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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 9 December 2008

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The Way Forward on Tuberculosis (TB)

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the way forward on tuberculosis (TB).

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on my decision on the way forward on TB in the North.

A new strategic approach on how we deal with TB, agreed jointly by industry and Government, has been identified with key stakeholders. The aim is, through a partnership between industry and Government, to move towards the eradication of TB in the most cost-effective way and in a realistic time frame. The timing and implementation of the strategy as we progress depends on how and when it is resourced.

First, I shall set the scene by outlining the current TB disease situation in the North. We have made considerable progress with TB in recent years. Since levels for the disease peaked in 2002, the herd incidence has been reduced by almost 50%. That is in sharp contrast to the experience in Britain, where the incidence of TB has been increasing. In the North, overall, the trend in disease levels has been downwards over the past five years or so.

However, bovine TB is a very complex disease, and it continues to be one of the most challenging and costly animal-health problems that we face. The total cost to Government of controlling the disease in the 2007-08 financial year was more than £21 million, plus costs to the sector. It is worth mentioning that those costs include a great deal of emotional cost to the farmer if his herd is restricted or contracts TB. A human element is also involved, because TB can be passed to people. I know of people who caught TB as a result of contact with animals. Therefore, when I refer to costs, I am talking not only about the financial costs but about the human cost of that awful disease.

The TB programme that is being implemented has a number of key strengths and benefits. My assessment is that the programme, which is based mainly on cattle controls, has been successful in reducing TB levels in cattle. Importantly, it has supported trade in both live cattle and in our beef products.

My Department's programme is based on a well-established system of testing herds for TB annually, as that gives a clear picture of the disease situation. Every herd in the North is tested at least once a year for TB. The Department believes that the enhanced TB measures that were introduced in 2004, particularly the tighter restrictions on overdue TB tests and changes to the valuation system, have contributed to the reduction in disease. Farmers, by co-operating with the tougher controls, have played a crucial role in reducing the disease in cattle and in preventing it from spreading.

The current position is that encouraging progress has been made so far. Although, during recent months, there has been a levelling-off in the downward trend in TB — there has even been a slight increase — it is too early to determine whether that means that there will be a sustained change in the direction of the trend. The Department has a key goal in the Programme for Government to achieve a 27% reduction in the herd incidence of TB by 2011. However, it is not possible to achieve full eradication within the time frame of the current Programme for Government. We must be realistic about what is achievable. It will take longer than until 2011 to eradicate the disease, and we must do more than we are doing at present.

In May 2008, at the Balmoral Show, I said that I would make a decision by the end of the year on the way forward on TB, including on the contentious issue of badgers. Since then, two major pieces of work have been carried out that have helped to inform my decision. First, as the badger stakeholder group recommended, my Department has completed an assessment of available evidence on the role of badgers in the spread of bovine TB in cattle in order to inform an appropriate course of action in the North, including whether it is appropriate to run a badger-culling trial.

Secondly, since last summer, my officials have worked in partnership with the leaders of the key industry and veterinary organisations — the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA), the National Beef Association and the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland — in the TB core stakeholder working group in order to assess all aspects of TB policy and to identify more clearly what can be done to

move further towards the eradication of TB in cattle in the North.

That has been a new and unique partnership approach to a complex and difficult disease problem. Key wildlife interests have been consulted as part of that process. At the end of November 2008, I received the conclusions of the TB core stakeholder working group's work and its proposals for the way forward, plus the views of wildlife interests.

I shall now comment on my Department's findings from its assessment of evidence of the role that badgers play in the spread of bovine TB in cattle. The key question that we seek to answer is whether a badger-intervention strategy will help to achieve a cost-effective reduction in TB incidence in cattle in the North.

Having assessed all the available information from work that has been carried out in Britain and in the South, veterinary advice has informed me that, at present, it is not possible to extrapolate the information that is needed from the work that has already been done in Britain and in the Twenty-six Counties. Key gaps in scientific knowledge remain, and those must be filled in order to inform what the Department does to deal cost-effectively and efficiently with the reservoir of infection in badgers, and to enable it to deal with TB comprehensively and conclusively.

In order to produce the necessary information, veterinary advice informs me that a study of the prevalence and distribution of TB in badgers, and a badger-removal trial, should be undertaken. Those studies will provide baseline information on disease and the cost of a badger-intervention strategy, and they will inform where any cull or other intervention may be most effectively targeted.

As I said, the Department has done work in partnership with key stakeholders, through the TB core stakeholder working group. That group has examined the experience of other countries that have eradicated TB, or that are on their way to doing so, and the key lessons that have been learnt from their experience.

The group also considered a spectrum of possible options for dealing with TB in the North, including implementing an intensive eradication programme. The group's consensus is that the eradication of TB in the North is not a realistic prospect in the short term, because it would not be realistic for farmers here to make the huge changes to farming practices that an intensive eradication programme would require, if one were to be introduced immediately. A further reason why eradication in the short term is not realistic is because a cost-effective means of preventing reinfection from the badger population is not yet known.

The group has developed and proposed a phased strategy towards the eradication of TB. The strategy is designed as an holistic approach to deal with three key strands simultaneously: real partnership between Government and industry; controlling the spread of TB among cattle; and the wildlife factor.

In coming to my decision about the way forward on TB, I considered all the evidence and the views of our industry and those of wildlife conservation stakeholders. I am clear that our ultimate aspiration should be to eradicate TB, which I know is what all stakeholders want to achieve. I recognise the benefits that moving towards the eradication of TB would deliver. It would maintain our export trade, avoid production losses, and, ultimately, reduce disease and the associated costs.

However, the key message is that the eradication of TB will take a long time, and it will be a painful and expensive process for both Government and industry. Strong, committed partnership between Government and industry is required if TB is to be eradicated successfully. It is also clear to me that the eradication of TB may be achievable only following scientific advances, considerable additional expense, and disruption to current industry practices.

Badger vaccination may be the most feasible long-term solution, but it could be some time before an effective badger vaccine becomes available. The issue is whether the best way forward is to maintain our existing approach to TB until an effective badger vaccine becomes available or to explore in the interim whether the culling of badgers would be a cost-effective way of reducing TB in cattle in the medium term. I believe that we need a realistic and pragmatic strategy that will move towards eradicating TB in the most cost-effective way. We need to create the conditions that will enable an intensive programme to be implemented to finally drive this disease out of our cattle population.

We should act to fill the key gaps in our scientific knowledge in order to inform our actions when dealing cost-effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers. It is also important that we position ourselves so that we are ready to act when an effective solution becomes available. Therefore, I welcome the phased and holistic strategy that has been developed in partnership with our key stakeholders. I want to pursue that new strategic approach in moving forward on TB.

Through industry and Government partnership, the aim is to move towards the eradication of TB in the most cost-effective way and within a realistic time frame. The key point is that in moving towards the eradication of TB, it is essential that there is robust partnership between Government and industry. There must be a combination of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and industry action and strong commitment and leadership from both industry and Government. That holistic approach to TB is based on the three key strands that the core stakeholder working group identified.

The strategic approach is not a quick fix, and I recognise that it will not deliver the eradication of TB in the near future. However, it will lay the foundations that are necessary for the eventual eradication of the disease. I have accepted the core stakeholder working group's recommendations on the shared industry/ Government goals for the first phase of the strategy, which is from 2009-2010 to 2013-14. The first of those goals is to maintain trade and compliance with EU requirements as a minimum. The second is to produce more effective and efficient ways of reducing the transmission of TB, from cattle to cattle and from wildlife to cattle.

Although the overall aim of the strategy is to reduce the levels and costs of disease and ultimately eradicate TB, the disease levels that we detect may increase, rather than decrease, by the end of the first phase. That is because we aim to improve detection methods and removal of disease and to develop better tools. We must bear in mind that by their very nature, measures that are taken to improve the detection of disease will raise disease incidence initially, because more infected animals will be detected.

The first five-year phase will be about laying the foundations for future phases of the strategy. By the end of that first phase, we will be better placed to know whether we are ready to aim for eradication in the next phase, whether we should maintain a holding position, or whether we should aim for steady progress. In order to push towards eradication, future phases will require more stringent controls, considerable changes to existing farming practices, and an addressing of the wildlife factor.

We have identified priority areas of action that are aimed at delivering those goals. We want to build a real partnership between Government and industry that will underpin everything else that we do in the strategy. We want to enhance the involvement of stakeholders, at both leadership and local-farmer level. We intend to work with local farmers — as we have done already — so that they have a better understanding of the causes of TB on their farms. Those farmers need to know more about what they can do to address the risks and protect themselves from infection. We will develop our partnership with private veterinary practitioners in order to ascertain what more can be done to develop and provide effective solutions.

Regarding the control of the spread of TB between cattle, our priorities will be to keep our export trade open and to produce more effective and efficient ways of reducing the transmission of TB from cattle to cattle.

10.45 pm

Regarding wildlife, our priority will be to pursue the necessary information-gathering actions and research in order to fill priority knowledge gaps, build the evidence that is required to make informed policy decisions about wildlife intervention in the North, and produce more cost-effective and efficient ways to reduce TB transmission between wildlife and cattle. Subject to the Minister of the Environment's agreement where necessary, and subject to bids for the necessary significant additional funding, my Department will undertake the studies and trials that are necessary to guide decisions. We will use the evidence produced by those actions to guide our proposals to reduce TB transmission from wildlife to cattle and to shape the next phase of our strategy.

Although more work is required to develop the detail of actions to deliver the shared industry and Government goals for the first phase, I want to announce some early actions that my Department will take in the first phase of the strategy. We will continue to maximise the effectiveness of delivery of the TB programme within the level of available resource.

At the start of 2009, the Department will undertake a TB case-control study in a high-incidence area in the North, the aim of which will be to identify and evaluate selected cattle- and badger-related risk factors on TB-infected and clean farms. We intend to focus the study in County Down, which contains some of the worst TB-affected areas, and to examine approximately 350 diseased and clean herds. We want to assess differences between infected and uninfected herds in the same high-TB-incidence area. We propose to use findings to identify key risk factors and to develop best practice and biosecurity advice that can be rolled out to herd-keepers in the North.

During the winter, my Department will undertake background surveillance to ascertain the current bovine TB prevalence in wild deer in order to better inform policy towards TB in cattle that may be associated with such deer. We will progress our plans to begin a badger-prevalence study next year, subject to the necessary bid for additional expenditure. We will also develop plans for a badger-removal trial, subject to the Minister of the Environment's agreement, and will continue to explore how best to contribute to the development of a vaccine for badgers.

Resources are needed to support the strategy. The timing and implementation of the strategy will depend on how and when it is resourced. We will seek to deliver the strategy as cost-effectively as possible and where additional expenditure is needed, it will have to be supported by a robust business case and be subject to successful bids for the necessary resources. I have already indicated the need for additional resources through this year's strategic stocktake for the remaining two years of the comprehensive spending review period. However, the outcome remains unknown.

I intend to bid for the additional resources, subject to an economic appraisal, through in-year monitoring and in the 2009 Budget exercise. We will continue to tap into the experiences of others and the results of research undertaken elsewhere, and we will make the most of opportunities to share research that has been conducted in Britain, the South and elsewhere to avoid unnecessary and expensive duplication. We will support appropriate scientific research in the North.

The TB strategy is part of my comprehensive approach to deal decisively with bovine TB and brucellosis in the North. As I have said, our aim for TB is to position ourselves to ensure that in five years, we can make informed decisions about the next phase in our strategy, which will move us closer towards the ultimate aim of TB eradication. Brucellosis is a very different disease, and it should be possible to eradicate it in the North in the next five years. My aim is to eradicate brucellosis as soon as possible and to wipe out the costs of that disease. I am prepared to step up the existing brucellosis control measures, if necessary, in order to achieve that aim, and I am committed to pursuing the useful brucellosis initiative that the Department started earlier this year.

The Department will continue to work in partnership with key stakeholders to develop the TB strategy. The next steps will be to work with the TB core stakeholder working group and to consult the wildlife stakeholders to develop specific detailed proposals for action that will deliver the shared goals in the first phase, a robust business case for any necessary additional expenditure, and a formal consultation to determine public opinion on our proposals.

I thank all our stakeholders for their ongoing constructive engagement on the issue of TB. I know that we will achieve success through a shared understanding of the issues and a shared commitment to the goals. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): In light of the serious concerns outside, will the Minister enlighten the House and confirm that the pork produced by Northern Ireland farmers is absolutely safe to eat, and that the immediate processing of the same has the backing of the Northern Ireland Executive? Will the Department immediately, this morning, provide that assurance to the customers and to the community?

With regard to the statement that the Minister has made, I am glad that the Department and the Minister have finally seen some sense and listened to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and, more importantly, to farm businesses throughout Northern Ireland, and are now working towards eradication of the disease.

The Minister stated that she believes that brucellosis can be eradicated in Northern Ireland in the next five years. Will she tell the House why she is continuing with a £6 million study into the prevalence of TB in badgers, when her Department has for years been conducting analysis of badgers that have been killed on the roads to do the very same thing? Will she also expand on how she hopes to eradicate brucellosis from Northern Ireland herds within the next five years, and explain how it took so long, and at so much expense, for her and her Department to come up with the obvious solution?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister answers those questions, I say to the House that the convention has always been that the Chairperson of a Committee is given some latitude when asking particular questions to ministerial statements. That is no different this morning, and perhaps the Minister will wish to address the question at the beginning of Dr McCrea's contribution, although it does not relate to the statement this morning.

The Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I discussed the situation this morning with officials and advisers and given the circumstances, I felt that it was appropriate to break tradition in this case and give the House a further update this morning. However, after I make this statement, I will not take further questions on the issue, because the matter of TB is very important, and that is what we are here to discuss today.

Yesterday evening, my officials completed their tracing visits to all the premises notified to the Department by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South as having received potentially contaminated feed. Those results were passed to the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which, as Members will know, concluded that no pigs born and reared in the North had received any contaminated feed. The FSA also advised that there is no risk from pork or pork products containing only pork from the North.

My officials also found that eight herds of cattle had been fed product from the affected Southern supplier. Samples were taken of that product, and are being tested as I speak — I anticipate the results later this week. At this time, those herds are restricted, and all animals that received that feed have been highlighted in our animal and public health information system (APHIS) so that they cannot enter the food chain without testing clear for any contaminant. Furthermore, traces of animals from the herds that have gone to slaughter have been provided to the meat plants concerned, so that they can identify any products that remain from those animals.

At present, we have no results from animals or feed. When those are available, they will be provided to the

FSA for risk assessment of any threat to public health. My Department is taking precautionary and prudent measures to protect the industry and public health while we await the results of those tests and the subsequent risk analysis. My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Food Standards Agency, and we expect further information from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when results of its further tests become available. We will also be liaising with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in preparation for an EU meeting in Brussels. Go raibh maith agat.

I am happy now to cover the other questions that were asked by the Committee Chairperson. He asked why I cannot eradicate TB in the short term. TB is a very complicated disease. If there were an easy solution to its eradication, it would have been done by now. I want to make clear that my ultimate aspiration is the eradication of TB, but there is no quick fix. It will be a long process for Government and industry, and I emphasise that actions by Government alone cannot eradicate TB. The new strategic approach that we have identified with the key stakeholders will be a phased long-term strategy to move towards the eradication of TB in a realistic and pragmatic way.

The experiences of other countries have shown that the eradication of TB is a long-term process. I am not sure whether I correctly picked up the entire question about badgers, but the key issue about badgers and TB in cattle that the Department seeks to address is whether badger intervention would help to achieve a cost-effective reduction in TB incidents in cattle in the North.

Tuberculosis is a complex disease. Although it has been established that there is a link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, it is not known with certainty the extent to which badgers contribute to the incidence of TB in cattle in the North, and neither is it known what impact badger removal would have on the overall incidence of disease in cattle across the North.

The scientific evidence that the Department has received is complex and, at times, conflicting. Having assessed all the available information from work in Britain and the South, the conclusion of our veterinary assessment is that we cannot currently extrapolate the information that we need. Therefore, further work is needed, which is why the Department is undertaking a study of the prevalence and distribution of TB in badgers and a badger-removal trial. Those studies will provide baseline information on disease and the cost of badger intervention.

I am not sure whether I have covered everything that the Chairman asked me. I hope that I have, but I am sure that there will be further questions in any case.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I welcome the strategic and holistic approach that the Minister and the Department are taking, which is the way forward.

As the Minister said, TB is a costly issue for farmers and taxpayers, and for animal welfare. When will a vaccination become available? In addition, will the Minister expand on the link between wild deer and bovine TB? Furthermore, people are already lobbying as they are very concerned that the Department could go down the route of culling for the sake of it, which would be wrong. Will the Minister reassure the public in that regard? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I thank the Member for his questions. We do not have a badger vaccination at this time. I recognise that badger vaccination may be the most feasible solution in the long term, but it could be some time before an effective badger vaccine becomes available.

Based on our veterinary assessment, there are, I believe, steps that can be taken now in order to fill the key gaps in our scientific knowledge and to inform what we do to deal effectively in the medium and longer term with the reservoir of infection in badgers. The studies that I want to pursue will inform whether the culling of badgers could be a cost-effective way of bringing about a reduction in TB in cattle here in the medium term. The studies will also enable the Department to be ready to act when an effective long-term solution becomes available.

I assure the Member that badgers will not be culled for the sake of it. The badger is a protected species, and I need the support of the Minister of the Environment for the actions that we are undertaking. The Department does not believe that there is any point in culling badgers just to alleviate some of the pressure regarding the eradication of TB. We will certainly cull badgers based only on the prevalence study that we carry out and on the information that can be extrapolated from it.

Wild deer, too, can become infected with bovine TB. That is of interest to the Department because wild deer are often found close to cattle — certainly where I come from. Over this winter, therefore, the Department will undertake background surveillance to ascertain the prevalence of bovine TB in wild deer. That will add to our knowledge of the dynamics of bovine TB infection in wild deer and the role of deer in bovine tuberculosis.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, the statement did not address the testing mechanisms and methods for TB. The mechanism that is used is outdated; it has been there for a long time and has proved not to be accurate. Does the Minister have proposals to introduce new methods for TB testing?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am not sure that I agree entirely with the Member's comments. The current testing regime has been instrumental in helping to reduce disease levels. The fact that our disease levels have decreased over the past five years — at a time when our nearest neighbours are finding that their disease levels are going up — says a lot for the testing regime that we use.

11.00 am

We use the standard EU skin test for screening cattle for TB; European legislation stipulates that member states must use that test. The Member will be aware that, in specific circumstances, we also use the gamma interferon test. However, that is only approved under the relevant EU directive as a supplementary test for TB. Therefore, it must be used in conjunction with the skin test. Further research and changes to EU legislation would be required before the gamma interferon test could replace the skin test for routine herd testing.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her statement — even though it was waffly and long. Ireland is an island of small farmers, and, for years, we have debated whether TB is transmitted through badgers or other wildlife. Every Minister applies more science, but we still have no results, which are what we really want. Could additional studies be carried out into the sharing of drinking water by domestic animals and wildlife, such as badgers and foxes?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In this instance, the phrase "the pot calling the kettle black" comes to mind. Obviously, we must consider all the relevant issues, and that is why we are studying wildlife. Although the farming industry can take other measures, it would be difficult to isolate drinking water for cattle from that of wildlife. Nevertheless, we must consider all measures, and I assure the Member that we will do everything possible to eradicate TB. We take advice from, and work closely with, our core stakeholders, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and NIAPA, and that partnership approach will get us through the battle with this difficult and challenging disease.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her statement. At the risk of being accused of agreeing with Thomas Burns, I found it a little less precise than her usual statements, such as the one she made yesterday afternoon.

In addition, I am concerned about Mr Clarke's point about whether a cull is being proposed for the sake of it. The Minister talked about "whether" a badger intervention strategy would help to achieve a cost-effective reduction in TB. She went on to talk about gathering information about where any cull or other intervention might be most effectively targeted, and towards the end she said that her Department "will" develop plans for a badger-removal trial, subject to the agreement of the Minister of the Environment and the necessary bids for expenditure. Although her statement does not include the necessary evidence, her mind appears to have already been made up. Given the dubious evidence produced in other parts of these islands about the effects of proactive or reactive culling, will the Minister assure Members that, rather than following prejudices, she will base her actions on science?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I think that there was a compliment in there somewhere, and that, in itself, knocks me off course, because I am not used to them. As I said, bovine TB is a complex and difficult disease, and the aim of the badger-prevalence study is to fill the scientific gaps — we do not have all the information that we need, and there is conflicting evidence from studies conducted on the island of Ireland and in Britain. We want to fill the gaps and inform ourselves about the best way forward. We have worked with the Minister of the Environment to achieve the required permission to carry out the prevalence study, and we will decide on further actions when the results are known.

Mr Poots: I came to the House under the misguided notion that I would hear something significant about a strategy to deal with the eradication or reduction of bovine TB in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, what we got is, to say the least, flimsy, and it does not deal with the issues.

Each year, £21 million of public money is spent on dealing with this matter, but, although entire herds of cattle have been wiped out, the source of infection has been left on farms.

When will the Minister bite the bullet and deal with the source of the infection, which is in the wildlife? She is not doing the wildlife any favours by allowing TB infected badgers to infect other badgers and cattle. It is time for her to take serious action to deal with the matter.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I said during my statement, the strategy, which is based on a holistic approach, has been developed in conjunction with our key stake-holders — the Ulster Farmers' Union, NIAPA, the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland and others — so that a joint approach can be taken on the way forward and so that we can do the right thing. Although there is a link between TB in wildlife and TB in cattle, there is not enough evidence at this time that enables us to say that dealing effectively with the reservoir of TB infection in wildlife would solve our problem.

The strategy that I have announced today is a new approach to dealing with TB; it is different from what we have been doing in a number of ways. As I said; it is an agreed industry approach. It is also a holistic approach that addresses three strands: real partnership

between Government and industry; control of the spread of TB between cattle; and addressing the wildlife factor.

The existing TB programme is largely based on measures that deal with cattle-to-cattle transmission of the disease. That will continue to be an important element of the strategy as we go forward, and we will continue to look for ways in which to maximise the delivery of the programme.

Mr Poots also asked about badger culling. Experience in other countries in which wildlife acts as a significant reservoir of TB infection — for example, the possum in New Zealand — shows that the financial cost of culling wildlife is high and sustained. That is only the financial cost — not the environmental cost — and it does not take account of our responsibility to protect badgers.

Bearing in mind the progress that has been made in reducing the incidence of TB in cattle since 2002, it is prudent to be cautious about introducing costly measures that might be ineffective, or, worse, could exacerbate the problem. Before introducing any badger-culling policy here, we require sound evidence that culling would help to achieve a cost-effective reduction in TB incidence in cattle. The issue is that we do not have such evidence on which to make an informed decision at present. I believe that we should act to fill the key gaps in the evidence to inform our actions to deal effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers. It is also important that we are ready to act when an effective solution becomes available.

Edwin Poots and I have been on panels that have discussed the problem, and he knows my position on it. We want to eradicate TB. However, if that were easy, it would have been done long before I became Minister.

Mr Irwin: The reduction in TB by almost 50% since 2002 sounds good. However, when one takes a closer look at the incidence of TB, is it not the case that we are no further forward than we were in the mid-1990s? We are back at the level of incidence that existed 10 to 12 years ago.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I accept that when testing was suspended during the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001, the prevalence of TB increased. That is one reason why I am very concerned about dealing with the issue and not taking my foot off the pedal as regards animal welfare. At times, it is costly to continue doing what we are doing. In challenging times, when the Department would love to spend money on other things, there is a temptation to take one's foot off the pedal as regards animal health. I am not prepared to do that, because of the ramifications of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 and the fact that the disease level spiked.

We must act responsibly. Based on the evidence, including the views of our key stakeholders, I am clear that the eradication of TB is unrealistic in the short term. Therefore, we must consider it in the medium and long term. Experience in other countries, such as Australia, that have dealt successfully with TB is that stringent cattle controls, a high level of Government/ industry partnership and a long-term commitment have been critical factors in successfully eradicating TB.

For example, in Australia, key features of the TB eradication programme were a 50:50 Government/ industry partnership in decision-making and cost-sharing and draconian cattle controls. Wildlife was not a significant risk factor in Australia, but it took 28 years to eradicate the disease. That illustrates our difficulty.

The reduction in the incidence of TB that has occurred here in the past five years brings us to a level similar to that experienced in the late 1990s. However, it is important to note that there was an increase in the trend of TB occurrence in the North 10 years ago. Since 2002, the trend overall has been on a downward slope. Over recent months, there has been a levelling off, but it is too early to say whether that position will be sustained.

The Programme for Government contains a target to reduce the incidence of TB by a further 27% by 2011. That is a challenge, but it is incumbent on me as Minister to ensure that we do everything possible to reduce the disease levels. I would love to be able to eradicate the disease, but I must be realistic and accept not only the advice from veterinary surgeons but from key stakeholders that it will be impossible to do that in the short term.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, I was disappointed that she started from such a low base and was so tentative in her proposals. How much money is the Minister looking for over the next two years? Given the importance of TB incidence and its effects on the agriculture industry, why did the Minister not prioritise the issue in the Budget discussions that took place this time last year?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We are looking for £6 million to carry out the study. As I said in my statement, I made a bid through the strategic stocktake for the remaining two years of the comprehensive spending review period. If the current bid is not successful, I intend to bid again for the required additional resources — subject to a full economic appraisal — through in-year monitoring and in the 2009 Budget exercise. However, the timing and implementation of the strategy depends on how and when it is resourced.

Mr O'Loan will know that TB is a costly disease; £21 million was spent on dealing with our current levels in the past financial year. It will cost more to

eradicate the disease, and we will have to do all that we can to receive the additional money that is required to help us to deal effectively with the disease.

Mr T Clarke: In the Minister's response to the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, she said that this is a long process. As my colleague from Newry and Armagh, William Irwin, said, the incidence of TB now is almost the same as it was 10 years ago. Therefore, we have endured a long process. Given that the Minister has carried out many studies — a report of which we have seen recently — and knows the areas in which there is a strong incidence of TB, why is she so reluctant to conduct a cull? A cull in areas of high incidence would instil confidence in the farming community and see a dramatic decrease in the rate of disease.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I have said already, the Department has worked closely with key stakeholders on the issue, and we have to take a realistic view. We are carrying out the prevalence study to fill in the key gaps in our scientific knowledge. We do not have that information available to us. The habits of badgers are different here to habits on the Continent, for example. Therefore, we have to seek to fill in those scientific gaps and make the best decisions on that basis.

We do not have all the tools at our disposal. As I have said, it is possible that the best way to deal with the problem in the long term is by way of a badger vaccination. That option is not available to us at present, so we are not dealing with all the tools that we need to eradicate TB in the short term.

Lord Morrow: In the Minister's statement, she said that she will be unable to achieve the TB targets that are set out in the Programme for Government. That will come as a disappointment to every farmer in Northern Ireland, and she needs to address that issue. Her statement says that the control of the disease is costing over £21 million plus costs to the sector. Does that mean that there is another £21 million on top of that? Furthermore, of all the animals that were slaughtered in 2008, how many were found to be disease free?

11.15 am

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has, as I said, worked with key stakeholders on the matter. Farmers have lived with TB for a very long time; there were incidents of TB where I lived as a child. The changes needed in farming practices to eradicate TB are not acceptable to the industry in the short term. For example, if marts were stopped there would be no contact between cattle and that would help to eradicate TB. However, we do not want to go down that route now.

Farmers understand that the eradication of TB is not possible in the lifetime of the Programme for Government. The fact that we are aiming for a 27% reduction is a challenge, and farmers recognise and accept that. We have lived with TB for a long time, and we are working towards eradicating it. However, that cannot be achieved in the short term.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she clarify that the reason for the low base is due to the fact that the previous Minister, Bríd Rodgers, did nothing to eradicate TB? Will the Minister adopt an all-Ireland approach, because diseases — and TB in particular — do not stop at the border? There would be opportunity for co-operation between Ministers in relation to badgers killed on the roads. Could those badgers be removed quickly to stop other animals from spreading the disease, and could they be collected by councils or the Roads Service for testing?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I understand that badgers killed on the roads are collected and tested. The known levels of TB come from testing such badgers. The only tests at present are post mortem. The prevalent study would be a more controlled study in order to ascertain the level of TB in the badger population. It will also help us to look at the wildlife reservoir and identify problems of TB in badgers in some areas, while, in other areas, badgers exist quite happily alongside cattle and there is no problem with TB. Scientific gaps need to be filled in.

It is important to have an all-Ireland animal health strategy as the disease does not stop at the border. Equally, badger movements do not stop at the border. Action taken South of the border will have an impact on us North of the border. We are examining all of the information coming from the South, particularly as we are on an island. However, we are also looking at evidence from other parts of the world to help us to fight this terrible disease.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, it contains nothing that I have not seen over the past five years. I am not blaming the Minister, but the scientific approaches taken by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are not up to speed with the situation in County Down. I am glad that County Down is being made a priority, because it has got to the stage that many farmers did not let their cattle out during the summer because their neighbours' animals were infected. The situation is getting out of control.

A figure of £6 million was mentioned, and that money could be spent more wisely. Many of the hunters know where badgers are. I doubt whether the Minister's officials know where the badgers are — in fact I am sure that they do not know where they are. The Minister should bring in a bounty to remove the badgers and give farmers peace of mind. No progress has been made over the past five years. Hunters have

told me that badgers are lying in their burrows with big litters of pups, and those pups will be out and about in a few months' time. More drastic action must be taken.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: First, I am disappointed that the Member thinks that there is nothing new in the statement. The Department is undertaking the badger-prevalence study, which is a move in the direction that the Member would like the Department to take. Again, I must point out that the large environmental lobby holds a view contrary to that of some in the farming lobby who want badgers to be culled. There is no point in culling badgers for the sake of it. The purpose of the prevalence study is to help the Department to fill in the gaps in scientific knowledge. We want to have a healthy badger population, as well as a healthy cattle population, but we do not have the necessary information, which is why the study is being carried out.

It would be far worse to spend millions of pounds on wiping out the badger population, only to find that TB has not been eradicated and that we still have to deal with the problem. Such an outcome would not just result in a cost to farmers, but to Government, too. We must be sure that we are doing the right thing, which is why the study is being carried out and why we have engaged closely with key stakeholders and have relied heavily on their advice and support. Their contribution has been hugely important.

The veterinary assessment is that that key piece of work must be carried out to fill the priority gaps in our knowledge and to inform us what action is needed to deal effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers. The findings will provide baseline information on the level and distribution of disease in badgers in the North, and they will help us to establish where any intervention in badger populations would be most effectively targeted. In that way, we can be sure that, if we take that action, we are doing so cost effectively and for the right reasons.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. I declare an interest as an owner whose herd was closed earlier this year as a result of TB infection. In her statement, the Minister mentioned real partnership between Government and industry, and more stakeholder involvement. I would have hoped that we were taking such measures already. As for Mr Molloy's talk of an all-Ireland approach, it is fair to say that our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland have not proven to be a big plus this week.

To follow on from my colleague Mr Elliott's question, does the Minister not feel that there are inaccuracies in the current testing system? Will she undertake to ensure that the study assesses how the testing regime can be improved so that those in the farming industry can have more confidence in it?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have answered that question in my response to the Member's colleague Mr Elliott. We carry out the skin test because EU rules tell us that we must — that is the EU-approved test. In certain circumstances, we carry out the gamma interferon test, but we must still carry out the skin test first. We are bound by the rules that the European Commission imposes on us, and we must use the tests that are available to us.

Mr Speaker: That ends questions on the ministerial statement. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments while we prepare for the next item of business.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Authorities (Reform) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. However, several Members have indicated that they wish to speak to certain clauses. Therefore, we will debate those clauses, and I will then put the Question on each clause, the three schedules to the Bill and the long title.

Clause 1 (Fisheries Conservancy Board for Northern Ireland)

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The clause provides for the abolition of the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) and the transfer of its functions to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. In April 2008, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure considered the Bill's provisions and agreed that it was content with the overall scope of the Bill.

However, the Committee heard evidence from representatives of the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society, who had concerns about representation of anglers following the abolition of the FCB. The Committee subsequently raised those concerns in the Department's salmon and inland fisheries stakeholder forum consultation. On 13 November 2008, our Committee received an update from the Department on the outcome of the consultation, and we were pleased that the Department has accepted the Committee's recommendations — there will now be at least four affiliated anglers on the forum, which will meet quarterly.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for his comments. He is correct to say that the Department considered carefully the recommendations that the Committee made following its consideration of the Bill. We were pleased to respond positively to the recommendation about the representation of anglers on the forum — we trust that that will assuage the concerns that members of the Fisheries Conservancy Board and anglers' groups raised about their representation.

The intention of the changes is not to cut out any of the stakeholders, but to ensure that their voices are heard. We hope that the changes will create a more effective arrangement and that the forum will provide anglers and other stakeholders with the opportunity to have their say on matters that relate to fisheries conservancy and other fishery issues. I thank the Committee for its contribution in that regard.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is on his way; therefore, I propose that the House take its ease until he arrives.

11.30 am

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you clarify the mechanism for raising matters of great urgency in the House? I know that there is a procedure whereby a Member can make a request to the Business Office before a particular time in the morning, but is there a procedure whereby a Member can bring subsequent events to the attention of the House during the course of the day's proceedings?

I would love to bring to the attention of the House the situation in County Tyrone when two school buses went off the Derrybard Road, Fintona; there were 28 children on one bus and three on the other. The buses did not go over on their sides, but they did tilt. It was a very serious situation at Derrybard Road, Fintona, as a result of icy conditions. How does a Member bring the like of that to the attention of the House?

Mr Speaker: I have given the Member some latitude. His first point was a point of order, but his second was not. The Member ought to know that there is a Standing Order that deals with Matters of the Day. The Committee on Procedures spent some time deliberating how Members can raise issues of deep concern to them, especially in their constituencies.

The Member has been very good at drawing attention to the matter that concerns him; however, I remind Members on all sides of the House that the Standing Order that deals with Matters of the Day is absolutely clear. That is how Members should raise any matter that they feel is urgent.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the same leeway be given to every Member who wishes to use innovative ways to raise issues on the Floor of the House? It is one thing for a Member to say that he understands that there is a procedure, which was put in place by the Committee on Procedures to deal with such issues; it is another for Members to use innovative ways to raise issues. Is that the way forward?

Mr Speaker: I thank Lord Morrow for his point of order. That is not the way forward. Members ought to know that, as Speaker, I give Members some latitude, but I have to agree with Lord Morrow. The Committee on Procedures has worked extremely hard to get Standing Order 24, which deals with Matters of the Day, to a point where all Members are satisfied that that is the avenue down which they should go. That Standing Order should not be abused.

Lord Morrow: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand and accept your ruling, but it seems that the Standing Order has been abused today, and it was clear from the outset that the Member had every intention of abusing it.

Mr Speaker: I ask Lord Morrow to repeat what he said; I was in deep discussion about other issues.

Lord Morrow: It was clear from the outset that the Member had every intention of abusing Standing Orders and procedures in the House. It was regrettable that he was not brought to heel much earlier.

Mr Speaker: Under Standing Order 24, which deals with Matters of the Day, there is provision to deal with issues about which Members feel strongly. However, there is a procedure that Members must follow. Let us be absolutely clear: Members should not abuse their standing in the House.

Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments that are tabled to the Bill. No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Bill's Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Pensions (No. 2) Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Pensions (No. 2) Bill [NIA 2/08] do now pass.

The Pensions (No. 2) Bill represents a further major step in legislating for long-term reform of our pensions system. It is appropriate that I comment briefly on what has been achieved.

The agenda for pension reform flowed largely from the recommendations that the independent Pensions Commission made, and is a response to demographic and social trends that the commission identified as creating challenges for the future. The first stage in the reform process — the establishment of a fairer and more generous state-pension system — was enacted by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. The measures contained in that Act recognised the different ways in which people contribute to society, and set out how certain sections of society, such as women and carers, will benefit.

The Pensions (No. 2) Bill represents the second stage in the reform process and is primarily aimed at tackling the problem of under-saving for retirement. Moderate to low earners, whom the market does not serve well, will be given the opportunity to build a private retirement income to supplement their state-pension entitlement. From 2012, eligible workers will be automatically enrolled into a qualifying pension scheme with a minimum employer contribution, and personal accounts will be one option.

For the first time, many workers will be able to save for retirement, and see their contributions matched pound for pound through employer contributions and tax relief. Automatic enrolment will help overcome barriers to saving, such as inertia. Individuals will, however, have the right to opt out, and those who do so will have the opportunity to review their decisions. They will also be automatically re-enrolled at regular intervals.

The reforms create important new rights for workers and obligations for employers. The Pensions Regulator will have overall responsibility for enforcing employer compliance. A proportionate compliance regime will ensure that rights are effectively safeguarded, while imposing no unnecessary burdens on business. The regime will also ensure that employers who fail to comply do not gain a commercial advantage. However, the emphasis will be on keeping to a minimum the need to take compliance action. Employers are critical to the success of the reforms, and minimising their burden has been a key principle in the proposals' development.

It is also important that employers who already provide good-quality occupational pension schemes continue to do so. The number of people who are covered by good occupational pension schemes has been falling steadily. The Bill aims to complement those schemes and to encourage and support employers to continue to run them. To that end, the Bill contains several measures that are designed to minimise regulatory and cost burdens on employers.

The consolidation of additional state pension built up under previous schemes will help individuals to see clearly the real value of their additional pension and contribute to informed decision-making about retirement saving. The indefinite extension of the state pension credit-assessed income period will reduce the level of intrusion that is normally associated with an income-related benefit and introduce a significant easement for the most elderly and vulnerable pensioners.

The Bill also contains a number of measures aimed at improving confidence in private pensions. The powers of the Pensions Regulator will be strengthened to ensure that it offers sufficient protection to scheme members and the pension protection fund. Overall, the Bill aims to help people to save for retirement and will deliver fairness, greater simplicity, affordability and sustainability.

However, saving for retirement might not be a realistic option for everyone; for instance, the very low paid, for whom income-replacement rates from state pensions are likely to be relatively high. However, the reform of state- and private-pension provisions form a complementary package and, as a whole, will create a new pensions settlement for the twenty-first century. It is a settlement that will allow everyone to plan with confidence for retirement.

With this Bill, and the state pension reforms already enacted, we are building a simpler and enduring pensions system for the generations to come. I thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Social Development, and Assembly Members in general, for the positive manner in which they have supported the progression of this important Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): As the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development has indicated previously, the Committee agreed to support the Minister's proposal for accelerated passage of the Bill. The Committee did so because it recognised the value of maintaining parity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom in social security and pension matters. On behalf of the Committee, I record my satisfaction that by progressing the Bill to its Final Stage, parity — with all the benefits that it brings to the people of Northern Ireland — has been maintained.

The Pensions (No. 2) Bill has many features, but I will not speak about all of them; some are complex, many are technical, but all are important for the provision of low-cost, reliable private pensions for the low paid. The Bill requires employers to automatically enrol employees in a pension scheme. That automatic enrolment is thought to be the most effective way of persuading people on low income to put some of their wages aside for their retirement. The Committee welcomes the provision of a low-cost pension option for the low paid. The Committee also welcomes the opt-out provision. It is hoped that the outworking of those measures will see employees making informed choices about their wages and personal pension provision.

Notwithstanding that, the Committee recognises the potential for an adverse impact on the cost base of local employers. For that reason, the phasing in of employer contributions is to be welcomed. That, however, is not enough. On behalf of the Committee, I caution the Minister to be cognisant of the fact that communication about the obligations under, and consequences of, the Bill for employers and employees is essential. The Committee has pointed out that communication from the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority, and other Department-led agencies, will be critical in ensuring that the consequences of this important Bill are understood.

Compliance is just as important as understanding; and the Committee, therefore, welcomes the additional, and commensurate, compliance measures of the Pensions Regulator. It is hoped that a compliance regime will be developed that does not burden employers unnecessarily yet gives assurances to those investing their wages in private-pension schemes.

The Committee has concerns about the alteration in the deferred pensions benefit cap. It is recognised that the alteration brings deferred pension benefits in line with other pension benefits.

Nonetheless, it is hoped that the Minister will work to encourage employers to ensure that the financial benefits that are gained from that aspect of the Bill are reinvested in pension contributions and that levelling down is restricted.

11.45 am

It is hoped that the Pensions (No. 2) Bill will enhance and improve the retirement prospects of many thousands of low-paid workers in Northern Ireland. The Committee regrets that, because of time pressures, it was unable to review and provide the level of scrutiny that such important legislation deserves.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Hilditch — who, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, spoke on behalf of the Committee — for his contribution to the debate. He raised the issue of communications, particularly with reference to the personal accounts delivery system.

Between now and 2012, a communications plan will involve the Department, the Pensions Regulator and the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority. I assure the House that that will ensure that employees and employers are aware of their responsibilities and duties on that issue.

The Pensions (No. 2) Bill is important. Alongside the measures that have already been introduced by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, it will provide a pensions system that is fit for the twenty-first century. I agree with the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Hilditch, that the Bill will greatly enhance the ability of workers to plan and save for retirement with confidence by removing barriers to saving and will help to change our saving culture.

It is important to ensure that people can be enabled to save for the future. All Members who spoke on the Bill during the debate on accelerated passage and at the Bill's Second Stage upheld that basic principle. The reforms will make it easier and more attractive to save and to extend pension provision to people who are not already covered. Confidence in private pensions will be improved, and existing provisions will be strengthened.

I note the Committee's concerns about the valuation of deferred pensions. I stress that we are introducing an entire package, some of which is designed to ease burdens on employers and to encourage them to run good schemes. We want to encourage employees to save for the future, and we also want to encourage employers; it is a joint exercise.

I am grateful to the Committee for Social Development and to Members across the House for their positive contribution to the progress of the Bill, for agreeing to its accelerated passage and for the level of consensus that the Bill has enjoyed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions (No. 2) Bill [NIA 2/08] do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Carbon Neutrality within the Northern Ireland Assembly

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

Mr Wells: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Assembly Commission to draw up an action plan aimed at ensuring that all the buildings used by the Northern Ireland Assembly achieve carbon neutrality by 2015.

I thank the Business Committee for its forbearance in dealing with the motion. As Members may be aware, the motion should have been debated two weeks ago, but, sadly, as a result of the tragic deaths of the four policemen in South Down, I was not available to take part in that debate. I am grateful to the Committee for agreeing to let the motion be withdrawn from the Order Paper, and I am even more grateful for the fact that the Business Committee brought it back onto the Order Paper so speedily.

The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland believe that climate change is occurring and that the overwhelming reason for it is the emission of greenhouse gases as a result of man's activities. I accept that there are a few who believe otherwise. Some individuals believe that it is a naturally occurring process and that man is not responsible in any way for climate change. They are well-meaning people, and they hold their views sincerely. That has to be respected.

However, I ask this question: what if I am, and the vast majority of Members are, wrong? If that is the case, and we take steps to reduce our carbon emissions, what is the result? We save our finite supplies of energy, for fossil fuels are running out; we use the earth's resources more wisely; and we inflict less pain on the Third World. However, if the sceptics are wrong, and we take no action to reduce carbon emissions, we face environmental catastrophe. I am not a betting man, but I know which horse I would prefer to back.

Let us assume, for the purposes of this debate, that mankind is largely or entirely responsible for the huge increase in greenhouse gases. That being the case, the scientists have told us that we must have an 80% reduction in CO2 emissions by 2050. That is a very difficult target to meet. However, we should adopt the precautionary principle and take steps now, before we hit the tipping point — the point of no return.

I realise that I am speaking to the converted. Others who need to hear the message may be listening elsewhere,

but that is my personal view on this issue, and I am sticking to it. We need to stabilise the growth in CO2 in order to ensure that average temperatures do not increase by more than 2°C by 2050, against an average based on pre-industrial levels. Again, it is a very difficult target to meet.

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

Members may agree that that is all very interesting, but ask what it has to do with the Northern Ireland Assembly. We are responsible for a very small proportion of the greenhouse gas emissions as a result of our management of this Building. Indeed, we are responsible for only 0·25% of the entire emissions of all the Government offices in Northern Ireland. Some Members might ask why we should bother or why we should be interested in the subject.

Well, most Members agree that we must set an example to the rest of the community. It is no good telling our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland that they must reduce their carbon emissions, take the pain and go for an 80% reduction by 2050, while we, in this Building and any other buildings that we control, do not bother to do anything. We must commit ourselves to that principle. It is like a bald man trying to sell hair restorer — the obvious question will be asked as to why he does not take his own advice. The same applies to Third World countries, poorer countries. If we are to tell them to reduce their carbon emissions, we must set an example.

Not only must we set an example, we must put our own house in order. I asked the Assembly Commission a question for written answer: how many kilograms of carbon does this Building emit? The latest figure is from 2006, when we emitted 1,165,561 kg of carbon. By any standards, that is a lot of CO2 going into the atmosphere as a result of our activities.

Mr McCarthy: Does that include the hot air?

Mr Wells: Yes, it includes the hot air emitted by Members.

Other Assemblies and institutions in the United Kingdom have set an excellent example. They have called on the Carbon Trust, which is the accredited body that knows most about these things, to come into their buildings and carry out rigorous checks to find out where the carbon comes from and what can be done to reduce emissions. The National Assembly for Wales started that process in March 2007. Already, in this financial year, it is implementing procedures recommended by the Carbon Trust. Therefore, it shows that that can be achieved, and quickly.

There are basic measures that we can take while that study is ongoing, which I hope that the Commission will agree to. First, there is no reason why the energy usage of this Building cannot be reduced by 20% now. I can illustrate that point by providing details of two issues that I discovered when I sat on the Commission. First, on the hottest day ever recorded in Northern Ireland's history, the radiators remained on in the Building. When I enquired as to why that was the case, I was informed that the heating system did not allow for a complete shutdown. I am not aware whether that is still the case, but that struck me as a horrendous waste of energy — all the windows were open, people were perspiring, yet the heating remained on.

Secondly, I was in the Building on the day before Christmas Eve approximately eight years ago. The Building was almost empty, but being the anorak that I was, I was here preparing and finishing off paperwork before the Christmas holidays. While I was here, I noticed that hundreds of electrical devices such as photocopiers, water heaters, scanners and public address systems had been left switched on. Everything, everywhere was left on. I asked whether anyone intended to turn those devices off, but I was told no and that those devices would remain on for the entire Christmas holidays — some eight days. Therefore, even though no one would be in the Building, all those electrical devices would remain switched on. I then asked whether someone could be appointed to switch those devices off, but I was told that that would be too complex, and that there would be health and safety issues to consider. I went on to ask whether the security guards could perform the task, but again I was told no, because it was not in their remit to do so. No one took responsibility for switching the appliances off, thus ensuring that we wasted electricity. I hope that that is still not the situation, because that was an appalling waste of energy.

Having ensured a 20% reduction in carbon emissions through a perfectly attainable reduction in the energy consumption of the Building, could we not also supply our energy needs through 100% renewables, rather than the current level of 25%? At home, I pay into Northern Ireland Electricity's Eco Energy scheme, which means that all the energy used in my home comes from renewable sources. That does not mean that the electrical wiring in my home runs to a windmill or tidal-power unit to provide electricity to my home. Instead, NIE pools all that electricity, people such as me subscribe to the renewable tariff and NIE buys an equivalent amount of electricity from renewable suppliers to service that demand. However, it still means that the electricity used in my house does not lead to any additional carbon load. Why can the Assembly not decide almost immediately — and I will be asking the representative of the Commission Mr Neeson to elaborate on this — that all the electricity in this Building will be renewable? That would send out a very clear signal to the community that we are serious about reducing our carbon emissions.

Even with a 20% reduction in our energy usage and the 100% use of renewable sources to provide electricity to the Building, we will not be at a zero carbon level. It is important to emphasise the difference between zero carbon and carbon neutral. Zero carbon means that no carbon is used at all; carbon neutral means that through a use of a mixture of conservation, renewables and offsetting, the net impact on the carbon load being released into the atmosphere is zero. I ask the Commission — after it has gone through those first two procedures — to consider examining some form of offsetting through the purchase of carbon credits. That will mean that we offset our remaining residual use and will effectively become carbon neutral.

This is not rocket science. In the United Kingdom as a whole, a decision has been made that all Government offices will be carbon neutral by 2012. Therefore, the motion that I have tabled today, which indicates a target date of 2015, does not place a huge burden on the Assembly. Indeed, in the sustainable development strategy that was outlined by Peter Hain before devolution, there is a target for all Northern Ireland Government offices to become carbon neutral by 2015. If we are asking our 11 Departments to take that route, it would be hypocritical if the Assembly was not carbon neutral by the same time.

I am aware that some Members feel that setting a target of 2015 is not a particularly tight deadline. However, I am also aware that some Members would not have backed my original motion — with its suggested target date of 2010 for carbon neutrality — while the Commission also seems to be somewhat uneasy about that target. Therefore, rather than lose the motion or divide the House, I agreed — against my better judgement — to change the motion and opt for a target date of 2015 instead.

I want to emphasise that 2015 is the absolute deadline, and if the Assembly can reach the target of carbon neutrality by 2012 or 2013, I will be delighted. Let us get at this. Let us set an example and show that we really care about the environment of Northern Ireland.

12.00 noon

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on it. I thank the proposer of the motion for outlining that not everyone recognises the existence of climate change.

We, as elected representatives, are very vocal in requesting that the general public do their bit in the fight against climate change, and in the promotion of energy efficiency, be it through councils, schools or other private initiatives. Therefore, it is only right that the Assembly should lead the way by reducing its carbon footprint. Perhaps it is time for a strategic review of these Buildings, similar to that of the energy performance review carried out in Wales, in order that we may take a fresh look at where we can improve.

I would welcome an assessment of this Building by the Carbon Trust. It would not be the final answer to reducing emissions; rather it would be a stepping stone to delivering a strategy that would enable us to make systematic reductions in carbon emissions from these Buildings.

An appropriate starting point would be to ensure that electricity used in these Buildings came from sources of renewable energy, such as solar, wind or water-generated power. Given the location of this Building, part of any review or strategy should explore the possibility of a wind turbine to provide our power, subject to all the necessary feasibility studies, planning permission and listed building consent. We need to phase out the use of power generated from fossil-fuel sources. Each of us — Members and staff — must also play our part by ensuring that we are mindful not to leave lights, computers and other units powered by electricity switched on when not in use, as Mr Wells has said.

We must be proactive in our waste management. Members have, in the past, commented on the huge volume of paper that we use and waste in this Building. We must, therefore, reconsider the use of paper records, recognising the fact that the IT system is backed up. We must eliminate as much paper use as possible.

Recently the Chairpersons' Liaison Group considered options and possibilities to increase and improve the use of IT by Committees. The aim is to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the service provided to Members and, over time, to reduce the amount of paper use. It was found that the introduction of IT equipment to existing Committee rooms would be costly due to difficulties in relation to lack of space, health and safety issues, and so on. However, from that consideration, new technologies and different approaches that may enable papers to be accessed electronically in Committee rooms are to be investigated.

Consideration is also to be given to improving the method by which Committee papers are distributed electronically to those Members who wish to receive them in that format. I believe that we should be encouraging all Members and all staff to make use of that facility. The sooner that we arrive at a situation where we can have a paperless regime, the better. It would certainly go a long way to meeting the requirements of the motion, as would reducing the amount of waste that we send to landfill.

We are making considerable efforts in this area, but I am sure that we can do better. I have highlighted just a few areas where I think that Members and staff of this Assembly could make simple changes that would improve our energy efficiency. I am sure that other

Members will highlight other measures. It is of the utmost importance that we carry out a strategic review of our energy consumption and waste management.

I support the motion, and I feel that it is a worthwhile target to strive for. I urge the Commission to initiate a review and to implement a plan as soon as possible. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important topic. There is an obligation to improve the environmental efficiency and sustainability of buildings in Northern Ireland generally, and we in the Assembly must do so too.

There is global climate change, and there are European directives governing the need to improve energy efficiency and reduce energy usage. There is also the practical issue of increasing fuel costs. Therefore, there are a number of drivers behind seeking carbon neutrality, and, clearly, we need to make further improvements. We cannot say one thing and not carry that through by our own example. Therefore, it is important that the Assembly is an exemplar on this issue, and we must aim for Parliament Buildings to be carbon neutral.

Carbon neutrality is about reducing, and/or offsetting, carbon emissions. If the Assembly is serious about tackling change, it must reduce the size of its eco-footprint. That is not about just energy usage or efficiency; it includes avoiding printing unnecessary documents. I welcome the fact that the Assembly Business Office has taken steps in that area. I do not know whether that emanated from the Commission, but I have highlighted, through Questions, the unnecessary printing of materials. I, and many other Members, I suspect, were not reading every page of every document, most of which seldom change. I welcome the fact that there is now the option to get an electronic version, thereby saving energy and the use of carbon.

There are other ways to reduce emissions, such as using renewable energy. In common with other Members, I wonder why only 25% of the electricity used on the Stormont Estate is from a renewable source. Clearly, that percentage should be increased. Why are we not using 100% renewable energy? The idea of a wind turbine is worth exploring.

The Commission is working closely with the energy conservation branch and the Carbon Trust to improve energy efficiency, and that is to be welcomed. Practical examples of that have been saving electricity by using more efficient light bulbs and sensitive equipment that automatically turns itself off when not in use. However, there is room for further improvement. We have to look at how we can get a total energy saving from equipment when it is not being used. We all have to remember that in not only our homes, but in Parliament Buildings, when electronic equipment is on standby it is still using about 20% of the energy that it would normally consume.

Gas and heating are key sources of carbon output, and reducing the heating level is an easy and obvious step to take. Too often I have come across windows open in the corridors because it is too warm. Why are there not effective thermostatic controls, in the pump system or on individual radiators, so that the heating switches off? That is not good for our carbon footprint or for the Assembly's energy bills.

Natural gas may be a relatively clean option, but there are other methods that the Assembly should pursue. Why are we not, for example, examining the option of a biomass boiler? Parliament Buildings would be a wonderful place to have such a boiler as an exemplar. Indeed, the Stormont Estate is of a considerable size, and has space for a willow coppice. That would be a wonderful demonstration for the public, and would provide visitors with a working example of biomass use. The Welsh Assembly has a very energy efficient building, and we need to start to make changes here.

Another area associated with the Building's carbon footprint is the use of water. Some Members may be surprised at that, but think of the disposable plastic containers and the transport costs in delivering water to the Chamber. Why are we not using tap water? Why are the Committees not using tap water in jugs? A Committee on which I sit provides that option, and the majority of Committee members are perfectly happy to drink tap water from jugs. I urge others to do likewise.

There are a variety of methods to achieve carbon neutrality, and we must look at a range of issues in order to make Parliament Buildings more energy efficient and to reduce our carbon footprint. Regrettably, fuel costs are increasing, and we must all try to protect the environment and to reduce the Assembly's running costs.

Mr Gallagher: Climate change is undoubtedly one of the greatest global and local threats. We know that it is inextricably linked to an over-reliance on deriving energy from fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas. Carbon emissions into the atmosphere from the use of those fuels have increased markedly over the past 40 years and continue to grow. It is unsustainable to continue to use natural resources at today's levels; therefore, I welcome and support the timely motion.

The motion makes the point that human activity is making a significant contribution to global warming, which affects climate change. We must live in a way that is fair and just for future generations of humans and all other creatures on the planet. As a society, we face the challenge of changing our habits and reducing our carbon footprint in order to save the environment.

There is, as I have said, an inextricable link between man's activities and climate change. It must embarrass more enlightened DUP Members that the Environment

Minister has frequently rejected the fact that climate change is in any way linked to human activity. It is also deeply displeasing, of course, for all those who care passionately about the environment, and sends the disappointing message to our neighbours on these islands and in Europe that we, as a society, do not really care about the environment either.

Neighbouring Governments, particularly the UK and Ireland, have joined industrial countries across the world in tackling climate change. All of them are making at least some efforts to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, which are responsible for carbon emissions. The Government spokespersons of those countries reinforce the message that we must change our habits and reduce our carbon footprint in order to save the environment. Therefore, it is important that the motion be supported and that the Assembly's Building be made as sustainable as possible. By setting a good example, we can send out a message about energy-efficiency standards that will encourage improvements by householders and by businesses.

In proposing the motion, Mr Wells pointed out that Northern Ireland has abundant natural resources that can be quickly and easily exploited. The range of renewables includes onshore and offshore winds; wave, tidal and marine currents; and solar panels. All of those can play a part in helping to achieve a more sustainable Assembly Building. Increasingly, individuals and communities are showing a greater interest in energy-efficiency measures, including insulating their homes and using wood-fired boilers or small domestic turbines.

A recent WWF study in Northern Ireland found that the number of people in Northern Ireland who want to live in a sustainable way has more than doubled in the past two years. Rising energy costs and the present financial crises may be a wake-up call. Something must change in society. People are being asked to tighten their belts, and they are thinking about ways of saving money on the cost of heating their homes. If financial savings can be made at the same time as saving our planet, there is a compelling case for promoting carbon neutrality. I support the motion.

12.15 pm

Mr Ford: It is unusual to have unanimity on such a topic. I, too, welcome the motion. I congratulate my friends Jim Wells and Brian Wilson — since we are not at Westminster, I can call them my friends — for securing the debate. Indeed, it is good to see such an array of DUP supporters of Jim Wells's brave initiative. The House must wait with interest to see how they act during the latter part of the debate.

It is important that such a motion is taken seriously. During the economic difficulties of the times in which we live, it is absolutely clear and important that the environment must not suffer because of what is perceived will be a short-term economic crisis. Indeed, there are compelling reasons why now is the time to take a strong and positive initiative to move towards carbon neutrality by 2015, if not, regrettably, by 2011.

It is also interesting to compare what the Assembly does with what is being done by the two bodies with which it, obviously, has most in common — the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. It seems that both have made considerably greater efforts during the past 10 years of their existence than the Assembly has been able to make so far. Perhaps, that is because the Assembly suffers from having an elderly Building.

Nevertheless, it can learn a lesson from initiatives that the other legislatures have taken; for example, the work that has been done in Scotland on the use of renewables for heating and electricity — use of solar panels on the Parliament building and an eco-tariff to ensure that its electricity is supplied better. Mr Wells highlighted the use of such measures in his own home. Perhaps, those could be advanced by the Assembly. Other measures are frequently ignored, such as proper water management to ensure that showers and taps are not left turned on, thereby wasting water as, sometimes, happens in this Building.

A key issue in Edinburgh is that of transport. When a Parliament building is built in the centre of a capital city, that cuts down transport costs for people who seek to visit it. Perhaps, that is why Holyrood is much more successful at attracting visitors than the Assembly. There is a problem with getting public transport into the Stormont estate and, therefore, in getting people who work in the estate to use it. That includes people who work in the Building and MLAs.

In Cardiff, there are somewhat different issues. One of the Welsh Assembly's key advantages, however, is the fact that there is a sustainability obligation in the Government of Wales Act 1998. The Welsh Assembly has taken that obligation to the point that it wants to achieve carbon neutrality by 2012, which is three years ahead of this optimistic motion — although one year behind it had it been tabled originally. There are measures towards reduction in energy use, use of on-site renewables and microgeneration — which is, perhaps, an option for the Northern Ireland Assembly — and carbon offsetting, to which Mr Wells referred.

As I understand the statistics, the Assembly used five million sheets of paper between its resumption in May 2007 and Christmas 2007. I hate to imagine how many of those sheets were not read or were glanced at briefly, as they could have been glanced at on a computer screen, before being binned. If, a few years ago, Antrim Borough Council could supply every member with a laptop and deliver all papers electronically, I cannot see why it is not possible to run Committee business in

this place with Members using laptops and getting papers delivered electronically.

The waste of staff time that is spent putting together packs and, frequently, repeating papers, week after week, is an utter disgrace. That is a key issue about the simple management of the place, and nothing to do with the problems of an ancient Building. That initiative is in our hands. Some measures that have already been highlighted are relatively straightforward and simple. The easiest way to save energy is to switch off electrical appliances, as Jim Wells reminded the House.

Examples of renewables in other public agencies include the wind turbine at Antrim Area Hospital. It is a classic example of where the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has taken an initiative that has had significant payback. Some people do not believe that a wind turbine would complement the Building; I believe that a turbine at each end of it would improve considerably the look of the place.

If the Assembly is serious about the institution's responsibility, it must ensure that it sets an example to society. Certainly, the installation of gas heating has improved the Building's carbon footprint when compared with oil heating. I understand, however, that in the Assembly's early days, its heating was controlled by a man in an office in Churchill House. Sometimes, I wonder whether, when Churchill House was demolished, the man disappeared with it. There is still no effective control over what happens in the Building.

Various options have been mentioned. The motion is not prescriptive, but the Assembly must call on the Commission to respond positively to it.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. David Ford will be glad to hear that more than one DUP Member supports the motion. Northern Ireland is a beautiful country with fields of green and wonderful varieties of wildlife. The carbon footprint issue spreads far wider than Northern Ireland — it is a global matter. Therefore, we have a global responsibility to play our part in reducing emissions and offsetting those that cannot be reduced.

Members outlined some of the simple but helpful ways in which the carbon footprint of Assembly and constituency offices can be reduced, and the Assembly should implement them as soon as possible. For example, the gift shop could use biodegradable, rather than plastic, bags. If that has already been considered, that is good news.

In mi' ain Bailliewick Oaffich, we uise renewable energy in oarder tae play oor pert. This haes cut doon, no oanly oan oor carbin fitprint, but haes broucht doon tha coast o' oor lectrik an haetin bills, whuch is a' guid thing. We hae as weel a' boax fer pittin oany papers, whuch erny impoartin, in sae that they caun be re-cycled. This is aw in lien wi' Ardes Cooncil ideels. As fer maesel, aa' hae plented trees oan mi' lan at haem in oarder tae try an affset sum o' trevellin that a' dae . This is guid practis. It micht nae be tha ideel wae, fer tha ideel wae is tae be carbin free at woark an at haem. Bit tha tree plentin wud jist simply be heftfú tae tha wildlife in mi' area, as weel as bein heftfú tae tha suroons an aw aboot as a' hael.

My constituency office uses renewable energy; that has reduced our carbon footprint and our heating bills, which is always a good thing. Non-confidential material is put in a box and recycled through the Ards Borough Council initiative. I have planted trees on my land in an attempt to offset some of my travelling. Those are examples of good practice, but they do not represent the ideal way forward, which is to be carbon-neutral at work and at home. If that was achieved, planting trees could be done simply to benefit wildlife and the wider environment. My colleague suggested that I have different reasons for planting trees. That may be true; nevertheless, I have played my part.

I have always thought that our constituency office in Newtownards does pretty well in attempting to be carbon-neutral, but we could do more. Much can be done, such as taking energy-saving measures when using computers, switching off lights, using recycled paper, and washing dishes only once per day. Those are small measures but, collectively, they can make a difference. We are mindful of our environmental duties, but we could, and should, do more.

It would be useful if there was a strategy for people to follow closely. The Assembly Commission should set out an action plan that can be followed in Parliament Buildings, in Departments and in constituency offices. Some targets have already been set: to source 15% of electricity from combined heat and power sources by next year — indeed, my office uses Airtricity; to be carbon neutral by 2015; to increase energy efficiency by 30% by 2025; to reduce water consumption by 25% by 2020; and to increase household efficiency by 25% — and by 40% in Housing Executive homes — by 2025. If the Assembly Commission implements an action plan, those targets could be achieved.

We do not damage the environment as much as other countries do. However, that is not to say that we do no damage.

Mr Ford: I assume that the Member is referring to the fact that we are only 1·7 million people, and that he is not suggesting that our average carbon footprint is lower than that of other countries.

Mr Shannon: I do not suggest that for one second, and I accept the pertinent point that David makes.

Responsibility for the matter does not rest solely with the Assembly Commission; every head of Department must implement and adhere to the strategy.

The Assembly Commission and the Departments must ensure that every building that they run meets and, if possible, exceeds targets. We all contribute to the footprint, which we must all help to reduce and negate. Members are aware of the changes that Departments can make, and, therefore, I will not list them. Most Departments are headed by people who have an interest in environmental issues and in reducing the carbon footprint, and there is vast room for improvement in every Department. If we are to encourage homes in the Province to improve and to help themselves and the environment, we must begin that process today.

I thank Members for their contributions, and I thank my colleague Jim Wells for proposing the motion. I look forward to Brian Wilson's contribution. I hope that it will be similar to that made by Jim Wells, which I support.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. I listened to, and agree with, the comments that Jim Wells and Jim Shannon made. I encourage them to repeat those comments to the Minister of the Environment, because there is clearly dissent in the DUP. Contradictions must be addressed.

I will not repeat other Members' comments, but we need to follow examples of good practice and other European Governments' examples in order to inspire the Assembly to be an exemplary organisation in areas of sustainability and environmental stewardship. We must achieve the Programme for Government's target to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by at least 25% by 2025. In doing so, we must set targets for the five, 10 and 15 years preceding 2025. Each public-sector site has been asked to reduce CO2 emissions by 20% by 2010 and by 60% by 2050. Although CO2 emissions from those buildings have decreased in recent years, it is now more urgent to ensure that buildings become carbon neutral.

The Assembly Commission should strive to make this Building energy efficient and should introduce radical measures to increase the level of recycling here. If ratepayers are to be penalised for not recycling, the Assembly should be treated in the same way in order to change old habits and behaviour. The Assembly Commission must consider radical ways in which to change the behaviour of the public and Assembly employees. However, Members should not feel that they are exempt from the initiatives.

Several weeks ago, the example was cited of the plastic cups that we use in the Chamber. Those cups are recycled regularly, but on some occasions, people throw coffee cups, chewing gum and other waste into recycling bins, thus contaminating them. Thereafter, they must be treated as general waste. The Assembly Commission should examine that matter and other recycling problems in the Building.

In response to a query that I submitted to the Assembly Commission in October, it confirmed that it plans to appoint a head of environmental services to the properties directorate, which will have responsibility for developing and improving all areas of sustainability in the Assembly. I welcome that measure.

David Ford mentioned the amount of paper correspondence that Members receive in the Building. The amount of waste is absolutely crazy, and the Assembly Commission must examine that issue. It should send a message to non-Government organisations — such as lobby groups, and so on — which send numerous reports and items of correspondence that, to be honest, many Members do not read thoroughly. As MLAs, and, in some instances, councillors, we must delegate and prioritise our work. We must encourage such organisations and different directorates in the Assembly to send correspondence electronically rather than by paper. Most of us, I hope, are computer literate and have BlackBerries that we should use more frequently to ensure that the amount of paper received decreases rapidly.

12.30 pm

I listened to Jim Wells's comments about carbon offsetting; there are examples across Europe that we should consider, because Ministers of other European Governments carbon-offset each trip that they make, especially those involving air travel. The Ministers of our Executive should follow their example.

To conclude, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I agree with other Members about the need to ensure that 2015 is made an absolute deadline for making this Building carbon-neutral. I fully support the motion from the dissident DUP/Green alliance. There is an onus on all Members to change their behaviour and to lead from the front in setting an example for the public. I support the motion.

Mr Poots: Some Members sought to lower the tone today. Mr Gallagher sought to enlighten us and Mr McKay had a pop at the Minister of the Environment. I know that he has demonstrated his commitment to green affairs by trying to ensure that bonfires in Ballymena were not lit — without much success, I might add.

Mr McKay: I note the Member's comment that I was having a pop at the Minister of the Environment. Does he not agree that the previous two DUP Members who spoke had a veiled pop at their own Minister?

Mr Poots: Absolutely not; the Member has got it completely wrong. The previous Minister of the Environment substantially improved and increased environmental protection, and the present Minister had

a huge battle with none other than Sinn Féin and the SDLP over the reform of planning policy statement 14; some individuals wanted to build a bungalow in every field and substantially increase our carbon footprint. Instead of the SDLP it should be the DSLP — the double-standards labour party. The Minister of the Environment has had to lead the way and show the Members opposite what true environmental policy should be.

Mr Weir: Would my colleague comment on the rumours that Mr McGlone has sought planning permission to build bungalows on the Stormont estate?

Mr Poots: I have no evidence of that, but as Mr Weir is a barrister, I am sure that he would not make such a statement without checking its veracity.

Believe it or not I have been here since 1998 — I am one of the veterans of the Chamber. In those 10 years, I have seen little change in how we do things, which shows that we have not moved on. We have not embraced the IT era that has been developing over that period. Lisburn City Council — which leads the way on many issues — gets all its materials through computer; we take our laptops containing all our reports and minutes to meetings. That is how we do our business. There is no reason not to do that in this Building. I do not believe that the technology cannot be provided in this Building to reduce the huge amount of paper that we use.

Heating has been mentioned. It is very warm in the Building today; I think that someone has turned the heating up especially because of Mr Wells's motion. The radiator in Mr Wells's room is always off; one should always wear a coat going into his room. I am the same; my room is fairly cold too. I embraced technology, such as energy-saving light bulbs, in my own home many years ago because it saved me money. Even if one is not a keen environmentalist, one can use technology to save money. The Assembly could save itself money by embracing technology.

Mr Ford, quite rightly, mentioned wind turbines. I do not know that they would enhance the look of the Building, but wind turbines could be placed discreetly in the estate.

We are on top of a hill, so we could probably supply more energy from wind turbines than is needed by this Building. The additional energy could be sold back into the system, which would go even further than Mr Wells's motion.

The use of geothermal technology should also be considered because we have a huge amount of green space around us that is ideal for geothermal technology. That could be another means of heating this Building. There is much that could be done that would assist us in reducing this Building's carbon footprint. That would demonstrate our commitment on those issues to the public, and would, hopefully, help to create a better environment in Northern Ireland.

Mr Neeson: I thank Jim Wells and Brian Wilson for proposing the motion. I am particularly pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Assembly Commission. I also thank all Members who contributed to this interesting and informative debate. At the start of the proceedings, I was told that there would be seven contributors, but I think that more than seven Members spoke during the debate. That shows the interest that Members have in this issue. I will endeavour to respond to all of the points that were raised. However, I will check the Hansard report and if I miss any salient points I will respond in writing to the individuals concerned.

I begin by stressing that the Assembly Commission is absolutely committed to working towards sustainable operations and is already working with all other Departments on the Stormont Estate to make the Government estate carbon neutral by 2015. Parliament Buildings has been participating in the public-sector energy campaign since 1999. The Assembly properties directorate works closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel and with the Carbon Trust in order to determine ways to reduce our carbon footprint.

All organisations that participate in the public-sector energy campaign are tasked with increasing the energy efficiency of their buildings. Each building is required to reduce the kilowatt-hours of fuel and electricity that are used for every square metre of building floor area by 15% by 2011, and to reduce absolute carbon that is used from fuel and electricity by 12·5% by 2011 — all relative to the base period of 1999-2000. In addition, at least 10% of electricity had to be sourced from renewable sources by 31 March 2008.

The Assembly Commission has already reduced its energy consumption by 24·9% since the base year 1999. That was achieved by installing gas-fired boilers, introducing energy-saving products such as energy-efficient lighting, and by raising awareness of energy-saving practices. We have also exceeded the target in respect of sourcing electricity supply from renewable sources. The Assembly Commission currently uses 25% green electricity, as opposed to the 10% target that was in place for March 2008.

There has been a decrease of 42% in our carbon dioxide emissions since the base year 1999.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Neeson: No; my time is limited.

The aim is for our buildings to reduce their emissions by 20% by 2010, and by 60% by 2050. The Assembly Commission is currently exceeding those targets. From 30 December this year, Parliament Buildings will be required to show a display energy certificate in a prominent place that is clearly visible to

the public, in accordance with the obligations that come into effect for public authorities on that date.

The purpose of introducing display energy certificates is to raise public awareness of energy use and to inform visitors to public buildings about the energy use of those buildings. A display energy certificate provides a building with an energy rating from A to G — where A is very efficient and G is the least efficient — and that rating is based on the actual energy used by the building over a 12-month period. The Assembly's properties directorate has been working closely on that with the Department of Finance and Personnel's energy conservation branch. Indications are that the initial rating for Parliament Buildings will compare favourably with similar buildings.

The Assembly Commission has been actively involved in the Stormont Estate transport initiative in an attempt to improve public transport and car sharing. In addition, during the summer, an awareness day was held in the Parliament Buildings' restaurant in order to encourage staff to use alternatives to cars, and a staff survey was carried out.

The Commission is also in the process of appointing an environmental officer to the properties directorate, and he or she will be responsible for, among other things, the design and implementation of an environmental management system for the Assembly.

Earlier this year, in response to Members' requests, the Carbon Trust carried out a carbon survey of Parliament Buildings, and it recommended a range of measures that would result in a 12·5% reduction in energy consumption and a 10% reduction in energy costs, based on 2006-07 prices. Such reductions represent a significant incentive for everyone in Stormont to buy-in to reducing energy demands, particularly electricity, and the payback periods for such measures range from immediate to two-and-a-half years. The technologies that have been introduced as a result of those recommendations include passive infrared lighting, which is activated by people entering a room, energy-efficient lighting and water-saving devices in the toilets.

The properties directorate continues to work with the Carbon Trust and the Department of Finance and Personnel's energy conservation branch to explore further means by which to improve energy efficiency. The carbon survey quantified the Building's total carbon dioxide emissions to be 1,294 tons per annum.

Carbon neutrality — having a zero-carbon footprint — refers to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by balancing a measured amount of carbon emitted with an equivalent amount that has been sequestered or offset. That can be achieved by balancing the amount of carbon dioxide that is released into the atmosphere with an equivalent amount of renewable energy, or by using only renewable energies that do not produce any carbon dioxide.

The Carbon Trust suggests that an organisation that is truly committed to addressing climate change should, first, focus on reducing its direct emissions; reduce its carbon footprint and create bottom-line savings by implementing all possible cost-effective energy-efficiency measures; and, if cost effective, it should reduce the carbon intensity of its energy supply by developing low-carbon energy sources.

Secondly, such an organisation should consider opportunities to reduce its indirect emissions by working with other organisations to develop strategies to reduce emissions and to cut costs up and down the supply chain. In addition, it should investigate new revenue opportunities, such as developing new low-carbon products. Subsequently, if appropriate, the organisation should develop an offset strategy that purchases only high-quality offsets from verified projects that create truly additional emission reductions.

The Assembly Commission has carried out a considerable amount of work on reducing carbon emissions, and it is committed to making the environment in the Estate greener than it has been for a long time.

I shall now refer to some points that were raised by Members. Jim Wells rightly said that if Members want other people in Northern Ireland to commit to producing a greener environment, the Assembly must set an example. In addition, he said that all electricity should be generated from renewable sources. The Assembly Commission is working closely with the Carbon Trust on that issue.

12.45 pm

Cathal Boylan stated, rightly, that Assembly Members and staff have responsibilities too. Whether it is a matter of switching off lights, or whatever; the onus is on all of us to play our parts. Roy Beggs and other Members talked about the amount of printed paper that is used. The Assembly has looked at that issue in the past.

Mr Beggs and David Ford referred to the use of wind turbines, which clearly is an issue that the Assembly should consider. As someone who is well acquainted with the scheme at Antrim Area Hospital, I feel that we should examine the matter in the longer term.

David Ford also referred to the work of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The Commission works very closely with its counterparts in both institutions and is ready to take on board any new ideas that can help the environment.

Daíthí McKay has been very active on environment issues, and I recently responded to a question from him about the recycling of plastic cups. I understood every word that Jim Shannon said, because Ulster Scots

presents no difficulty to someone from east Antrim and I am very well acquainted with the language. Edwin Poots mentioned initiatives that have been introduced by Lisburn City Council, and the Commission can certainly look at those.

I wish to make two final points. First, in relation to the target of obtaining 25% of energy from renewable sources, as I have already stated to Jim Wells, the Commission is exploring opportunities to increase that percentage. Secondly, Edwin Poots raised the issue of the heating system. We are investigating the potential to upgrade Parliament Buildings's energy management system.

This has been a worthwhile and interesting debate, and I appreciate the contributions that were made by all the Members who spoke.

Mr B Wilson: I found the debate on this enormously important topic to be extremely interesting, and I thank all Members who participated in it. *[Interruption.]*

As Mr Wells pointed out, climate change is the greatest threat facing the planet, and, as other Members pointed out, we must play our part in reducing it. The present use of fossil fuels is totally unsustainable, and the Assembly must give a lead on the issue. One of the problems, during the past few months, is that the Assembly has, perhaps, been giving a lead in the wrong direction —

Mr S Wilson: The Member is always very generous in giving way, and I appreciate that. As I have said to Members in the Assembly many times; would the Member from North Down be prepared to use the excellent public transport system from Bangor to Belfast and from the railway station to the Assembly daily in order to give the sort of lead that he is talking about?

Mr B Wilson: As I have said previously, I use public transport on every possible occasion — I used public transport to commute to Belfast for 20 years. However, there is a problem. For example, a debate last night ran to 8.00 pm — how is one meant to get home on such occasions, given that the public transport is totally inadequate? If we had decent public transport, I would certainly consider using it. A problem is that the Assembly does not work regular hours, and, therefore, public transport does not fit with its working hours.

To return to my previous point; thanks to the Minister of the Environment's leadership, over the past few months the public has, perhaps, been given the view that climate change is not happening, or that people are not responsible for it.

Members must give the motion their unanimous support, recognise that climate change is happening, and agree that the Assembly will make a significant effort to reduce its contribution to the situation.

One must look at the situation at the Assembly. Over the past few years, significant efforts have been made to increase our greenness, but we lag far behind our sister legislatures in Holyrood and Wales. As some Members said, 25% of our electricity comes from renewable sources. However, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales receive 100% of their electricity from renewable sources. One can argue that the nature of the Building causes problems for our efforts to become more environmentally friendly, but the Palace of Westminster receives 100% of its energy from renewable sources, saving 2,000 tons of carbon dioxide every year. Therefore, we do not compare well with other buildings.

During his tenure as Secretary of State, Peter Hain proposed that a combined heat-and-power plant be installed for the supply of energy to the Stormont estate. I am disappointed that that did not materialise; such a development would have demonstrated considerable leadership.

A number of Members talked about installing wind turbines, which is a measure that I support. In the past six months, North Down Borough Council — of which I am a member — installed a new wind turbine that generates all the energy that the council requires for its new recycling plant and refuse collection waste-disposal station. Such measures provide the potential for making savings, and there is no reason why we should not take advantage of them.

The Stormont estate is the ideal site for wind turbines, as some Members said. It is a windy place, and we should take advantage of our natural resources.

Cathal Boylan talked about the Carbon Trust assessment, and I was glad to hear Mr Neeson say that the Commission has looked into that issue.

Several Members talked about the large volume of paper that is used in the Assembly. I am shocked at the mountains of paper that we get through, and it is important that some of the new computerisation techniques that Mr Poots mentioned are used to help us to reduce the amount of paper used.

Mr S Wilson: It has been reported to me that I have been criticised during the debate, but does the Member accept that the first person to raise concerns about the paper mountain in the Assembly was none other than myself? Will he inform the House of how the appointment of someone to yet another public-sector post — an environmental officer for the Building — will save money for the heating of the Building? Given the rates that we pay, I am sure that the post holder would be paid around £50,000.

Mr B Wilson: One council — I cannot remember which — employed such an officer to examine all its facilities. Within six months of that employee's appointment, he or she had saved the council the value of his or her pay. There is a lot of waste around; one need only walk around the Building to see it.

There are plenty of opportunities to make savings. Mr Beggs talked about the thermostatic controls of the heating system. Such controls on radiators offer the potential to bring about savings.

Mr Weir: Brian Wilson, rightly, mentioned the amount of internal correspondence in paper form that circulates through the Building. My honourable colleague Sammy Wilson was the first person to highlight that issue.

Does the Member also agree that a message must be sent out to outside bodies which send material to the Assembly? Assembly Members are quite often deluged with reports and glossy brochures, many of which are not particularly relevant to our work and could, in many cases, be emailed. Indeed, a clear signal should be sent out to the various public and private bodies throughout Northern Ireland which send vast amounts of paper to the Building.

Mr B Wilson: I totally agree. We are deluged with paper every day. If Members set an example, then others can follow. It is up to us to act first.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member take that message to his friends in the various environmental lobbies? I featured prominently in the last issue of 'Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland Newsletter' — of which I was very proud. However, I received four copies; one here, one at my constituency office in Carrickfergus, one at my constituency office in Larne and one at Westminster. Can the Member get across the message that green lobby groups should not be wasting paper?

Mr B Wilson: I take the Member's point. I received at least three copies of that issue, and regularly do so.

Mr Ford raised the issue of improving public transport to Stormont and of encouraging people to use it.

Mr Neeson talked about the improvements made by the Assembly Commission. We can see those improvements happening, but perhaps they are not happening at the same speed here as elsewhere. I welcome the appointment of an environment officer, and I welcome the fact that the Carbon Trust is carrying out a survey. There are many things to be done. The targets that we set have been met; however, I am concerned that perhaps those targets were not ambitious enough.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr B Wilson: The Assembly must send out a strong message that it will fight climate change by voting unanimously on the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Assembly Commission to draw up an action plan aimed at ensuring that all the buildings used by the Northern Ireland Assembly achieve carbon neutrality by 2015.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Private Notice Questions

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the House that I have received notice under Standing Order 20 of private notice questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety relating to matters associated with contamination of animal feed. As business has moved more quickly than expected today, the normal period of notice for Ministers cannot be met at present. I am conscious of the interest that Members have in this important issue and, therefore, propose, by leave of the House, to suspend the sitting until 4.00 pm, at which time the two private notice questions will be taken.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you confirm that the private notice questions will be the only issues that will be dealt with, and that no other matters will come before the House today?

Mr Speaker: I confirm that that will be the only business before the House this afternoon.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is now 1.00 pm. You said that the private notice questions will be taken at 4.00 pm. Surely it would have been better to have organised the questions to be taken at 2.00 pm? Most Members have an interest in those subjects, and they will have to hang around for three hours until the Ministers make their comments.

Mr Speaker: The Standing Order is clear that private notice questions are governed by the availability of the Ministers. The Ministers are not available at 2.00 pm, but they are available at 4.00 pm, which is why the sitting is being suspended until 4.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

4.00 pm

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

North/South Ministerial Council in Education Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have been advised that a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format will be held on 10 December 2008. A copy of the letter that sets out the agenda for the meeting and the names of the Ministers who will attend, has been placed in the Library.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Assessment of Public-Health Risk from Beef or Dairy Products

Mr Speaker: I have received notice of a private notice question, under Standing Order 20, for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I wish to advise the House that, generally, when dealing with private notice questions, I would call only the Member who tabled the question and the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of the relevant Committee. However, given the importance of the issues covered by today's private notice questions, I will ensure that each of the five main parties is given an opportunity to ask a supplementary question on each of the private notice questions.

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if an assessment has been made of any health risk to the public from eating beef or dairy products from animals that may have consumed potentially contaminated feed.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Currently, eight beef herds and one beef and dairy herd in Northern Ireland have been identified as having consumed contaminated feed. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has placed restrictions on those farms. The Foods Standards Agency (FSA) is, at present, carrying out a risk assessment on results obtained from the Republic of Ireland in relation to samples of beef from herds in the Republic of Ireland that consumed contaminated feed. That work is being carried out in conjunction with authorities in the Republic of Ireland. The Food Standards Agency will put in place appropriate measures based on that risk assessment.

Members will also be aware that samples have been taken from detained carcasses in Northern Ireland abattoirs that are thought to have derived from the herds in Northern Ireland that had consumed contaminated food. The results of those tests are not expected to be available until the end of the week.

With regard to dairy products, one farm has been identified as having fed contaminated feed to dairy cattle. All milk from that farm has been prevented from entering the food chain. All previous supplies of milk from that farm were sent to a single purchaser in the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland authorities are aware of that situation. Again, the public health risk will be determined when an appropriate assessment has been completed. The FSA has advised me that, at this point in time, it has no evidence to

suggest that consumers should stop eating beef. The FSA has also advised that it is safe to drink milk.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for the update on the situation, and for the comments in the latter part of his statement. How satisfied is the Minister with the levels of communication between his Department, which has responsibility for public safety, and DARD, since this communication was conveyed to one of the Ministers on Friday and since the conversation between the Health Minister and the Agriculture Minister on Sunday?

Furthermore, the Minister mentioned this morning that communications needed to be looked at. Can the Minister let us know if, by that, he means that the present system of communication between the Departments is not adequate when a crisis such as this arises?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The remark that I made was that one can always learn lessons with the benefit of hindsight. One of my concerns was the communications between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland — that was the specific issue about which I was talking — and how the information was disseminated through the Departments here. I will examine that issue because I have concerns about it. I will conduct a review of how those matters came to my attention because, as I said, I was not made aware of the situation until Sunday afternoon.

The Member asked specifically about beef products, and my point is that, at this moment in time, the Food Standards Agency is saying that there is no evidence to suggest that consumers should stop eating beef, and that milk is safe to drink.

Tests are ongoing, and samples will continue to be taken — those tests take three days to complete. The Food Standards Agency is independent of my Department, and, indeed, independent of all Northern Ireland Departments, and at the moment, after examining the evidence, the FSA has advised me that it is safe to eat meat and drink milk, and I want the House to receive that message today.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. The message that we want to send out from here today is that it is safe to eat beef and that it is safe to consume dairy products. Does the Minister agree that a degree of caution must be exercised — be that by Members, the media or spokespersons of interested organisations — because although people's best intentions may be to protect the consumer, unguarded or unconfirmed comments will only serve to damage one of our most important sectors.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At this point, I am trying to deal with the situation and the facts as they are and as I find them. In the Irish Republic, a series of tests has been conducted, the results of which showed that several premises were clear, several had animals with dioxin levels just above the safe limit, and others had animals with dioxin levels well above the safe limit. Consequently, the Irish Republic has ordered a trade withdrawal. I can confirm that, at this point, the Food Standards Agency is not asking for, or ordering, a trade withdrawal. That is an important piece of information.

We are in a changing situation. However, I emphasise that there is a very low risk to public health from contaminated animals entering the food chain; and the risk of harm to individuals that I am talking about requires long-term exposure to dioxins. Nevertheless, if test results show that we have animals with dioxin levels above the safe limit, I will not hesitate to take the appropriate steps. At this point in time, my advice is that it is safe to eat beef, that consumers should not stop eating beef, and that milk is safe to drink.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister accept that the spectacular overreaction yesterday — when pork was taken off the shelves even though no pigs had consumed contaminated material — has not engendered consumer confidence but has caused a crisis in consumer confidence, which is spreading to the meat and milk industries? The sooner that Mr McGimpsey and the FSA take actions that engender consumer confidence, the better for all of us.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The assurances that I gave in the House yesterday and today were based on advice from the independent Food Standards Agency. It is quite clear that Mr Poots is playing politics with what is an extremely serious situation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That type of politicking is reprehensible in the extreme. It is Mr Poots who is hyping the situation; not me or anyone else. Had we not taken the action that we took yesterday, Brussels would have intervened and closed down our pork industry. That is a fact. Mr Poots should make himself aware of the facts before he utters his exclamations and before he engages in cheap politicking for the benefit of a constituency that he is rapidly losing.

Mr McCallister: I declare an interest as a dairy farmer and as a shareholder in a milk processing company. I welcome the Minister's response. It is important that the Minister and other politicians keep hammering home the message that our products are safe and will continue to be safe, and that we must continue to have confidence in the Food Standards Agency.

As the Minister said yesterday, the agency was set up to give that consumer confidence. Will the Minister

comment on whether there is any question of banning the import of product from the Republic of Ireland? Furthermore, will he ensure that the Food Standards Agency gets its message absolutely crystal clear before it goes public on it, and preferably that the message goes through him and his Department?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I have said, it is an evolving situation. Yesterday, Mr Poots ironically asked a question about the advice that had been given. I read out the agency's advice, which was to recall all pork and pork products that had been sourced from the Irish Republic and to remove them from the food chain and destroy them; that is in action. It advised that a recall of pork products in Northern Ireland would be undertaken on the basis of withdrawing products from sale pending further information. That was to allow the industry to sift out product from the Irish Republic that had the potential for contamination and, therefore, needed to be recalled. Had we not taken those steps, Brussels would have intervened and closed down our pork industry. I see by Mr Poots's face that he thinks that that is funny — politicking again.

With regard to banning products from the Irish Republic, I am bound by the advice that I receive from the Food Standards Agency. It is an independent organisation — a department without a Minister — that provides expert advice.

This is an evolving situation, and I have related the advice that I have at hand today. That advice may change, but, as I have reiterated, the firm advice is that consumers should not stop eating beef, and it is safe to drink milk. All of us need to get that point across. This is an issue of consumer confidence, and everyone in the House needs to pull together rather than play politics.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his clear and unequivocal support of the industry. He has assured us that there is no threat to our health. However, if a situation ever arises that could be detrimental to the health of the people of Northern Ireland, will he take immediate and decisive action? Let us hope that such a situation never arises.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can give the Member that assurance. I act on advice that I am given, and it is independent, expert advice. I am working on the basis of the current information and advice that I am being given. If that information or advice changes, I will act appropriately.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Contaminated Feed: Cattle and Dairy Animals

Mr Speaker: I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what (i) investigations have been undertaken; and (ii) assessment has been made of whether potentially contaminated feed has been consumed by cattle or dairy animals and if there is any subsequent risk.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted that the Food Standards Agency has advised that there is no risk from pork or pork products containing only pork from the North and that processing has now resumed at our pork factories. On behalf of the Executive, I want to send out a clear message to consumers: there is no risk from pork or pork products from pigs born and raised in the North, and we look forward to having local pig meat back on shelves and tables this week.

My officials found that a number of herds containing cattle had received, and been fed, product from the affected Southern supplier. Samples were taken of the product where it was available, and they are being tested as I speak. I anticipate that we will receive the results later this week.

Those herds are restricted, and all animals that received the feed have been highlighted on our APHIS (animal and public health information system) animal traceability system so that they cannot enter the food chain without testing clear for any contaminant. Furthermore, tracings of animals from herds that have already gone to slaughter have been provided to the meat plants concerned so that they can identify any products that remain from those animals. Therefore, consumers can be confident that beef that is entering the food chain today is safe, as are pork and pork products.

4.15 pm

We have yet to receive the results of samples that were taken from animals or from feed. When those are available, they will be forwarded to the FSA for a risk assessment of any threat to public health. My Department is taking precautionary and prudent measures to protect the industry and public health while we await the results of the tests and the subsequent risk analysis.

In the South, results have been received for marker PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in beef. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland has evaluated the results of the samples taken from the 11 herds from the 45 farms

that are restricted as a result of having received contaminated feed, and is satisfied that there is no public health concern.

My Department continues to work closely with Minister McGimpsey's Department, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burns: When was the Minister first made aware that cattle in Northern Ireland may have been given contaminated feed? Why did she fail to answer PJ Bradley's question in the House yesterday? What information led her to say on the radio this morning that something had been eating contaminated feed? I presume that she meant cattle. What does the Minister know about the whereabouts of that contaminated food, and when did she know about it?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I hope that the Member is not being deliberately obtuse. I told the House a number of times that this is an evolving situation. My Department was made aware of the issue of PCBs on Friday, when the herds in question were identified. At that time, we were dealing with information from the South. I was made aware of the issue on Saturday evening, and dealt with it. My Department's officials were out investigating the problem on Monday, and that is when we received further information.

As I said in the House on Monday morning and again this morning, the situation is evolving. My Department's inspectors are conducting investigations and taking samples, and more information is coming back. Every time we answer questions or talk to the media, new information becomes available. As I sat down here today, I received information that Grampian Country Pork in Cookstown has begun slaughtering again, and Tesco is putting products back on its shelves.

The situation is evolving, and from that point of view, new information will be regularly available. Therefore, as I said already, I can only be as clear and transparent as I can with Members on the basis that information is coming to me and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on a frequent basis. We will continue to update the House as we get that information. However, we cannot give the House information that we do not have ourselves.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I am disappointed in Mr McGimpsey's attempt to score a party political point. It is not worthy of such a serious situation.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I welcome the Minister's statement. It is very important to have a clear assurance that Northern Ireland pig products are safe to eat. I am also delighted that meat and milk have been declared safe for people to eat and drink.

At the end of his remarks, Mr Burns talked about contaminated food. Will the Minister confirm that there is no contaminated food? Contaminated feed was brought into Northern Ireland; there is no contaminated food. Therefore, we should be heralding from the rafters that Northern Ireland pig products are safe to eat. From the farm to the fork, we should be saying:

"Get it on the shelf, get it on the plate and get it in your belly." *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I welcome the Chairperson's comments. It is good that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and I have had a positive response from both Committee Chairpersons. We must work together on this issue. We are on the same side, and we must get the same message across. It is important that we now encourage consumers to get back to buying pork products.

To reiterate Mr McGimpsey's point, had we not acted over the weekend as we did, the European authorities would have closed us down, and that would have created serious difficulties for our pork industry. Prudent and measured responses were made in light of the situation, and we have done everything that we can to support our industries.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We must all generate confidence in our quality products. We should not be scaremongering or playing party politics with what is a very serious issue. The agriculture industry operates on an all-island basis; therefore, it is in everyone's interest that Members work closely with their Southern counterparts in the Dáil to generate that confidence. Does the Minister agree?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I agree with the Member. Contact has been ongoing throughout, and that contact has assisted us in dealing with the matter swiftly and decisively. The all-island nature of the agriculture industry is undeniable, and we must ensure that proper structures are in place and that communication continues. We are doing that, and we will continue do so. We certainly cannot deny the amount of all-Ireland movement of livestock that takes place. We must ensure that communication continues and that structures are in place, both for the safety of our products and for the confidence of our consumers.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her reply. Given the traceability system for animals that operates in Northern Ireland, what progress has been made with the supermarkets at this very early stage to ensure that Northern Ireland produce — pork, in particular — is

put back on the shelves without any further delay? That is the key to dealing with the matter.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Traceability systems are in place. As I said, supermarkets are putting products back on the shelves as we speak. Obviously, we must work closely with the Food Standards Agency, which is the decision-making body involved. It makes decisions based on the information that my Department provides. Therefore, I am content that robust traceability mechanisms are in place, that supermarkets are putting products back on the shelves and that people can begin to eat their fries again tomorrow morning.

Mr Ford: I also thank the Minister and, indeed, her staff, both in the Chamber and on the ground, who have done the necessary work over the past few days.

At this stage, the most important action to be taken is to restore consumer confidence. The Minister has been able to report on the significant progress that has been made in the 24 hours since she made a statement in the House. Therefore, can she assure the House that, despite the fact that there was one failing in the South in recent months, her inspectors are making every effort to ensure that the most robust standards are being enforced for the safety of animal and human health in Northern Ireland at this time?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I thank the Member for his question. Part of the success that we have achieved came from the fact that local Ministers were able to take swift and decisive action. Ultimately, that is what has saved the industry from a potentially very damaging situation. Local people took action at the weekend and alerted the appropriate bodies about the situation. Everyone who was involved worked very hard, and I commend them for that.

That is the kind of joined-up partnership working that we need in order to better the future of our industries in the North and our people. We can take a positive out of what could have been a very negative situation. We can learn lessons, and we can always do better. In this case, local Ministers were the key to success.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Redeployment of Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Jobs from Derry/Londonderry

Mrs M Bradley: I ask the House that the Adjournment topic not be debated, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The Member has indicated that she no longer wishes to raise the matter.

Adjourned at 4.24 pm.

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