Although

there are problems with the 11-plus system, it could never be accused of discriminating directly against families because of their financial status. If the Minister's vision becomes reality, that is what will happen — parents who can afford to buy homes close to their favoured schools will be able to give their children the best education at the expense of those who are less well off. What strategies does the Minister have to prevent that form of postcode discrimination from becoming a reality? It is of paramount importance that those questions are answered quickly and effectively.

The current uncertainty is causing great stress to parents and teachers alike — and not least to children. The ramifications of this meandering may be even more serious because, as we are becoming more aware, for the Northern Ireland economy to flourish, a competitive education system is required. The message that is being sent out to potential investors is uncertain and ambiguous. The current circumstances are regrettable. For those reasons, I support the motion as amended by the amendment tabled in the name of Basil McCrea.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, which follows my statement to the Assembly on 4 December on my route map for education. I welcome the tone of the debate. It is important that the discourse continue because there is a tremendous debate about education in our communities. I have been part of that debate, even since my statement on 4 December.

There is a simple truth at the heart of my proposals. If we do not change our education system, we will continue to fail the majority of our children. I am Minister of Education for all the children, not only a few. We need change, imagination and vision to deliver for all our children. What will happen if we do nothing? In 2006, more than 1,110 children in the North left school without a single GCSE or equivalent qualification; almost 4,000 left with fewer than four GCSEs at grade A to G; and almost 12,000 — nearly half — left school without English and maths at GCSE grade A to C.

Members should note that the 2006 Audit Office report on literacy and numeracy showed that half of the 14-year-old boys in secondary schools across the North had not achieved the expected standard in literacy or numeracy, and only 60% of 14-year-old girls in secondary schools achieved the expected standard of numeracy. It is impossible for any Minister charged with the education of children to ignore those facts. The undoubted success of many children at the top end of the academic scale cannot be allowed to mask the many failures and deficiencies in the system. We have evidence of a system that is failing children, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some 27% of children in the post-primary sector qualify for free school meals. In grammar schools, it is only 6%. Those who argue that grammar schools offer a route out of disadvantage cannot explain that.

Cruthaíonn ár gcóras seo: tá 27% de pháistí sa Tuaisceart i dteideal béilte scoile saor in aisce. I gcóras cothrom ionadaíoch bheadh beagnach áit amháin i gach cúig áit glactha ag páiste atá i dteideal béilte scoile saor in aisce.

Those who seek to defend the current system argue that merit should be the principle on which educational opportunities are decided. That argument ignores the reality that money — not merit — influences educational opportunities. The figures that I have quoted bear that out.

I ask Members to consider what a grammar school is. The effect of falling pupil numbers is changing our system, whether we like it or not. In 2006, almost one quarter of grammar-school places were awarded to applicants who received a grade B2, C or D in the transfer test. Only seven out of 69 grammar schools exclusively admitted children with grades A and B1. Meanwhile, the non-grammar schools suffer. Some 144 non-grammar schools out of 159 were undersubscribed in 2006. In 59 non-grammar schools — a quarter of all post-primary schools — the extent of that under-subscription meant that one in four places was empty.

George Bain reported that the schools estate has 53,000 surplus places, and that number is expected to rise to more than 80,000 — more than a quarter of the current school population — over the next 10 years unless we act. Consider what that means for so many of the 144 undersubscribed schools. It means reduced funding, teacher redundancies and shrinking opportunities for children in a school that is struggling to survive. The terrible tragedy is that that reduced education experience costs more.

None of the 36 post-primary schools in the North that have fewer than 300 children is a grammar school. The cost of educating one child for one year in those schools is, on average, almost 20% more than in the 41 schools that have 1,000 or more children — 26 of which are grammar schools. That is a greater cost for a narrow and shrinking education experience, and it is one of the costs of academic selection. To do nothing — which some Members advocate — is the easy option, but it is not an option for me.

Change is already happening, and I am seeking to manage the process of change and use the opportunities it presents to tackle the inequalities that blight the current system.

In recent days there has been much discussion about the cost of my proposals. Let me be very clear that whatever cost the changes will have, it will be less than the cost of doing nothing. There is so much to galvanise

in our system, and that can be achieved if we remove the blinkers and see beyond our current divisive structure.

The Executive have set a priority for building a vibrant economy in the years ahead, and the First and deputy First Ministers have just returned from an economic mission in North America. We must create an education system that is suited to the twenty-first century and its need for a range of skills and talents. We will do that by retaining and improving what is best in the system, and by developing new pathways that are suited to the talents, abilities and aspirations of all our children.

We must develop a joined-up system that encompasses the very best in pre-school, primary, post primary, FE colleges and universities if we are to be ready to meet the economic challenges that lie ahead. My proposals will not be driven by ideological dogma but by a desire to create a world-class education system for all children with equality for all at its core.

Look at the schools that are bucking the trend — those non-selective schools that are delivering high-quality education to all children against all odds. I am thinking of schools such as St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint; St Paul's High School, Bessbrook; Ashfield Girls High School; St Mary's College in Derry; and New-Bridge Integrated College. Those schools achieve excellent results, offer a great range of opportunities, and going by applications, are more popular than many grammar schools. They do all that without rejecting the ability of any child. I state that academic selection is unnecessary, and these schools prove it.

The facts speak for themselves. The case for change is irrefutable, and it is an opportunity to restore equality to our system, address sustainability and raise standards for all. I make no apology for using the word equality — equality for everyone. This is the opportunity to organise access to suitable provision for all young people in a manner that is in keeping with a modern-school system that supports a modern economy.

I appreciate that concerns have been raised by parents and school teachers on how and when post-11 and post-14 transition criteria will be applied. I wish to reassure them today that my proposals are clear. The last transfer test will be held in November 2008, and the last children to sit the transfer test will be those starting post-primary school in September 2009.

The transfer of children who will be starting post-primary school in September 2010 will operate under new arrangements that will be based largely on family, community and geographical criteria, as they do now for pre-school and primary school, and indeed, the majority of post-primary schools.

The new arrangements will extend to grammar-school admission processes, and I will discuss their nature with the grammar schools. Some grammar

schools may require time to adjust to the new vision, and I am ready and willing to work with them on that.

However, let me be clear: this will be a well-managed and well-planned transition. There will be no postcode lottery, as some have said. Sound bites may be good for chasing headlines, but they contribute little to the debate on the future of our children's education. I have no doubt that in September 2009 we will successfully match children to the correct post-primary places. We will do so by managing the current spare capacity in the system and by working with post-primary schools in all sectors to ensure that that happens. The educational professionals who deliver for our children on a daily basis are confident that it will happen, just as it currently does at primary-school level. Unlike some here today, who predict and hope for failure, I share the educational professionals' optimism for the future of our system and our children.

I thank Trevor Lunn and Declan O'Loan for their thoughtful comments, and I would like to reassure them that this is not a one-size-fits-all system.

I agree with Declan O'Loan that education should not simply be about the economy. Last week, I sat in the staffroom in Anahorish Primary School, just before Seamus Heaney was due to attend an auction there. As I sat there, I thought of the education that was provided to people such as Seamus Heaney. No one would argue that he did not receive a broad-ranging education. I did not hear the programme on Radio Ulster, although I would have liked to.

2.45 pm

Some people may think that I am choosing headlines selectively. I ask Sammy Wilson to look not just at the headlines that suit his ideology. A headline in yesterday's 'News Letter' reads: "Changes to Education System are Refreshing". That is a quote from the principal of Millburn Primary School, a controlled school that I have visited. That principal cares about every child, and in a letter to the editor of the newspaper, he states:

"Change is invariably stressful and normally those who least understand the issues and for whom change will therefore be greatest, shout the loudest to try and prevent it occurring and maintain the status quo. Perhaps if we stopped for a moment and considered the 55 per cent of our children that this present education system fails on a yearly basis, then change might be more readily accepted. I find it disturbing that once again Northern Ireland occupies the bottom of the UK ladder in performance. I accept that on a year-to-year basis we normally produce the top four to six per cent ... we also produce the bottom 23 to 27 per cent ... We are failing children with the greatest need and we haven't put a single change in place to alter this system ... I am extremely disappointed with the negativity of your headline on Wednesday December 5 as I can absolutely assure you there was no fury in Millburn at the scrapping of this antiquated system of selection."

I do not want to turn the education issue into a political football. I ask Members to listen to educationalists in all communities.

I was asked earlier about trade unions. I met the trade unions last week, and they all welcome my proposals.

In 2013, the key education decision for a young person will be taken at 14 years of age, and it will be reached through a formal and structured process of informed selection, drawing on three years of post-primary schooling and the advice of parents, school-teachers and careers professionals. The provision for post-14 education will be accessed either by transition within the same, or collaborating, institutions or by transfer to other institutions. Area-based planning will design an area's provision to ensure that it has the capacity to match young people to suitable provision post-14 years of age, potentially with models catering for 11-14 year-olds, 14-19 year-olds and 11-19 year-olds.

The area-based planning criteria will be decided through a short consultation process, which has already begun. The choices available to young people at 14 years of age will be expanded by the entitlement framework, providing new opportunities for access to academic, professional and technical courses.

Beidh níos mó roghanna ann do dhaoine óga in aois a 14 faoin chreatlach teidil; cuirfidh sé ar a gcumas cúrsaí acadúla, gairmiúla agus teicniúla a rochtain.

Academic excellence will be at the heart of the new system. We have some world-class schools, and we will continue to have them. We will continue to match academic young people to academic provision. The only change will be that we no longer have some world-class schools at the expense of an underclass of schools. We will not have a two-tiered system, no child will fail at the age of 10, and we will not have a population that is afraid of change.

I shall, as promised on 4 December, make a statement in the new year on how that work is progressing, including, as previously stated, an update on the development of area-based planning. In January 2008, I shall also publish my strategy for school improvement — 'Every School a Good School' — which will underpin the pursuit of high standards for every child in every school.

I will bring proposals for the future of post-primary transfer to the Education Committee and the Executive Committee, and my draft admissions criteria regulations for transfer in 2010 and beyond will, of course, be subject to statutory consultation.

Cuirfidh mé moltaí ar thodhchaí an aistrithe iarbhunscoile ar bráid an Choiste Oideachais agus an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin. Nuair a bheas rialacháin dréachta agam do chritéir iontrála do Aistriú 2010, cuirfear iad faoi chomhairliúchán reachtach. Is mian liom comhaontú a chothú.

Some people are intent on pointing out the various constitutional stages that are required before any significant policy changes can take place. Let me say

this: I want a legislative basis for my proposals. As I said last week, I will bring forward draft regulations. The point is that I want Assembly and Executive approval — I want consensus. Far from flouting consultation requirements, my 4 December statement served as an early briefing on the sorts of proposals that I intend to bring to my colleagues in the Executive, the Assembly and the Education Committee. That statement also prompted a long-overdue debate, and I urge my Assembly colleagues to listen to that debate, to the vast majority of educationalists who welcome my proposals and to their communities — and all communities.

There is excitement about the future of education. There is excitement and imagination about what is possible if the system's potential, which has been restrained for too long by our selective tradition, is released. My proposals will harness that energy and allow for different solutions in different areas and for debate. As I said, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The educational interests in each area will be responsible for developing the provision that best meets the needs of local children.

I will finish by setting out the work that I will be doing in the immediate future in order to develop my plans. Since my 4 December statement, I have already met a range of stakeholders: school trustees; the Governing Bodies Association; trade unions; the Equality Commission; the Human Rights Commission; and the Children's Commissioner. Before Christmas, I will meet all those involved in planning an orderly admissions process for grammar-school applicants due to transfer in 2010. On either side of Christmas, I will explore with them transfer arrangements that will enable them to move significantly towards a successful future, and which will help schools to manage the transition quickly and effectively.

I want to build a consensus, and I urge fellow Members to realise that they have a responsibility to approach this issue constructively. My responsibility is to be a Minister for all children. Work with me. The Minister, the Executive and the Assembly cannot stand by and allow the failure, drift and decay in our system to grow. We cannot abandon our children any longer. They are our collective children — our future. For their sake, we must reform our outdated and antiquated education system, and that reform must be delivered now.

Mr Butler: A Cheann Comhairle, I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No 4.

Amendment No 4, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Ross: I listened to what the Minister said. She made it obvious that she is listening to this, that and the other but she has not been listening to the people of Northern Ireland or looking at the surveys and polls that have been carried out on what those people want for their education system. She has also not been listening to this side of the House. If she had, she would not

have come up with these proposals. She came up with these proposals last Tuesday, and that is why a raft of amendments were tabled, although I note that her party colleague Mr Butler has withdrawn his.

The DUP amendment clearly sets out — and such clarity has been missing from the Education Minister's statements — the necessity for the transfer mechanism to match individual children with schools that best suit their needs, rather than creating a one-size-fits-all system that will fail everyone. Amendment No 3 recognises that some children require additional help and that others who are academically gifted need to be academically stretched.

Having said that, I listened to the Members who spoke on the other amendments, and there is some merit in those. I will return to them later.

We also recognise the potential for what Mr Butler described as a "postcode lottery". I disagree with that phraseology, because, by definition, a lottery suggests that everyone has an equal chance. What will happen is that families who can afford to do so will buy houses in the catchment areas of the best schools.

Mrs Long: Does the Member accept that that already happens to some degree? Parents choose to buy houses near prestigious primary schools so that their children will have a better opportunity of passing the transfer exam. That is not a new situation; it has been going on for years. Those who have money and influence will do better out of almost any system.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for her intervention. I am not sure whether she is trying to justify that by saying that the inequality already exists, so it might as well happen in the post-primary sector.

We have seen evidence of it happening in England; we have read reports from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and 'The Scotsman' has reported that parents in Scotland are driving up property prices near good schools.

Mary Bradley talked about the equality of opportunity. Access to grammar schools should be based on merit — that is the fairest criterion. It would be a backward step to introduce measures that would automatically mean that children from lower-income families on both sides of the community are denied access to the most popular schools because they do not have as much money as middle-class families. Yet, we hear so-called socialists in the House proclaiming that doing away with selection is great.

Last Tuesday, the Minister of Education was referred to as the "Minister of confusion and mess". That mess and confusion exists as much today as it did before last week's announcement. She talked about her vision and her dream, and Mr Dominic Bradley said that he hoped

that it would not turn into a nightmare. We can all agree that it is time for her to wake up and face reality.

Two specific issues must be addressed — academic selection and whether pupils should transfer at age 11 or 14. Members have touched on both issues throughout the debate. No one has argued that the 11-plus exam should remain. That is not, nor has it been, my party's position. We recognise that it is not the best means of selection. However, academic selection must be part of any transfer proposals.

The Minister still has not grasped one simple reality. Academic selection is safeguarded in legislation, and, in order to do away with it, the Minister must introduce new legislation in the House and gain cross-community support for it. My colleague Michelle McIlveen quoted from the existing legislation. The Minister knows that her proposals will not receive the required cross-community support.

Since the Minister made her statement last week, I have listened to people discussing the subject in canteens, shops and in party meetings, which shows that the issue is important to everyone, not only to politicians. Nobody is a failure at the age of 11, but we must recognise that some children are more academically gifted than others, and that all children deserve —

Mr Weir: The Members opposite, and particularly the Minister, are keen to lecture us on the supposed mood of the unionist community on the issue. However, last year, several of us on North Down Borough Council launched a local petition, which, in a few weeks, received 13,000 signatures, with very few refusals. It showed clearly what the mood was. Does that petition not outweigh the one letter received from a primary-school headmaster?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute, because he has allowed two interventions.

Mr Ross: I agree with Mr Weir. That anecdotal evidence backs up various polls and surveys that have been conducted by newspapers and television programmes.

Academic selection allows children from all classes to go to grammar schools on the basis of aptitude and ability. That is fair. It also means that those children who struggle academically can go to schools that will be better suited to their needs. Mixed-ability classes in schools cannot deliver for children who need extra attention or for those who need to be stretched academically.

Members will have heard stories of very bright children who failed the 11-plus but went on to achieve academic success. That proves that a secondary-school education that is tailored to the individual needs of the pupils actually works. The House heard my colleague from Strangford Miss McIlveen describe how she failed the

11-plus. She has gone on to become a very successful young lady.

The second issue is whether transfer should occur at age 11 or 14. That is a separate issue from that of academic selection. Perhaps, the two issues have been merged in some of the debates.

There are merits in transferring at age 14. Those who live in the Dickson plan area talk about how great that plan is. However, that is another issue.

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

Mr Ross: In conclusion, the DUP is happy to support Mr Basil McCrea's amendment, as it includes proposals to avoid selection by postcode. To the DUP, that means that academic selection —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Ross: It is interesting that Paul Butler has withdrawn his amendment, which welcomed the statement —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Ross: He has changed his position —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

3.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: I am glad that the mood in the House has changed. The debate started off in a sombre and argumentative mood. However, Members are now beginning to move to a more cohesive stance.

The Minister lectured Members about working with her and listening to her. Well Minister, had you come to us, we would have listened. We would have wanted to work with you, but the method by which you chose to bring your statement to the House on 4 December made a difficult task even more difficult — if not impossible.

Therefore, before I begin my winding-up speech, I want to ask you one or two questions, and I will give you time to ponder those and perhaps this time we will get an answer. Did you discuss your statement with any of your Sinn Féin colleagues?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr K Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Did the Minister discuss her statement with any of her Sinn Féin ministerial colleagues prior to making the statement to the House? Did they make her aware of the ministerial code to which she must adhere? Did she discuss the matter with any other Ministers prior to making the statement to the House? Did she discuss the matter with the Chairperson of the Committee for Education prior to meeting that Committee? The changes to the education system that the Minister has proposed are massive. Is she able to implement those changes within the timescale available to her?

Some Members who have contributed to this debate have taken a predictable approach regarding the transfer procedure. They have emphasised the word “failure”. I hate that word; I do not use that word, and I hate to hear other people using that word. As Mr Ross and others have pointed out, children do not suddenly fail at the age of 11. Many are failing before they enter our schools, and for a variety of reasons. If the Minister addressed that issue, perhaps there would be total agreement in the House. Resources are required for children before they go to school.

I find it distasteful when politicians behave in a doctrinaire manner, yet are indecisive having let the hare loose. On this particular subject, the undue delay on a matter of such gravity and significance for families across Northern Ireland is totally unacceptable. The political correctness exhibited by the Minister and her preference for what she calls “election over selection” is typical of the type of woolly thinking that has pervaded — perhaps up to now, maybe she has seen the light today, and maybe the vision has come home — her approach to handling this process.

Running an education service is about making real choices that dramatically affect real people. This is not about playing with words, and the Minister’s clichés and platitudes are no substitute for the lack of real investment in adequate staffing and resources in all our schools. Unless that issue is addressed urgently, I can imagine the Minister and her colleagues clocking up air miles as they travel backwards and forwards to attend Westminster Committees regarding underachievement in our system.

Selection is a perfectly valid process, as are the setting and streaming processes. The problem with selection is not the process itself; it is the perception by some people that it involves passing or failing a particular test. Selection is not about passing or failing; it is about seeking to place pupils in the educational situation that is most appropriate to their aptitudes.

One of the problems lies with the obsession that people in our society have regarding success and failure, and the suggestion that the academic route is the only route to success — it is not. However, the other routes require proper funding.

I thank the SDLP and the DUP for their movement towards the UUP’s view on this matter. I was particularly taken by the way that Dominic Bradley analysed the situation. He talked about a forensic examination and how that showed certain sets of fingerprints. I hope that those fingerprints can now be withdrawn and that all Members can settle down and address the real issues. That is what is required to enable all our children to succeed before they transfer, regardless of whether they transfer at age 11 or 14, and regardless of

what system is in place to enable them to transfer to their receiving school.

The proposals lack detail, as Basil McCrea said. There is no use in trying to introduce a system unless it is properly resourced. It is absolutely obvious to every Member that there are not currently enough resources to go around all the Departments. How on earth will the Minister proceed along the route that she has chosen? That path will end in total confusion.

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

Mr K Robinson: The Minister will not be able to deliver. The staff are not trained, the processes are not in place, and sufficient resources — buildings and personnel — do not exist.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimre a dhéanamh ar leasú uimhir 1.

I am pleased to sum up on amendment No 1. It is clear from the debate that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the Minister’s plans. Members agree that not enough thought has been given to those plans and that there is not enough detail to make them credible. Much more work remains to be done before the Minister’s hazy vision becomes clear. Having listened to the various contributions, the Minister will now be aware of that.

The Minister must publish the sustainable-schools policy and her scheme for area planning — both are essential to provide the framework within which consultation will be based. That point has been already made by some of the major partners in education, including CCMS, the teachers’ unions and the Transferors’ Representative Council. The framework for consultation must have enough detail to enable teachers and parents to see clearly what the Minister’s plans will mean on the ground in local areas. Without more detail, parents will continue to be uncertain and confused about what the future holds for the education of their children.

There is also confusion about the future of academic selection. The SDLP has been opposed to academic selection since its formation. The Minister has been unclear on that issue. She has said that she is not in favour of academic selection, and Mr Butler was at pains to remind us that the Minister has not said that there will be no academic selection. What exactly is the situation? Has academic selection gone for good, or will it still remain in some form or other?

The SDLP — along with others — has pointed out the need for the schools estate and infrastructure to be ready to facilitate choice at age 14. There will be a huge need for restructuring, and we are not convinced that the Minister has been allocated sufficient resources in the draft Budget to deliver that. There is no indication that those major changes have been included in the

draft investment strategy. We must also be sure that the new system will be invested in to an extent that will ensure that educational disadvantage resulting from social deprivation will be dealt with early in the school lives of pupils, and before they enter post-primary education.

Many Members underlined the need to avoid a postcode lottery, with housing hot spots developing around oversubscribed schools. As my colleague Mary Bradley said, we do not want to substitute a postcode lottery for a life lottery. Many questions remain about rural communities and the need to ensure that pupils from rural backgrounds are not disadvantaged by the forthcoming changes.

Overall, we must move forward constructively, and I am glad that the Minister seems to have got her skates on and is thinking of making progress.

In the context of the debate, I am minded to withdraw my amendment. The Assembly must present a clear message to the general public, and I thank the Alliance Party for its support for our views. I am minded to withdraw my amendment in favour of the UUP amendment, but I will continue to warn the Minister that she must have the resources to effect change. I wonder whether she has raised the matter with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Together with my colleagues on the Committee for Education, I will raise that question with the Minister and her officials. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member clarify whether he wishes to withdraw his amendment?

Mr D Bradley: A Cheann Comhairle, beidh mé iontach soiléir faoi — agus bhí mé iontach soiléir faoi — ach le tú a shásamh, déarfaidh mé é, “Beidh mé ag tarraingt an leasaithe siar.”

Yes, Mr Speaker. [*Laughter.*] I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No 1.

Amendment No 1, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 1 has been withdrawn, and I am hearing no objections.

Mr Storey: At the outset of the debate I thought that there would not be any Christmas cheer, given the position that we are in. However, it appears that there may be some light at the end of the tunnel, albeit on the basis that what was certain last week is now uncertain. Sinn Féin has withdrawn and is in the process of retreating — all the answers have become questions. We know the reason for that: the Minister has realised that she has no chance of getting her proposals through the legislative framework that was negotiated by the DUP, limited and lacking in detail though those proposals were. Whether her retreat is dignified, discredited or disorderly, I assure the Minister that we will continue to pursue her on the issues.

Today, the Minister informed the House about what she has done since she made her statement on 4 December 2007 — she has been having talks about talks. We have had those in the past, and we have seen how little value they have brought to the process.

In this Chamber last week, the Minister outlined what she called her vision for the education system in Northern Ireland. Some of us might suggest that the Minister had been eating too much cheese — Irish cheese, no doubt — before she retreated for the night. Therefore, instead of a vision, she came up with what my colleague Dominic Bradley referred to as a nightmare. It is clear to even the most naive Members that the Minister's commitment is not to strengthen or improve the education system, and that her lack of competence to do a job that is far too big for her will be harmful to our education system and, in turn, harmful to our children. No doubt there remain some on the Sinn Féin Benches, including the Minister's defender Paul Butler, who would say that she is doing a good job no matter how many gaffs she makes, or how many times she makes a complete hames of her job.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that Northern Ireland students outscore their peers in England, Scotland and Wales, and that lower-income families also outscore their peers across the water? Does the Member also agree that it appears ludicrous to change the system to something that will fail?

Mr Storey: We must ensure that rather than bringing the system down, which is what the Minister's proposals advocate, we must bring the entire system up so that everyone has equality, if that is what is at the centre of the Minister's aims.

Even on the Minister's Benches, there must be some Members who are questioning why Gerry Adams decided to promote someone who is so obviously out of her depth and who cannot deal with the situation that confronts us.

Undoubtedly, it is time for Gerry Adams to say to the Minister that it is time to go, you know. That is the message that must come from the Chamber. The DUP's motion and amendment call on the Minister to do what she ought to have done last week: do the work that she is paid to do; and put in place a process that will deliver an education system that is fit for purpose in Northern Ireland. The DUP is happy to support Basil McCrea's amendment, which calls on Caitríona Ruane to provide a coherent strategy for the implementation of her proposals for alternative arrangements to the existing transfer system, which will end in just over a month's time.

3.15 pm

Several Members quoted from various newspapers. I want to quote from a recent edition of 'The Irish News'. A certain individual made the following comment:

“One area of Sinn Féin politics that is less welcoming is their fundamentally flawed approach to our education system.”

Obviously, people who read that publication are not convinced that the Minister of Education has got it right.

This is a golden opportunity for the Minister to put some flesh on the bones and to give the House a clear outline of the fruit of all the work that she has supposedly done since taking office. Now is not the time for one of her lectures about equality, which, of course, Members are always being given. Listening to the word “equality” on the Minister’s lips is a bit like listening to the words “till death do us part” on Elizabeth Taylor’s lips. I have no doubt that that is not a matter on which she has been overproductive and over-profitable during the past few years.

What does the Minister actually propose to do? She must tell the House what her intentions are for children from 1 February 2008 onwards. If she cannot do that, she has failed not only the House but the children and parents who are waiting to hear from her. There is concern about the way in which she intends to go about that. Will there be a 12-week consultation on the Minister’s proposals, or, with her constant references to regulations, will her proposals be introduced by sleight of hand and through the back door? Let me tell the Minister that she will not succeed in bringing anything in through the front door, the back door or any other door, without the say of the Executive and the Assembly: there will be no sleight of hand on this issue. If the Minister cannot do that, she becomes the Minister of failure — the Minister who, as I have said previously, has failed the children of Northern Ireland.

Does the Assembly really believe that the mess that Members have been debating has all been created by one individual? I would suggest that it is not simply the fault of the Minister; it is, of course, a result of Sinn Féin policy. Sinn Féin continues to promote that policy and to trade in destruction and division. It has not moved away from its old tactics. Therefore, Sinn Féin has put the Minister in a position where she must carry out its diktats. Last week, the Minister missed a major opportunity to back up the party’s rhetoric. Today, she has failed again to do exactly that, because she is ill prepared to have tangible and meaningful proposals in place by the end of January 2008.

In conclusion, I have some suggestions for the Minister. It is a bit like the “toolkit” to which she referred earlier, when she told the House about the merits of the toolkits for diversity in primary schools that she discovered in the Irish Republic. Today, she will receive a toolkit that is stamped with the words “made in Northern Ireland”, because that is where the best products are made.

The Minister must reflect on why so many children fail to achieve the literacy and numeracy skills that

they are expected to develop through the primary-school system. That is where much inequality begins. She would do well to tackle that, if she could see beyond her political ideology and social engineering. She must carefully examine those targets and then hang her head in shame.

Observers are now asking whether the Minister has deliberately turned a blind eye to the potential for “grannyng” because of her apparent contempt for the existing pupil allocation system.

The existing pupil allocation system prevented abuse by all but the dishonest. Informed as she is about the ruling on pupils from across the border attending our post-primary schools, does Minister Ruane propose to open the floodgates deliberately to all kinds of underhand practices, such as “grannyng” and the postcode lottery, by decommissioning the existing system? Were she to do so, that would create the type of anarchy of choice that the Minister seems to desire.

Grammar schools have made it clear that they will retain the right to put in place their own transfer procedures, which will include an element of academic selection. There is absolutely nothing that the Minister can do about that, so what is her proposed response? She has threatened not to fund those schools but has failed to say whether she is referring —

Mr O’Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: No. She has threatened not to fund those schools but has failed to say whether she is referring to the funding of pupils — capital or administration — or simply the funding of any test that those schools may introduce. Again, she has failed to give us any clear indication on that matter.

What will the Minister do? Will she strangle the very part of the education system that is acknowledged as providing excellence in education? Is that her vision for the future education system in Northern Ireland? Is she so ideologically crippled, and so eaten up with hatred, that that is her intention? I leave the House to decide whether that is the case.

However, that may not be the case. Perhaps she simply does not want an obligation to fund any independent transfer process. What would that result in? If that were to happen, the selection process would have to be paid for by someone. The schools would set charges that would have to be borne by parents. Instead of our having an education system that is at the centre of equality, we will have further inequality.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Storey: I suggest that the Minister, in her current proposals, is a Minister of apartheid in education rather than of equality.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Order. I remind Members that amendment No 1 and amendment No 4 have been withdrawn, by leave of the House. I remind Members that if amendment No 2 is made, amendment No 3 will fall.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, *put and agreed to*.

Main Question, as amended, *put and agreed to*.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposed process of formal structured election, including the process by which schools will be selected; to indicate what support will be offered to schools in relation to the proposals; to outline the policy for selection and allocation of teaching staff; and to further outline her proposals to avoid selection by postcode.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Missing Disks

Mr Speaker: As I indicated to the House earlier, I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that she wishes to make a statement about two disks that have gone missing in transit between the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) in Coleraine and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the speedy way in which you dealt with my request to make this statement. I apologise to Members, but a copy of my statement should, by now, be in their pigeonholes. The statement was produced quickly, and I hope that Members appreciate that fact.

Two computer disks, which contain the names and addresses of 7,685 vehicle keepers and details of their vehicles, are missing in transit between DVA in Coleraine and DVLA in Swansea. The information on the disks for each of the 7,685 vehicles consists of the keeper's name and address, and the vehicle details, which include registration mark, chassis number and the make, model and colour of the vehicle. The data on the disks were being sent to DVLA in response to requests from vehicle manufacturers who need to contact drivers about faults, or potential faults, that have been discovered in certain vehicle models.

The two agencies routinely deal with such safety-recall requests, and the release of data to manufacturers for that purpose is both lawful and in the interests of the drivers concerned. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Would whoever owns the mobile phone that is ringing, please switch it off? I ask all Members to ensure that their mobile phones are switched off.

Minister, I apologise for the interruption.

Mrs Foster: I would be very happy if that was Parcelforce on the phone. *[Laughter.]*

The disks were sent using a special courier service that is operated by Parcelforce Worldwide, which is part of the Royal Mail group. The packages were collected by prearrangement by Parcelforce Worldwide and were tracked at every stage of handling until they reached the company's central hub in Coventry. There is no record of the packages leaving the depot in Coventry, although Parcelforce Worldwide believes that they were despatched to its Swansea depot but did not arrive there. Despite extensive searches at the depot, they have not been found.

That method of sending such data has been used without incident for many years. Due to the nature of the data on the disks, encryption was not used. It is ironic that an internal review — which was initiated by

the Department after the child benefit disks were lost in Great Britain — identified that method of sending disks as a systematic weakness — a week after the disks had been sent.

DVA has written to every vehicle keeper involved. In view of the limited nature of the data on the disks, it is not likely that keepers will need to take any action. However, a special helpline has been set up that customers can call if they have any concerns. Every vehicle record has been flagged to alert staff in the unlikely event of any attempt being made to misuse the data. The information needed by the manufacturers has already been re-sent to DVLA by a different method, and drivers can expect to get the safety information that they require shortly.

I sincerely regret that this error has occurred, and I regret any inconvenience or concern that has been caused to the keepers of the vehicles involved. As well as the internal review that was carried out by the Driver and Vehicle Agency, all issues regarding the handling and transmission of data are being examined urgently as part of a review of the security of personal data across all Departments, which was initiated by Minister Robinson.

I will ensure that all the recommendations that emerge from those reviews are implemented fully and speedily. In addition, the Information Commissioner has been informed and has agreed to carry out an audit of data security in the Driver and Vehicle Agency.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her prompt statement.

Many people will view this latest revelation of yet more losses of computer disks containing people's details with dismay, anger and, in some quarters, fear. When such details are lost, people are fearful that they could fall into criminal hands.

Can the Minister clarify when the disks were sent and when it was first discovered that the data had been lost? Since that discovery, what has been done in conjunction with the police, Parcelforce Worldwide and any other relevant authorities to retrieve the data or at least to establish what went wrong? I believe that tracking measures were supposed to be in place.

Finally, what measures will be put in place at the Department of the Environment to ensure that such an incident does not occur again? Although the Minister cannot answer for other Departments, I hope that there will be compliance with, and standardisation of, measures across all Departments and all statutory agencies within their remit so that our citizens' personal data can be protected in the interests of personal privacy and, more important, personal security. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his concerns. The Driver and Vehicle Agency very much regrets this incident, and its chief executive made that very clear in his comments today on this problem.

The disks were sent on 20 and 21 November, and although both disks were received at Parcelforce Worldwide's national hub in Coventry — and were tracked to that destination — DVLA notified DVA on 5 December that the disks had not been received in Swansea. Since then, Parcelforce Worldwide has carried out extensive searches to locate the disks. We are not optimistic that the disks will be found, and there is no point in saying otherwise.

In order to rectify the situation, DVA has written to every vehicle keeper involved. In view of the limited nature of the data on the disks, it is not likely that keepers will have to take any action.

3.30 pm

Customers may have concerns as a result of the recent losses of computer disks containing financial details. We have, therefore, set up a helpline that will, hopefully, give people the answers that they need. Furthermore, every vehicle detailed on the missing disks has been flagged in order to alert staff in the unlikely event of an attempt to misuse that data. As I have already said, the reason for sending the material to Swansea was a safety recall by manufacturers. That information has been sent by a different method, and drivers can shortly expect to obtain the safety information that they require.

The Information Commissioner's Office has been informed of the incident and has agreed to carry out an audit. The Member will know that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has instigated an audit of all practices across Departments, and we are working with him. This latest incident was, as I said in my statement, detected by an internal audit in the Department after the child benefit disks were lost in GB. It is unfortunate that the incident happened only a week after the revelations about the child benefit disks. There is nothing that I can do about that. All I can do is work with the people who have concerns and look to the future so that this will not happen again.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Minister of the Environment — or "Arlene Darling", as she is likely to become known after this incident — for her statement.

The big concern is that this information could be used by criminal gangs that are involved in the theft and resale of cars or the recycling of cars that have been written off by insurance companies. Has the Minister consulted the police and car manufacturers to establish the possibility of such a misuse of data, and how that might be avoided?

Mrs Foster: The loss has been reported to the police in Northern Ireland and in GB, where it occurred. I note the Member's comments about the potential misuse of the data by criminal gangs. We are confident that that will not happen. As I have already said, the records have now been flagged so that staff will be alerted to any misuse and can take appropriate action.

I have been asked whether the missing data could be used fraudulently to insure a vehicle. The insurance database would show that the vehicle was already insured, which would raise suspicion of fraud in the insurance industry, and alert it to that. I am confident that criminals will not be able to use the material. However, if Members or their constituents have concerns, I urge them to call the helpline.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I note the exceptional affection with which the Minister's party colleague addressed her. I also thank her for her statement.

Many people's concerns will be heightened by the emerging evidence that there are significant holes in the system. My Committee has heard evidence that highly secure intranet facilities are available to the Government that would obviate the need for any kind of physical transfer. That, it seems, would provide some answers to concerns about the security of highly sensitive data. Would the Minister agree that that is an option that we should urgently consider?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. There is no doubt that that issue required examination. The current method of sending disks to Swansea has been used for some considerable time, and was in need of review. Unfortunately, as I said, we looked at the matter a week too late.

On this occasion, we re-sent the information to Swansea, using the sort of method that the Member has talked about. I have no doubt that that will be the way that information will be sent in the future. It is unfortunate that this has happened at this time.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the detail that she provided. I ask that every effort be made to keep Members informed into the new year as to how the practical problems are outworking from this unfortunate episode.

It is important that encryption should be used in the handling of data of that nature. Can the Minister tell the House whether there are any plans to insist on encrypting data in future, irrespective of the review that the Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel are carrying out? I also welcome the Minister's assurances that no insurance implications will result from the incident. The incident is somewhat unfortunate, and it highlights a degree of incompetence, particularly in other parts of the United Kingdom, that we do not wish to become widespread in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Foster: This is a systemic issue, and the DVA in Northern Ireland has met it head on. The DVA has made itself available and given the fullest amount of detail that it can. Therefore, I felt that it was important to come to the House today, before it rose for the Christmas recess, to give Members their place and to make them aware of where we are on the issue.

In the past, it was felt that the sort of data that was being sent on the disks was of such a nature that it did not need encrypting. However, when the data is sent by the new methods to which I referred in my previous answer, it will be encrypted.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her statement. The issue of data minimisation is often raised in situations such as this. I am aware that extracting pieces of data to be sent can be a costly process, but in some cases, it can help to increase security. Therefore, can the Minister tell the House whether only information that was essential to the manufacturers for recall was forwarded, or whether complete records were forwarded to the DVLA?

Mrs Foster: The information that was sent to the DVLA was: the keeper's name; the keeper's address; the chassis number; the registration; and the make, colour and type of car.

Some Members: The model of the car.

Mrs Foster: Yes, the model of the car was sent to DVLA — I could not think of the correct word. I understand that that was the information that was requested in order to effect the security recall. All those issues will be considered in the audit that is being carried out by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I omitted to tell Mr Kennedy that I am more than happy to keep the House informed about how the matter is progressing.

Mr Weir: I join other Members in thanking the Minister for bringing the issue so swiftly to the Assembly. Along with the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I look forward to the Executive's review on data, which will be brought before the House and which will allow us to consider how issues such as this are handled systemically. I note that, on this occasion, it is clear that the mistake was made in England. However, we must ensure that we are not complacent on such issues because peace of mind is crucial to people. The Minister said that the information related to around 7,500 vehicles, which, I presume, are all Northern Ireland-based.

In her statement, the Minister said that the owners of the vehicles had all been written to. Can she tell the House when they were written to? Depending on her answer, can she give an assurance that everyone who has been affected has either already received a letter, or should receive one in the next couple of days, so

that people who do not receive such a letter can be fairly certain that their vehicle has not been affected?

Mrs Foster: There were 7,685 vehicles involved, and letters have been written to all 6,000 individuals concerned. Some have received those letters today, and, presumably, others may not receive theirs until tomorrow. People who have not received correspondence by the end of the week, to take account of the Christmas post, can assume that they are not affected.

Mr I McCrea: I also thank the Minister for coming to the House so swiftly to keep Members informed of matters that affect some of our constituents. Other Members have asked some of the questions that I had in mind, but the loss of any personal information, including the data that the Minister mentioned, is concerning. Will the Minister confirm that no financial information was included on the disks? She detailed the information that was sent, but, for the sake of people who hear about the situation, it is important to clarify that there was no financial data.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that important question. It is vital to reiterate that the data included no details whatsoever of bank accounts, or any other financial information. Given the context in which we are discussing what has happened, I recognise the concern in the community. I reiterate that no financial details were on the disks, as the letters that have been sent to the people involved confirm.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, her news is quite alarming, and the questions that have been put to her thus far reflect Members' concerns. I presume that police are investigating the theft of the disks. If so, have they, at this early stage, been able to indicate whether the disks are in the hands of criminals, and, if that is the case, what steps are being taken to address the situation?

The Minister mentioned an alternative method of relaying information. I want to ensure that that will replace the current method, which is clearly suspect, and that any future method will be more secure.

Mrs Foster: There is an ongoing police investigation in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Given that I was alerted to the situation only towards the end of last week, that investigation is at an early stage. Parcelforce is continuing its search for the disks, but I am not particularly optimistic that it will find them. I understand why the Member said that this is an "alarming" matter. However, the mislaid data includes no financial information. I urge anyone who is concerned about the issues that I raised in my statement to contact the helpline for guidance.

I severely doubt that the Department will use the same system again. We will use the intranet system that has been mentioned and other secure methods of transmitting data.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Route of the NIE North/South Interconnector through the Constituency of Newry and Armagh

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic will have 10 minutes to speak, and all others will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr D Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to address the House today on the emotive issue of the proposed North/South interconnector between Tyrone and Cavan. At the outset, I wish to make it clear that I, and those I represent, are not opposed to North/South interconnection, and we welcome the steps that have been taken to make the all-island electricity market a reality.

However, when embarking on large-scale infrastructure projects such as this, elected representatives must ensure that the concerns and fears of constituents are adequately addressed.

I am concerned about the proposal to create a 400-kilovolt interconnector running 80 kilometres between Tyrone and Cavan as part of a joint project by NIE (Northern Ireland Electricity) in the North and EirGrid plc in the South.

The proposal as it stands has created genuine fear and anxiety the length and breadth of this island. For many different reasons, communities have deep-rooted concerns about the health and environmental implications of overhead power lines and about their visual impact on some of the most beautiful parts of this land.

3.45 pm

Homeowners and farming families are concerned about their lands, and about the fact that power lines may depreciate them. For many years, scientific experts across the globe failed to agree a collective response to the issue of overhead power lines. However, in August 2007, after lengthy collaboration among many international scientists, a report titled 'A Rationale for a Biologically-based Public Exposure Standard for Electromagnetic Fields (ELF and RF)' was produced by the BioInitiative working group. That report shows that there are sound reasons for questioning the use of overhead high-voltage power lines, and it strongly argues in favour of using underground power lines instead.

The report, which was published on 31 August 2007 by 14 of the world's leading experts in the physical,

biological and engineering sciences and in public health and public policy, rejects outright current industry guidelines and calls for a drastic reduction in permitted limits of electromagnetic field exposure. The report states:

“You cannot see it, taste it or smell it, but it is one of the most pervasive environmental exposures in industrialized countries today. Electromagnetic radiation (EMR) or electromagnetic fields (EMFs) are the terms that broadly describe exposures created by the vast array of wired and wireless technologies that have altered the landscape of our lives in countless beneficial ways. However, these technologies were designed to maximize energy efficiency and convenience; not with biological effects on people in mind. Based on new studies, there is growing evidence among scientists and the public about possible health risks associated with these technologies.”

The report makes it abundantly clear that not everything is yet known about the subject. However, it states that existing public-safety standards are not enough.

People are extremely concerned about their health and safety because of EMFs (Electromagnetic Field) and their links to cancers, particularly to leukaemia in children. There are clearly demonstrated potential health risks, especially to young children, with so many schools and houses in the proposed route corridors. In the stretch from Moy in County Tyrone — in my colleague Mr Gallagher’s and the Minister’s constituency — to the border with County Monaghan, there are four primary schools in close proximity to the proposed overhead cables. They are Our Lady’s Primary School in Tullysaran, Drumsallen Primary School, St Joseph’s Primary School in Madden, and Our Lady’s and St Mochua’s in Derrynoose. That is totally unacceptable.

In June 2007, the Draper Report was published. It was a UK Government-funded study that the University of Oxford childhood cancer research group conducted. It studied 29,000 children with cancer over 33 years and investigated whether proximity of home address at birth to the nearest high-voltage power line was associated with an increased risk of childhood cancer.

The results showed that children who lived within 200 m of high-voltage power lines were almost twice as likely to have childhood leukaemia as those who lived more than 600 m from the power lines. A slightly increased risk of leukaemia was observed for those children who lived between 200 m and 600 m from the power lines.

The BioInitiative report concludes that the business-as-usual attitude cannot continue. It is time that planning for new power lines, and the homes, schools and other habitable spaces that are close to them, is done with routine provision for low-ELF (Extremely Low Frequency) environments. The lives of our children are too precious to play such dangerous games with.

However, the exposure from high-voltage power lines and high-level ELF’s does not just affect children. Indeed, the BioInitiative working group’s report also

highlights a strong link between EMF exposure and adult leukaemia, suggesting that childhood exposure increases the risk of adult leukaemia. The report also points to connections between EMF exposure and breast cancer, Parkinson’s disease and other cancers and neurodegenerative diseases.

Although I do not want to use scare tactics, the BioInitiative report is correct to state that it is no longer acceptable to build power lines and electrical facilities that place people in ELF environments that have been deemed risky. One is not at risk of picking up any of the diseases by simply walking close to power lines. However, continued and sustained exposure to high-level ELF’s considerably increases the risk of the aforementioned diseases.

Putting power lines underground is one way to simultaneously reduce their health implications, protect the environment, reduce the visual impact, and allay public concerns. It will also ensure that the North/South interconnection goes ahead. Communities demand that power lines are built underground, and I support them in that. Indeed, I welcome representatives of communities from Armagh, Monaghan, Cavan and Meath to the Public Gallery. Evidence shows that putting power lines underground can be done without major disruption to land or roads. There will be no visual impact or noise pollution. Such construction will use less agricultural land, and it will lower power losses. Ultimately, putting power lines underground will mean that there will be no electrical fields and that there will be low magnetic fields.

When pressed on underground construction, Northern Ireland Electricity and EirGrid suggested that it could cost up to 10 times the capital outlay. However, given that NIE has just commissioned a report into the cost of such work, how can it make those claims?

Constructing power lines underground is an option that is used elsewhere in the world. For example, building a 400kV line stretching 200 km from Beaulieu to Denny is being considered in Scotland. That may be because, in a letter to the Scottish Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee, Professor Henshaw, who is a member of the Stakeholder Advisory Group on EMFs (SAGE), wrote:

“I urge the Scottish Parliament to consider immediate strict precaution against the siting of power lines near houses”.

There is much concern in our communities about those power lines. I understand that insurance companies, such as FBD in the Republic and Norwich Union in the UK, now regard living close to high-voltage power lines as a future risk for their industry. For example, FBD has EMF exclusion clauses on its insurance policies.

I have held meetings with Northern Ireland Electricity, made representations to TDs from my neighbouring constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, and I have hosted

meetings between NIE and concerned local residents. I am not convinced that Northern Ireland Electricity or EirGrid have properly — or meaningfully — engaged with the local communities or tried to allay their fears.

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

Mr D Bradley: To conclude, what I have said highlights the health risks of the issue. I welcome the Minister of the Environment, and I urge her to consider making the construction of underground power lines a factor in planning approval.

Mr Irwin: Since it was announced, NIE's proposal for a North/South interconnector, which will create a high-voltage overhead-cable network that carries the highest voltage ever used in Northern Ireland, has generated a high level of public interest.

Public meetings have been convened, and large numbers of people have attended to spell out their dissatisfaction with the proposals. The level of interest remains high, and one can see that from the large number of residents from the area who are in the Building.

Northern Ireland Electricity has undertaken consultation with residents along the proposed route and met landowners. However, despite NIE's attempts to sell the idea, local people have rejected the proposal outright. The message from the residents is clear: they do not want high-voltage overhead power lines and steel structures blotting their landscape. The landowners along the preferred route have been contacted by NIE, and many have made clear their objections to any idea of large pylons blighting their picturesque countryside — regardless of any financial incentives.

Northern Ireland Electricity faces a huge difficulty, as its proposal for overhead cabling is the least favoured option among residents and landowners. As well as being a MLA, I am a member of Armagh City and District Council, and in that capacity I have met NIE officials on a number of occasions and placed on record the council's strong objections to above-ground cabling and the impact that it would have on the environment. The council has also raised serious concerns about the well-documented health fears relating to electromagnetic fields.

Although there is a strong consensus against overhead cabling, the council recognises the principle of the interconnector in securing the electricity supply and reducing operating costs. The council, therefore, has pursued the idea of placing the cables underground, thus doing away with the need for unsightly pylons and reducing greatly the health concerns. From the outset, NIE has labelled that alternative as hugely expensive compared to overhead cabling. However, NIE has yet to provide exact details on the difference in cost between the methods. I urge NIE to provide those costings to council representatives as soon as possible.

There is no doubt that everyone wants cheaper electricity, and there will be no debate when it comes to the idea of paying less. However, the methods being suggested to bring about a situation in which the consumer will receive cheaper electricity via the North/South interconnector are a long way from what the people want. NIE has made it clear that, whether above or below ground, the cost will be fed through to the consumer. I ask NIE to provide detailed costings on the inevitable increase in electricity prices that will arise from the cost of construction. I would also like to see long-term projections with regard to NIE's promise of reducing operating costs, and details of what that will mean for consumers' future bills.

NIE faces a massive uphill struggle in its task to create the interconnector with the use of pylons and overhead cabling. In the current circumstances, with people in the area rejecting the method proposed for the interconnector, I urge NIE to reconsider its proposals and seriously consider putting the cables underground. I also call on the Minister of the Environment to exercise care when considering any planning proposals for the interconnector, and I urge her to take note of the local residents represented here today, who strongly object to overhead high-voltage lines.

I have asked NIE whether land vesting might be pursued as a final method of providing overhead cabling. I urge NIE not to go down that route; it would be unfair to farmers. That would be a highly controversial and unfair way of pursuing this.

Residents unanimously reject the current NIE proposal, and their views must be taken on board by NIE and by the Departments that will deliberate on any interconnector plan. The residents' valid and passionate views on the safety issues surrounding high-voltage overhead cables cannot be ignored, and I call on NIE to engage more fully with public representatives and residents to ensure that any final proposal has the necessary support.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I thank Dominic Bradley for bringing the matter to the Chamber.

4.00 pm

I also thank him for clarifying his party's stance on the issue, as it seems to have changed from the initial feelings of his colleagues in Armagh City and District Council.

Mr D Bradley: It has not changed.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Brady: The Member should read the minutes.

The interconnector will allow an all-island electricity market to work efficiently and will benefit the consumer

in both price and dependability. We recognise and welcome that, and indeed, Sinn Féin will support any project that benefits the community.

Major health concerns have been raised North and South of the border. Sinn Féin asked NIE to extend the corridor of consultation up to a kilometre, which it did, and that is welcome. NIE also held a consultation clinic in Armagh City; unfortunately, it has not convinced the public that their health concerns are unwarranted or so minimal that they do not warrant concern.

NIE should not be allowed to steamroll its way through communities North and South of the border, but should take their concerns on board. In the absence of clear and unequivocal evidence that overhead power lines will not pose a medical risk to those living in the vicinity of the pylons, it should be incumbent on the powers that be, namely the Minister of the Environment, to ensure that the interconnector is placed underground. The main obstacle is cost.

NIE will make profits from the interconnector for many years, and it could absorb any additional costs of placing the interconnector underground over many years. People are prepared to pay a few pounds extra a year on their bills if it means less risk to their children. Weight must be given to people's concerns at the planning stage, and the interconnector should be placed underground. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I thank Mr Dominic Bradley for bringing this important debate to the Assembly, and I thank the Minister for her attendance.

People are chiefly concerned about the effect that the interconnector could have on landowners and rural dwellers who live on the proposed route corridor; however, there are also concerns about the economic, welfare, health and environmental risks that could occur as a result of the proposal being developed in its current form. Other public representatives and I were at a very well-attended meeting in Armagh City Hotel, where approximately 600 people highlighted their concerns.

The initialisation of pylons along the proposed route could prevent many farmers from utilising large tracks of their land, which could have an adverse economic effect on their livelihoods in an increasingly difficult economic climate. Although NIE said that landowners will be entitled to, and will receive, compensation, it will be dictated in many cases by NIE and will reflect NIE values rather than those of landowners. Consequently, people have serious reservations that NIE's compensation would recompense farmers for any financial losses suffered as a result of being unable to utilise sections of their land.

Pylons will be placed extremely close to properties along the proposed routes, and numerous householders have, understandably, raised concerns about the visual impact and the potential health and safety risks.

Although NIE has stated that there are no risks associated with the interconnector, that has failed to reassure local residents and landowners who live along the potential route. They have acted responsibly and sensibly and have engaged the services of well-qualified experts.

One such expert, Mr Roger Coghill, has countered NIE's claim by stating that much evidence points to the adverse health effects of living near electric fields. He said that the belief that there was no health risk from living near such fields had been dispelled decades ago. He maintains that there is substantial evidence in every part of science to show that there are adverse health affects from possible exposure, which flies in the face of the material produced by NIE.

Local constituents believe that the environmental and potential health risks associated with such a major overhead power line cannot be justified by NIE. They believe that a high-voltage overhead power line, with pylons of over 100 ft, would significantly destroy areas of beautiful, natural landscape in that part of Northern Ireland.

I support the calls of Assembly colleagues that NIE should listen to public representatives and residents in the area and insist that if a cable is absolutely necessary, it should be buried underground. I hope that the Minister will feel sufficiently minded to insert an approval clause making that a requirement in any determination of a planning application.

NIE has much work to do, and it will have a considerable battle as it seeks to convince local representatives and householders that its plans are in their best interests. No one doubts that a project of this nature and magnitude will not be abandoned easily. Nonetheless, it has deep-seated opposition, and NIE, the Department and public representatives must be aware of that and must reflect on it. I hope that the various groups concerned will listen and pay attention to the views of those who want to site the cables underground.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla rud a rá sa díospóireacht seo.

I declare an interest as a member of Armagh City and District Council, which is one of the councils that requested NIE to consider the cost of laying the cables underground. I appeal for no division on the matter. I am glad that my fellow Member for Newry and Armagh Mickey Brady sought clarification from parties about their positions on the matter, and I thank him for bringing the subject to the Chamber.

The Cavan to Tyrone electricity interconnector has been a worrying and emotive subject for the public who live along the proposed route, which includes five counties: Armagh, Tyrone, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan, and public meetings have been held in most of those areas to highlight concerns.

The reason for that concern is the fear of health risks connected to overhead power lines that carry up to 400 kV. In Ireland, no such voltage has been carried by overhead power lines before, and there is no conclusive proof for, or against, the health concerns. The public have a right to demand safety, rather than leaving judgements about the matter to future generations, when it may be too late. However, for every scientist who says that there are health issues, there is another who says that there are none. That should not be left to chance, and there is evidence to suggest that incidences of cancer and leukaemia are linked to such power lines.

One aspect of the health concerns that must be examined more closely is the production of corona ions. When high voltages are present in electrical systems, it is possible that strong electric fields close to conductors may cause the electrical breakdown of surrounding air — an effect known as “corona discharge”. A consequence of corona discharge from high-voltage power lines is the production of clouds of ions that are readily blown downwind. An increase of charge density downwind of power lines is well established and can be measured at distances of several kilometres. People may be exposed to such highly charged polluted particles, and the effects that electrostatic charges have on increased instances of respiratory problems have been recognised for some time.

4.15 pm

In plain English, ions cause the damage. Air pollutants and particles cling to ions, and there is evidence to suggest that that causes serious problems for people’s lungs. I ask Members and the Minister — and I welcome her presence at the debate — whether we are prepared to gamble with subjecting the public to the potential health risks that might be posed by corona ions? In all conscience, I do not believe that we should.

I call on the regulators, North and South, the Minister of the Environment and her counterpart in Dublin to take the handcuffs off NIE and Eirgrid and allow them to put the interconnector underground. Doing so will not only reassure the public on health issues, but will cancel out the detrimental environmental impact of 40 km of pylons — irrespective of their size — in the North and 40 km in the South, which will cut across the drumlins of Armagh and the other counties that I mentioned.

Any planning applications must take into account that those pylons will be visibly intrusive and impact adversely not only on the environment but on property and land prices in the affected areas.

The concerns are not about cost. They are about the health of future generations who will live near the interconnector. Although we do not have a crystal ball, we know that future generations will judge us on the decisions that we make in the coming months.

Sinn Féin supports the proposal for an all-Ireland energy system that will benefit the consumer. That can best be met by putting any proposed interconnector underground, and Sinn Féin supports the public in its call for that.

I remind the Minister that a motion on the Climate Change Bill [HL] was passed yesterday, and, if we are serious about tackling climate change, we must consider renewable and other forms of energy production.

I ask the Minister to consider not only whether planning applications meet current criteria, but to take account of the serious concerns about the possible health implications for future generations. The conditions of any planning application assessment should stipulate that power lines be put underground. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I support my colleague Dominic Bradley in raising this matter in the House. Like some others here, I have been a Member since 1998, and, given that this is an Adjournment debate, this is the first occasion on which I have seen such a high level of public interest, which is reflected by the attendance in the Public Gallery.

We must bear in mind that those visitors are not from greater Belfast. I understand that they have travelled considerable distances to attend the debate.

I welcome this opportunity to reflect the views, concerns and annoyance of many of the people in the Moy and Benburb areas of south Tyrone, which are on the planned route of the North/South interconnector. I have been to see those areas for myself, and I have spoken to people who live in close proximity to the route. Their views are, clearly and simply, that they want the proposal stopped.

Their anger is justified. No electricity line in Northern Ireland compares to the scale of that which is planned. The line will carry 400,000 volts through twelve cables, which will be strung from pylons 49 m high. Most Members will have been to the top of Parliament Buildings, but even that is not 49 m above the ground. That is what faces the communities in Cavan, Armagh and the part of south Tyrone to which I referred.

The annoyance of people in south Tyrone has been increased by visits from NIE officials. On one occasion, they were told that the line would be very difficult for NIE to construct in that part of the country, because it could not pass over poultry sheds. The pylons, however, could be located within 50 m of people’s homes.

The residents’ strong opposition can be summed up by three areas of concern: the visual impact; the health risks, which have been referred to in some detail; and the impact on property values. We can all understand those concerns. One property, just outside Moy and close to the proposed route, was on the market for a

considerable time. It could not be sold, because it had dropped so much in value. It is easy to translate that scenario to a person's home, which might end up with a pylon outside its front window.

As for the visual impact, those of us who have had the privilege of visiting that part of south Tyrone, particularly in the summer, know about its natural beauty. The beauty and tranquillity of the countryside has been a tremendous asset to the people for generations, and they have a valid concern that the erection of pylons will damage the visual environment.

The concerns about the risks to health have been outlined. There are many reports about the dangers of electromagnetic fields and the risks that they pose to health. Cancer and childhood leukaemia have been identified as risks, especially for people who live within 600 m of overhead lines. NIE's plan does not take account of that 600 m zone.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that NIE has not been open and transparent in its handling of the issue so far?

Mr Gallagher: NIE did not put all the information in the public domain at the beginning. An individual — a resident — who asked for an environmental impact assessment to be carried out was told by NIE that that could not be done.

My colleague Dominic Bradley mentioned the latest report, dated 31 August 2007, which again warns of the likelihood that a project such as the one under debate will carry health risks. It also warns that, heretofore, the Government have not exercised sufficient caution on the development of a project of that type. To the best of my knowledge, there is no scientific report that will state baldly that there is no health risk associated with the development of such a project.

As I have said, the proposal places a duty on both NIE and the Planning Service to heed the relevant research. NIE must go back and factor all that information into its plans for the interconnector. As Cathal Boylan pointed out, NIE was not exactly forthcoming with information, particularly on the environmental impact assessment.

NIE must provide all the information, and, specifically, it should produce the costings for both the overhead and underground options. Simply proceeding with the cheapest option is not a proper basis for the project. Health risks and the infringement of the rights of residents should be properly considered.

I welcome the presence of the Minister, who, like others, is listening carefully to the debate.

The Planning Service also has a responsibility that goes beyond the rules and regulations of planning policy statements. It must ensure that a safe environment for

all is its top priority. The project must not pose a threat to the health of residents, particularly young children.

The present proposal is unacceptable. The best option may be to route the interconnector underground, which may also be the best way to develop the all-Ireland market for electricity. There must be a cautionary approach on the part of both NIE and the Planning Service. To date, we have not seen that from NIE.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I join Members in thanking Dominic Bradley for bringing this matter before the House. I recognise the widespread interest and concern that exists in the community that he represents, and, indeed, as has been mentioned by Mr Gallagher, in the community that he and I represent in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I note the comments and concerns that have been expressed in respect of the proposed North/South electricity interconnector. I welcome the opportunity to clarify the position of the Department of the Environment on this matter.

This issue has already been the subject of debate and scrutiny. Members of the Committee for the Environment will know that that Committee has questioned Planning Service officials about the forthcoming planning application. I have also responded to several questions that have been tabled in the Assembly.

The proposal to build a second North/South electricity interconnector represents a major infrastructural project, and its promoters have indicated that it would more than double the current trading capacity of the existing line. They consider the new line a key component in promoting greater competition in the new single energy market for wholesale electricity trading, as well as enhancing security of supply, network stability and supporting the future growth of renewable energy generation.

I hope that Members will realise that this is not simply a matter for my Department, but for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). As well the consideration of a planning application, I understand from DETI that it will have to grant consent under article 40 of The Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to proceed with such an interconnector. Therefore, this is a cross-cutting matter, and, as such, will come before the Executive for a decision at some point. In other words, I have drawn the short straw and have to appear before the Assembly today.

My officials have had preliminary discussions with NIE in relation to the submission of a planning application and the content of an environmental statement. I noted Mr Gallagher's comment that when someone asked NIE about an environmental impact assessment, NIE was unable to provide it. I assure the Member that an environmental impact assessment is an integral part of the planning application. There will have to be an environmental statement attached to the planning application.

Members have all expressed concern about potential health risks associated with the interconnector. I fully understand those concerns. As Members have said, it is always difficult to assess the gravity of such health risks and to rule them out entirely. The risks in this case will come from the electromagnetic fields generated by electricity lines. I assure the House that NIE will be required to include a full section on EMFs in the environmental impact assessment that will accompany any planning application. That will, therefore, be addressed when the application is made.

NIE has continued to update Planning Service officials on its progress in preparing a planning submission. During the most recent contacts, my officials were apprised of the preferred route of the power line. It was indicated that the planning application was likely to be submitted in February or March of next year. As I have indicated, an article 40 application will also have to be made to DETI. I understand that, at present, no such application is awaiting consent.

The planning application for the interconnector is likely to be dealt with under the procedures for handling major applications as laid down in article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. As I have indicated, the matter will come before the Executive and, as it will be an article 31 application, it will also come to the Floor of this House when a decision is made in respect of it.

Under the article 31 provisions, the final decision —

Mr Boylan: I have asked another Minister about the costing of the project. Can that be held until the actual application is made, or can that information be made known before the application? I have asked for a costing for underground cabling. The response that I got — obviously not from Mrs Foster, who may or may not be able to answer — is that the costing will be submitted along with the planning application. I would like to know whether those figures can be made available to councillors or to the Assembly prior to the submission of the planning application.

Mrs Foster: I understand that figures on the feasibility of underground cabling are supposed to be available in mid-December. I cannot force NIE to share those, but it will be in NIE's best interests to share them with elected representatives and with those concerned. I assume that the reason why NIE has not yet proceeded with the planning application or the environmental impact assessment is that it wants to consider putting the cables underground as part of that. That is why an application has not yet been made.

Under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, the final decision on any such application will rest with me as Minister of the Environment. Members will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to express any view that might suggest that I

had already adopted a position on any application prior to its being given full consideration through the formal planning process. When the application is made, I will consider it. Let me reiterate that part of the planning process is an environmental impact assessment, which will address all the issues that I have mentioned heretofore.

Mr Boylan mentioned the need to consider renewables in relation to climate change — I entirely agree. Planning Service recently brought out PPS 18 to encourage people to use renewable energy and to consider future security of supply in that context

Potential health risks associated with the interconnector proposal have been brought to my attention by Members. Those will be taken into account.

4.30 pm

Environmental impacts, particularly the visual impact on the landscape, as referred to by Mr Gallagher, will also be taken into account — as will the matter of whether the proposed cabling should be placed underground, and the choice for the preferred route. All those matters will be addressed as part of the consideration of the planning application.

I understand why Members may wish to debate those issues, but I cannot not be drawn into those matters for reasons that I have already set out. Moreover, when dealing with the substantial amount of correspondence that has already been generated by the proposal, my officials are unable to respond in a constructive manner due to the absence of the planning application and the environmental statement. Indeed, when that planning application is submitted, it will provide a much-needed focus for the debate and a degree of certainty on the issues that have been discussed. We look forward to that.

I am aware that NIE is engaged in a public-consultation process, and that some Members have expressed disappointment about the manner in which that has been conducted. That is a matter for NIE. In defining its preferred route, NIE has sought to maintain a distance of 60 m from residential properties, although some people have cited a distance of 50 m. NIE is conducting a feasibility study on the underground routing of the cable along part of the proposed route. That work will shape the final content of the planning application, and, indeed, the environmental statement.

I assure the House that the application will be publicised in the normal way, and, considering the interest of elected representatives, I have no doubt that they will alert the wider public about that. All interested parties will have an opportunity to make representations in respect of the article 31 procedure to which I referred earlier, which will also allow me — should I consider it necessary — to ask the Planning Appeals Commission to hold a public local inquiry to consider the matter

and to help the Department to reach a decision on what will be a major application.

Mr D Bradley: To what extent are the project's possible effects on health a material consideration in the planning process?

Mrs Foster: That will form part of the environmental impact assessment, and will be taken into account to a great degree. I expect that residents and Members will raise that matter with me again when the planning application is received and we have that much-needed focus for debate.

I hope that what I have had to say has been helpful, and has provided some clarity on a matter to which we will probably return in the new year, when the planning application is received.

Finally, Mr Speaker, as the last woman standing in the Assembly — just as I was before the summer recess — I wish you and your staff a very happy Christmas.

Adjourned 4.33 pm.

