
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 24 March 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and
Investment (Mrs Foster):** I beg to move

That the Draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

The statutory rule is being made under powers contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the 2009 Order must be laid in draft for approval by an affirmative resolution of the Assembly. The Order under discussion today is the culmination of a programme of work that involved close consultation with industry and other stakeholders on the development of the policy on renewable energy.

The changes were subject to a statutory consultation process that closed in December 2008. The primary powers for the amendments were established through the Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, which was approved by the Assembly in January 2009. The Order introduces important changes to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO). By making NIRO more efficient and effective, the changes will better enable us to meet the targets on renewable electricity.

Similar changes are also being made to the renewable obligations in Scotland, England and Wales. The renewable obligations work in harmony across the United Kingdom, and, therefore, it is important that all changes are made at the same time.

Renewable energy is a vital part of the Department's strategy to tackle the two major challenges of ensuring a secure supply of energy for Northern Ireland and combating climate change. As Northern Ireland's main mechanism for encouraging new renewable electricity generation, it is crucial that NIRO is as effective as possible, and it has been successful so far. When NIRO was introduced in 2005, just under 3% of electricity

produced in Northern Ireland was renewable. Today, 7% of electricity produced and consumed in Northern Ireland is renewable, which is a higher percentage than ever before.

However, NIRO must deliver even more. I will soon consult on a new strategic energy framework that will contain proposals to set higher targets for renewable electricity, which is vital in securing Northern Ireland's energy supply and combating climate change.

The draft Order that is under consideration makes some fundamental changes to the NIRO, which will allow it to bring forward a higher level of renewables generation from a wide range of sources. The most significant of those changes is the introduction of banding. The NIRO was designed originally as a technology-neutral instrument, intended to pull through the most economic forms of renewable generation. It has delivered on that, and is proving to be particularly successful in bringing forward technologies such as onshore wind. However, it is never wise to rely wholly on one technology and to put all our eggs in one energy basket. That is why we do not rely solely on one fuel for conventional power generation, and it is also why we need a greater contribution from other renewable technologies.

Banding will enable us to provide higher levels of support to technologies that are further from market. Currently, each megawatt hour of eligible generation is awarded one renewables obligation certificate (ROC). A banded NIRO will mean that different technologies will get different numbers of ROCs. For example, anaerobic digestion will receive more ROCs than onshore wind. Furthermore, all microgenerators — defined as those that will generate a capacity of up to 50 kilowatts — will receive two ROCs for each megawatt hour, irrespective of technology.

Many Members will know that my Department consulted on keeping one ROC per megawatt hour for landfill gas in Northern Ireland, whereas the rest of the UK is banding down to one quarter ROC per megawatt hour. The consultation response has supported that position because of the relative lack of development of landfill gas compared with the rest of the UK where landfill gas is highly developed. It was on that basis that we in Northern Ireland applied for EU state-aid clearance. Unfortunately, that clearance was not forthcoming in the time frame available. However, because of the need to bring the revised NIRO in together with the other renewables obligations in the UK from 1 April, we have to lay the Order on the basis of the quarter ROC until we can get state-aid clearance.

Should EU state-aid clearance be forthcoming — and I am confident that it will be — it is my intention to lay a further Order to amend the banding

of landfill gas up to one ROC per megawatt hour at the earliest opportunity thereafter.

We are not alone in that position. Many Members will be aware that Scotland has proposed higher bands for wave and tidal power than the rest of the UK. It has also not received state-aid clearance in time and has had to lay its legislation on the basis of the GB position. I know that many Members will question why Northern Ireland is also not aiming for higher ROCs for tidal stream and wave power. We do not have the power here to issue ROCs for offshore generation. That power is exercised by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in Westminster, but I intend to discuss the position with DECC at the earliest opportunity.

If we are able to amend the legislation so that offshore generation is eligible for Northern Ireland ROCs, I will consider the appropriate level of support for those technologies as part of the programme of work under the offshore wind and marine renewable strategic action plan, which will be issued for consultation in the autumn.

The banding levels in the Order were based on research into the costs and market potential of each technology type, and the Order details a process for the banding levels to be periodically reviewed. That balances the need to provide investors with a stable support framework while ensuring that we can respond to market developments, so that the banding levels continue to provide the right level of incentive for project developers. That is very important.

In addition to banding, we are making a number of small technical and administrative changes to the Order. We have addressed that issue through previous amendments to the NIRO, and we are now making further improvements to the administrative requirements for microgenerators, to remove the barriers to participation in the NIRO, which some small generators face.

Technologies such as wind often get most of the coverage in these debates, but we also have the potential to generate electricity from biomass and waste. Many Members are rightly concerned about the sustainability of those fuels, and I recognise those issues. However, to ensure that the UK as a whole has a better understanding of the issue, the Order introduces a sustainability reporting requirement on all but the smallest generators who use biomass.

To protect investment decisions made on the information available at the time, we are committed to the principle of grandfathering. Subject to certain exceptions, stations in existence when the proposal to introduce banding was announced will continue to receive one ROC per megawatt hour.

I believe that the costs of administering the renewables obligation will be better met by those who

actually participate in the scheme and who will therefore benefit from the changes that we are introducing. That is the reason that a further change is being made to the NIRO, in that the costs of the administration of the scheme will be met from the buy-out fund rather than from public funds. That is a change from the current situation.

The proposed amendments to the NIRO are important for the long-term future of its operation and to the long-term future of renewable electricity in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Ms J McCann):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considered proposals to replace The Renewables Obligation (NI) Order 2007. It noted the proposed introduction of banding, which would permit the different renewable technologies to be grouped into separate bands, with the result that different levels of support would be offered, depending on the cost of the technology that is involved.

The Committee expressed the wider concern, which was repeated in the Assembly in January 2009, that the renewables obligation certificates here and the renewable electricity feed-in tariffs in the South are not compatible. Therefore, it seems somewhat wrong to suggest that we have a single-electricity market, when the two schemes to provide incentives for generating renewable electricity result in operators on one side of the border not being able to avail themselves of incentives to provide electricity to suppliers on the other side of the border. As Committee members stated in January, the Committee will keep a close watch on that matter.

Following a briefing from departmental officials on the outcome of the consultation and consideration of the proposals on 5 February 2009, the Committee subsequently considered the draft Renewables Obligation (NI) Order 2009 on 12 March 2009. The Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the draft Order. Go raibh maith agat

Mr Hamilton: I support the draft Order. It is important to do so, and I acknowledge the success of the renewables obligation in general. It has helped us to tap into our widely recognised renewable energy potential in Northern Ireland and to make progress towards achieving the target of having 12% of our energy come from renewables by 2012. The renewables obligation will also set the context for growing that potential further in the future.

The Minister and the previous Member to speak pointed out that the introduction of banding and allocating different quantities of ROCs for different types of renewable energies is the major change that

the proposals will make to the renewables obligation. There was some concern in the Committee — which I shared — about the potential of wave energy. As the Minister said, whenever we discuss renewables, we are somewhat fascinated by windmills and the potential of wind energy; however, there is great potential in Northern Ireland to produce offshore wave energy. There was concern that Scotland had sought to award more renewables obligation certificates for wave energy than would be available in Northern Ireland. However, the Assembly will be pleased to know that the European Union did not grant that derogation to Scotland, meaning that Scotland has no particular advantage over us in that respect because the ROCS that will be awarded there will remain at the same level as those that will be awarded in Northern Ireland.

I have spoken to some in the wave-energy industry who are seeking to tap into that potential. They said that they view investment in grid infrastructure as being much more important than the numbers of ROCs that they receive. Although Scotland may have equal or greater offshore wave-energy potential than we do in Northern Ireland, it tends to be located beyond the reach of the marketplace. Although that potential exists in Scotland, it is hard to get the energy that is produced to consumers quickly.

The Minister also mentioned the ongoing strategic energy framework review. I hope that in tandem with that review, the narrow proposed changes to the NIRO will strengthen and create investment in the grid and further tap into our very obvious renewable energy potential. That will ensure that Northern Ireland will not only be able to reach, but surpass the 12% target by 2012 and develop renewable forms of energy to ever greater levels in the future.

10.45 am

Mr Neeson: I welcome the draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has considered the Order and is very much in favour of it. In the present climate, it is important that we maximise the use of renewables. As the Minister rightly pointed out, however, we need to sort out the issue of renewables obligation certificates.

I am disappointed at the Environment Minister's attitude to wind power. Wind power is a major asset that we have in not only Northern Ireland, but in the island of Ireland, and the Republic is, in many ways, clearly forging ahead much more than Northern Ireland in the development of wind power. It is important that we maximise the potential of that energy source.

As well as maximising the use of wind power, it is important that we develop tidal and wave power. Furthermore, the use of biomass for electricity generation is an issue that needs to be developed. In

the first mandate after devolution, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment visited Denmark to explore how various materials are used to develop energy and electricity. In particular, I remember our visit to a plant in Copenhagen, which generated electricity from waste. That process is being considered by Belfast City Council, and it should be given serious consideration. Although I recognise that certain elements of the green lobby are opposed to that, it is worthy of serious consideration, and should be developed.

Furthermore, in the current economic climate, the Assembly and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) should follow the lead that has been taken by President Obama in developing the green economy, because there are opportunities for us to develop the green economy.

As the Minister is aware, the Committee has been considering the security of supply, whether of electricity or natural gas. That is why I am considering with interest the developments of the storage of natural gas. As the Minister is well aware, a location in my East Antrim constituency is being surveyed for its viability as a potential gas storage facility. I hope that there will be a successful outcome to that survey and that that security of supply for natural gas will be provided for Northern Ireland, as has happened in so many other parts of the United Kingdom.

I welcome the draft Order, and I look forward to its implementation.

Dr Farry: I did not, perhaps, expect to be called to speak so quickly — two Alliance Members in a row. It is disappointing that there has not been more debate on this topic in the Chamber. We are progressing what is, in effect, a piece of legislation, which will have a practical impact on society in Northern Ireland. Later this morning, we will be discussing a private Member's motion on climate change. Worthy as it is, it is still a non-binding resolution, and, no doubt, we will discuss it for an hour and a half, as we do all private Member's motions.

The motion that we are debating has practical importance, but, so far, only five Members have spoken in the debate. That is disappointing, and strange with regard to the priorities of parties in how they are approaching the matter.

Like my colleague, I welcome and support the draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009. It is important that we move forward on the basis of that Order and that we, as an Assembly, are open to a wide range of potential sources of renewable energy and do not close our minds to any of them. Although I am an environmentalist I am also a pragmatist, and I recognise that there are different opinions and options on the table.

My main concern is that although we are moving forward on the renewables obligation with respect to electricity generators, we must be aware of the wider context in which we are working and the importance of joined-up Government. There are concerns about what is happening elsewhere in Government, particularly in the planning system, in relation to renewable energy. Although today we are, quite rightly, asking more from electricity generators, there are concerns that the planning system is not keeping up to speed with respect to giving generators the tools they need in order to provide the infrastructure that will meet the new obligations that we are asking of them.

There are concerns about draft Planning Policy Statement 18, particularly the supplementary guidance arising from that in relation to the potential for the size and scope of wind turbines. There are concerns also about the areas in Northern Ireland where such turbines could potentially be located.

It is my understanding that there is sufficient interest in wind power and that there is potential for wind turbines, placed at different locations in Northern Ireland, to meet the different targets that we, as a society, are setting ourselves. However, it seems that the infrastructure for that may not be put in place because of the way in which our planning policy is going to be structured, never mind the speed of decision making in the planning system.

In essence, I make a plea for more joined-up Government in dealing with such matters. I respect the leadership that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has shown, but there is a need for better joined-up Government and better co-ordination in the Executive and between the different Departments with responsibility for renewable energy, so that Northern Ireland can have a more rounded solution and can move forward successfully.

I note that the United Kingdom is thirteenth in the European league table of wind energy capacity per capita. Given our geographical location, we have a lot of potential to move up the table. Countries such as Denmark and Spain are well ahead of us, but other countries, which may not have the same geographical advantages as us, are doing better than us on a per capita basis. That should drive us on to do a lot better. Even in the context of the UK, Northern Ireland is behind the other regions. Those facts point to the work that is required of us.

Although we can pass this Order today, it has to be seen as one part of a much wider debate. Major questions must be asked about what other parts of Government are doing, as that will enable us to meet the challenges as a whole.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I have a couple of issues to bring to her

attention that I would appreciate a response to, if possible. Renewable energy is important to us all. I will focus on wind farms, because I believe that that source of renewable energy can bring direct advantages for many people and can help the Minister and the Assembly achieve their targets.

This morning, I heard on the news that the RSPB has made a statement about wind farms. It said that it is not against them providing they are not located in environmentally sensitive areas, particularly areas that are important for bird life. Has the Minister had time to examine the statement? If so, what are her feelings in relation to it?

Some time ago, when I was wearing my other hat as a member of Ards Borough Council, comments were made to us about putting wind farms on Strangford Lough.

One of my concerns — which is fairly rich coming from a person who shoots ducks — is that if wind farms were placed strategically in Strangford Lough they could probably do more harm to the wildfowl than Jim Shannon could ever do with a 12 bore, and, for that reason, I thought that this morning's statement from the RSPB was important. I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say about that. It would appear that there could be a meeting of minds and, if that were possible, we should look at how that could be brought forward.

My final point relates to the financial incentives to farmers and landowners who are trying to diversify. Wind farms may be one way in which they can diversify, generate an income, not hurt the environment, and be sensitive to their neighbours as regards the noise from wind farms. What are the incentives for landowners, farmers — and everyone — to look after the environment?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank those Members who contributed to the debate. I am particularly grateful to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for its support and patience through the long process of bringing in these changes to the NIRO, and for its contribution today through the Deputy Chairperson.

The Deputy Chairperson mentioned an issue that I knew would come up — the difference between the feed-in tariff and the NIRO. Although I understand the view that she expressed on behalf of the Committee, it was not the view expressed by the majority of consultees, and it did not come out of the consultation either. I can see the logic of the Deputy Chairperson's and the Committee's argument about the single electricity market and, because of that, I said that we will keep watch on that and do all that we can to tie it up.

However, we must also be cognisant of those people who have invested in renewable energy here on the basis that a renewables obligation system is in place

and, therefore, they will take advantage from that. It would send out a negative signal to people who have made investment decisions if one were to start chopping and changing the system, and I do not want Northern Ireland to be seen as a risky place in which to invest in renewables — that is the last message that we want to send out. We need more renewable energy. I will not do anything to jeopardise that, and I know that the Committee will understand that position.

Mr Hamilton referred to the potential of renewable energy and the role of the NIRO in incentivising that, and he is absolutely right. There is potential in wave energy. That is one of the reasons why I will be discussing our territorial waters with the Department in Westminster in order to see what can be done on that issue. The ‘Northern Ireland Strategic Energy Framework 2009’ is a hugely important document. I hope that, when we consult on that document, people will become involved in the consultation.

Mr Neeson said that we should maximise the use of renewables. However, wind power is “not the only fruit”. We recognise the importance of wind power — we did so, in particular, in the past when we started to look at renewable energy — but we must look at the wider picture. We cannot put all our eggs in one basket, and that is why the banding proposals are coming forward today. Mr Neeson talked about the landfill gas, and that is one reason why energy from waste will receive one ROC. We believe that it is important to incentivise different types of renewable energy.

I was a little disappointed by comments that were made at the Alliance Party conference at the weekend, which suggested that we were not engaged with the green economy. I dispute that wholeheartedly. The Member will know the reason for that, because part of the focus of our new interdepartmental working group on sustainable energy is on the green economy and on looking for new opportunities for green jobs. Mr Neeson mentioned gas storage and compressed air. He will know about the opportunities that are available for that in Larne Lough, and we want to develop such things.

I agree with Dr Farry that it is hugely disappointing that neither the Ulster Unionist Party nor the SDLP thought it worthwhile to speak on this important piece of legislation.

I can only conclude that they would rather propose a private Member’s motion. That is a stunt, whereas this piece of legislation will make a real impact on renewable energy. It is disappointing to note that this morning,

11.00 am

In relation to draft Planning Policy Statement 18, the draft supplementary planning guidance raised a number of concerns about some elements of the wind-farm industry. My Department is proactively working with the Department of the Environment, and

Mr Farry knows that it is a balancing act between protecting very beautiful rural landscapes and giving impetus to renewable energies. When the SPG is produced, I hope that it will be a balanced document that will take into account everything that we have said about renewable energies and wind farms.

Dr Farry: I am certainly encouraged by the Minister’s comments. Does she agree that wind farms could, in some cases, enhance the landscape of Northern Ireland in that people would see them as a sign of progress and engagement with the environment?

The landscape is never a constant: it is always evolving. Although there are some very sensitive areas of Northern Ireland, a wind farm on a hilltop — in other areas — could be seen as a source of pride.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: If the Member had listened to the Member who spoke after him, he would appreciate the difficulties with which we must deal because wind farms are a subjective issue. I did not think that I would ever hear Mr Shannon wanting to protect the birds of Strangford. *[Laughter.]* He wanted to ensure that Strangford Lough — which is an environmentally sensitive area — was protected. It is important that the draft supplementary planning guidance achieves the right balance, which is why we have engaged with the Department of the Environment. When the final document is published, I have every reason to be confident that it will deal with some of the objections that have been made thus far.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that the Order will contribute to the further development of the renewables sector in Northern Ireland. It will also support the higher levels of renewable electricity that are needed to reduce carbon emissions and — importantly — to secure our energy supply. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General

The Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Gardiner): I beg to move

That this Assembly determines that the salary to be paid, under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, shall be the amount recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable for that year to the judiciary at salary group 5.

First, I apologise for the absence of the Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Unfortunately, he had another engagement that clashed with this morning's debate. He sends his apologies.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee, I introduce the motion that is tabled in the Chairperson's name on behalf of the Committee. The governing legislation for the Comptroller and Auditor General's salary is the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, which allows for the salary to be fixed by resolution of the Assembly. The annual salary increase is payable on 1 April 2009. Therefore, a resolution must be agreed by the Assembly on or before that date.

In 2008, the Assembly agreed that Standing Order 58 should provide a mechanism to update the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General annually. Accordingly, it falls to the Audit Committee to review how the salary will be determined and to propose a motion to the Assembly that recommends what it deems to be a reasonable increase for the year.

The motion proposes that the Assembly should resolve to pay the Comptroller and Auditor General a salary for 2009-2010 that is in line with the Senior Salaries Review Body's recommendations for the judicial group 5 rate. The Senior Salaries Review Body is an independent body, and its report is currently being scrutinised at Westminster.

During suspension, it was agreed by the Audit Committee, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Comptroller and Auditor General that the salary should be linked to the judicial group 5 rate. That decision has been endorsed by the Committee in successive years after consideration of the following factors: section 65(6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides that the Assembly cannot reduce the salary payable to the Comptroller and Auditor General; in addition, the salary must be less than the highest salary paid to a public servant in Northern Ireland.

The Committee reviewed those parameters and the increases recommended by the Senior Salaries Review Body in previous years. The Committee concluded that the judicial group 5 rate was a reasonable benchmark for the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Senior Salaries Review Body report on judicial salaries for 2009-2010 has not yet been published. Therefore, the motion provides that the salary increase should be paid retrospectively to 1 April 2009 once the recommendation is published. The report will be placed in the Assembly Library as soon as it becomes available. The Audit Committee has undertaken to review this arrangement when the current Comptroller and Auditor General retires later this year.

In agreeing this motion, Members will be maintaining an agreement that the Audit Committee has fully scrutinised and with which its members are unanimously content.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly determines that the salary to be paid, under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, shall be the amount recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable for that year to the judiciary at salary group 5.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Act on CO2 Advertising Campaign

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign. A valid petition of concern in respect of that motion was presented earlier today. Having checked the petition, the Speaker regarded it as fulfilling the requirements of Standing Order 28. However, the presentation of that petition means that the vote on the motion may not be held at the conclusion of today's debate. At its lunchtime meeting today, the Business Committee will consider when the vote on the motion will be taken.

Members should also note that the vote on the motion will be taken on a cross-community basis. However, the petition does not affect the amendment, and the vote on the amendment may proceed today. Members who wish to inspect the petition of concern may do so at the Business Office.

Members may, of course, contribute to the debate itself. 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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McClarty: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the attempt by the Minister of the Environment to block the Department of Energy and Climate Change advertising campaign Act on CO2; further notes that the position is contrary to the targets set out in the Programme for Government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to remove his opposition to the Act on CO2 advertising campaign.

The following are not my words, but the words of Senator John McCain, the most recent Republican candidate for the American presidency:

"I know that climate change is real. We can have a debate about how serious it is, but the debate about climate change is over."

It can be said that the Republican Party has, for some time, maintained a healthy scepticism about man-made climate change. However, in light of the growing weight of scientific evidence, its members now realise that to deny climate change, sit on their hands and do nothing is logically and morally wrong.

Our Environment Minister has tried to paint a picture that anyone who proclaims that climate change is real, man-made and a threat is a confused ideologue intent on destroying our economy. It is patent nonsense to adopt such a position: the Minister of the Environment is single-handedly isolating Northern Ireland on this key issue, and he is making us all look like dangerous radicals.

That view is shared by many people including Neil Adger, an expert on climate-change adaptation from Northern Ireland who is now based at the University of East Anglia's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. He has stated that the basis science is so clear and unambiguous that anyone denying it is either a fool or is deliberately misleading others for political or other ends. That opinion is backed up by David King, the UK Government's former chief scientific adviser, and Gabrielle Walker, who have stated that people who question the evidence:

"either have a vested interest in ignoring the scientific arguments or they are fools."

Those people are not ideologues, and they are not left-wing radicals. They are scientists and commentators who have based their opinions on the available evidence and facts. Most of all, they are pragmatists who recognise the long-term danger that climate change poses for the United Kingdom's economy and security; they are pragmatists who recognise the long-term human cost of doing nothing, and they are pragmatists who realise that people in the developing world will pay the heaviest price for the ostrich impersonations of people such as Mr Wilson.

I am beginning to wonder why we should expect anything more from a DUP Minister. We are becoming increasingly aware that that party has no vision for the future as it repeatedly exalts and practises economic and fiscal short-termism. Indeed, the DUP has more in common with the Scottish Nationalist Party than with genuine unionists, and it appears to think that it is either above, or immune to, scientific and public opinion.

Minister Wilson's opposition to the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change's (DECC) advertising campaign is perhaps the most ludicrous and dangerous development in his radicalism. The advertisements urge people and businesses to reduce energy consumption and cut carbon emissions. That seems to be the most positive and beneficial of messages that any Government could produce. Indeed, it is directly in line with the Executive's targets and the message they delivered to the public. In their Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive state:

"It is clear that climate change is one of the most serious problems facing the world. While we recognise that it requires action internationally, we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change ... our carbon footprint is relatively high and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the longer-term."

It appears that no one told Sammy.

There are also targets to reduce greenhouse gas 25% below 1990 levels by 2025. Minister Wilson blatantly contradicted the Executive's policies on climate change in a letter to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. That raises serious issues about ministerial collective responsibility and the ministerial

code. In the system of government that we work under, does the Minister have the right to act as he did?

The Act on CO2 adverts have the objective and potential to reduce our carbon emissions and save families and businesses money, but Mr Wilson called them an “insidious propaganda campaign”. His party colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, gives money to the Carbon Trust in order to increase businesses’ energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions — does the Minister of the Environment consider that to be an insidious waste of resources? What does he think of the £18 million that such initiatives saved local businesses in Northern Ireland last year?

11.15 am

Minister Wilson has been quoted as saying:

“As the world recession bites, countries are looking at what is practical in terms of keeping their economies going, as opposed to what the environmentalists might like.”

The Minister has badly misjudged the international community, the business community and the UK Government. The CBI recently criticised the UK Government for not doing enough to lead the way in low-carbon technologies. It stated:

“With increasing globalisation, the UK has an opportunity to enter and lead in new markets estimated at \$1 trillion.”

It went on to state:

“The UK needs to act now if it is to be a low-carbon leader.”

The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced that he expects that the green economy will create 400,000 new jobs in the next eight years, and Barack Obama has pledged billions of dollars to ensure that green energy forms part of America’s economic resurgence. Left to Minister Wilson, Northern Ireland will be absent when opportunities arise.

Mr Wilson and his DUP colleagues have been naysayers, scaremongers, critics and Back-Benchers all their political lives. Mr Wilson has not yet realised that he is a Minister with responsibilities, an expectant public and a Department. London and Brussels are setting high environmental standards which, regardless of whether the Minister agrees with them, we must implement. His antiquated position on climate change makes the work of his Department and officials extremely difficult and, I am sure, embarrassing at times. However, he has already shown through his criticism of the Planning Service that he is not scared to transfer his own failings onto his staff.

Minister Wilson, writing — on behalf of us all — to Ed Miliband, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, said that the advertising campaign promotes anthropogenic climate-change gospel, which is contrary to his views as Minister of the Environment in Northern Ireland. He went on to say that he does not

believe that man-made greenhouse-gas emissions are the main cause of climate change, and that he does not believe that the Act on CO2 messaging should appear in Northern Ireland. He also went on to say that language should be tempered where possible to take into account local difference in opinion.

The only differences of opinion in this place are between the Minister and his own party manifesto; the Minister and the Programme for Government; the Minister and this Assembly; and the Minister and the public at large. The Minister should withdraw his opposition to the advertising campaign which would help us meet our agreed and binding targets and also help families and businesses alike to save money. The Minister’s opposition highlights the worst form of blinkered Northern Ireland nationalism and the worst type of arrogance possible. Despite the overwhelming evidence, he believes that everyone else is wrong and that he is right.

Richard Girling, writing in ‘The Times’, correctly highlighted:

“Those on Planet Exxon are beyond the pull of reason.”

I support the motion.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and, mindful of the Environment Committee’s vote of no confidence in the Minister of the Environment, calls on the Executive to launch a cross-departmental advertising campaign on climate change aimed at achieving the Programme for Government environmental protection targets.”

There are two main points to the amendment. First, there is the matter of the vote of no confidence in the Minister that was passed at the Environment Committee and, secondly, the need for a cross-departmental approach to the issue of climate change.

When the vote of no confidence was passed, the Minister’s colleagues rushed quickly out of the meeting to tell the media that —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not. Mr Weir was among those Members who rushed out to tell the media that this was —

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I am sure the media will confirm, any discussions that I had or interview that I gave took place after the meeting was over. Is it in order for the Member to deliberately mislead the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. The Member should resume his seat.

Mr T Clarke: On a point of order. The question is — *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, are you going to rule on a Member shouting from a sedentary

position? The question is this: is it in order for the Member to deliberately mislead the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is not misleading the House. There is no evidence to say one way or the other; it is a point of view.

Mr Gallagher: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The DUP spokespersons tried to dismiss that vote of no confidence as a political game or stunt. To refresh everybody's minds, I will read from the Programme for Government:

"We are becoming increasingly aware of both the global and local threats to our natural and built environments. It is clear that climate change is one of the most serious problems facing the world. While we recognise that it requires action internationally, we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge."

One of the ways in which we can do that is by reducing our impact on climate change.

"We have the lowest levels on these islands of electricity generated from renewable sources and our carbon footprint is relatively high and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the longer-term. At a local level, therefore, action is needed to protect our built heritage, our landscape and marine environment and to reduce our impact on climate change."

That was one of the reasons behind the vote of no confidence in the Minister.

Climate change resulting from greenhouse gas emissions is now a universally accepted reality. The signs are all around us — warmer temperatures; extreme weather, and we know all too well about melting glaciers and the impact that that has on animal and plant life cycles. In the face of overwhelming evidence about that link, our Environment Minister has, on so many occasions, rejected the fact that climate change has been man-made. He has allied himself with the sceptics and made himself and his Department appear silly and irrelevant at times. It is a stance that has alarmed many people who realise that there is a serious problem and has alarmed all of the people who care passionately about the environment and the consequences of climate change — consequences which they see as catastrophic.

The sceptics argue that the earth's climate has always changed and that it is no different now. That is true; however, it is not an argument against the change that we are experiencing and that is a direct result of the actions of humans and the resulting carbon emissions. The climate does not change spontaneously. There has always been some driver behind the change. For example, the ice age came to an end because the sun moved closer to the earth. There is nothing like that to explain — *[Interruption.]* There are no natural drivers behind the change in climate. For the benefit of the Minister, I will state, once again, that there are no natural drivers powerful enough to produce the level of warming that we have experienced. I refer to a lead author from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change, who is also a professor at the University of East Anglia. He said:

"Anyone who disputes these facts is either a fool or seeking deliberately to mislead for political or other purposes."

Our neighbouring Governments in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have joined with most of the industrial countries across the world to tackle climate change. They are making efforts to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and to cut back on carbon emissions. Their Government spokespersons are putting out messages such as that all of us have to change our habits and reduce our carbon footprint if we are to save the environment. Their environment Ministers, in particular, are reinforcing those messages.

As elected representatives, we have a responsibility. How can we ask householders to cutback and to become more energy efficient if we do not send out a strong message? How can we expect the big companies to fall into line and to comply with their requirements? It is time for a serious approach across all Departments, not just the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In a previous debate, I voiced the concerns of the Chief Medical Officer. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development also has a huge responsibility for forests and trees and the role that they can play in mitigating the impact of climate change.

I wish to consider the economic advantages of tackling climate change and reducing emissions. Recently, a study on that topic was carried out by Queen's University, which stated:

"As the UK economy moves towards a low carbon economy, Greenhouse Gas performance and efficiencies will become increasingly important to regional competitiveness."

The study looked at the competitiveness of the four countries of the UK and found that the English economy was the most efficient and, therefore, the most economically competitive. That link has been well established. Scotland was the next most efficient, followed by Northern Ireland, so we have room for improvement. The economic downturn presents an opportunity, and other Governments have already availed themselves of that opportunity. The potential of renewables from wind sources, the sun and crops such as biomass is untapped.

The "green new deal" that was announced by the President of the United States brings an opportunity to put people back to work, as has already been mentioned by the proposer of the motion. In recent months, our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland launched a scheme to make homes across the entire country more energy efficient and created 200,000 jobs as part of that initiative at a time when job losses are at such a serious level.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I am not giving way.

The conclusions of the Queen's University study are worth further consideration. The study states:

"those regions that will be most competitive will be those that are able to outperform other regions, in terms of a higher production of goods and services per unit of GHG impacts."

It also states:

"In the not-so-distant future, the efficiency with which GHG emissions are used will be a fundamentally important determinant of competitiveness. Countries and regions with low GHG efficiencies may therefore find themselves at a disadvantage."

Therefore, it is important for the Assembly to adopt the motion as amended as a first step. I thank the House for its consideration, and I ask Members to support the motion as amended.

Mr Weir: I have the difficult job of following the expert dissertation in astrophysics from the Member who just spoke. I am sure that, if they were alive today, Galileo and Copernicus would be green with envy at his grasp of the subject. I will make my remarks fairly quickly — not only because I have only five minutes, but because I want to avoid the dangers of a moving sun hitting me. *[Laughter.]*

I am disappointed by the motion, but, given its source, I am not particularly surprised. That is the level of "stuntery" that one would expect from the Members who proposed it.

The motion is not about the commitment of the Executive to carbon reduction and to combating climate change, because that is clear and unchanged. The commitments and actions that are taken by various Departments are clear-cut. Under my colleague Arlene Foster, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has a group on sustainable energy. Work is going on between all Departments, including the Department of the Environment (DOE), to bring those commitments about. There is an issue over whether all Departments are fully pulling their weight, but it is clear that the motion is not about that.

11.30 am

Nor, indeed, is the issue about trying to ban any advert. Had the mover and co-signatory of the motion actually listened to what the Minister said to the Committee, they would know that he stated clearly that not only had he not banned the ad, he had not tried to ban it. The motion is, therefore, not factually accurate on that basis.

Nor, indeed, is the motion about preserving energy or about trying to prevent people knowing about energy efficiency. We already have the Energy Saving Trust's adverts, which run alongside others.

I believe that the motion is motivated by the same stuntery that we saw in the Committee when the motion of no confidence was proposed. Indeed, its

motivation comes from an ever-more-desperate Conservative grouping that sits on other Benches. That group is more concerned about vote reduction than about carbon reduction. It is less concerned about landslides in the developing world than the landslide in East Antrim in 2005. That is the real motivation behind the motion: it is a blatant attempt at point-scoring. I will give it credit, however, for giving the Assembly the opportunity to debate the issue that is truly behind the matter, which is the right of the Assembly and the Executive to pursue campaigns on their own accord.

The fact is that the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr Weir: Had Members — particularly those who sit on the Committee — actually listened to the Minister instead of wanting constantly to talk, they would have realised that he sought a Northern Ireland campaign on the issue. He objected to only one item in the advert and to the attempt by the Westminster Department concerned to impose it on other parts of the United Kingdom. Wales and Scotland objected in exactly the same way; indeed, they are pursuing their own campaigns.

On that issue — as well as on other devolved matters, such as road safety — the Assembly is entitled to pursue its own campaign. Road-safety campaigns do not happen simply by accident: they are tried and tested, and indeed, market tested, in order to determine the most effective message for Northern Ireland. The fact is that there has been no opportunity to do so with regard to climate change. Act on CO2 is simply an attempt to impose a one-size-fits-all approach throughout the UK. It was resisted by Wales and Scotland, and indeed, no similar campaign has been put in place in the Republic of Ireland.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I appreciate that the Member has given way. He will be pleased to note that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has now started to swing round to my point of view. Such has been the opposition in England to the Act on CO2 brand that the ad now has to include the strapline that includes the words "save energy". That is my point: if a message is to be effective, it must resonate with the public.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Weir: I agree absolutely with the Minister. As he made clear at the Committee meeting in question, and as Members should know perfectly well, there has never been any opposition to saving energy, nor has there ever been any opposition to the Assembly putting forward its own message on the issue. As a devolved Assembly, it should have the opportunity to do that. It is clear that the motion is simply an attempt at stuntery.

It has unearthed, however, one important issue, which is the right of the Assembly to follow its own advertising campaigns.

I must say that I am surprised that on the one hand, the SDLP and, presumably, Sinn Féin will support the motion and will, therefore, want the Assembly to follow slavishly the exact line that has been taken in England, while on the other, the Conservatives' friends, UCUNF (Ulster Conservatives and Unionists — New Force), on the Benches to my right, want the Assembly to follow the exact words of new Labour.

There is, therefore, no conviction whatever in either stance. The dodgy science that was highlighted by the proposer of the amendment, as well as his dodgy recollection of what happened in the Committee on the particular day in question, shows that there is absolutely no conviction behind the motion. It is simply an attempt to score points and to have a go at the Minister of the Environment. I call on the Assembly to, rightly, reject that stuntery and to concentrate on taking real and substantial action on energy conservation and to ensure that climate change is tackled properly.

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

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion and the amendment. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I also welcome the Minister to the Big Brother House; this must be day 133. I am sure that he is wondering whether he will be evicted.
[Laughter.]

When one reads the text of the advertisements that the Minister of the Environment blocked from being aired in the North —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: I have only two and a half minutes to speak, Peter; have a wee seat to yourself there. Sorry.

When one reads the text of the advertisements that the Minister of the Environment blocked from being aired in the North, one can see that their major message is very relevant in the present economic downturn — namely, save money, save energy. The Minister's reasoning for blocking them was his self-proclaimed scepticism about the effects of global warming and climate change, and mankind's contribution to it. However, we can clearly see that those advertisements make little mention of the subject, other than to outline that reducing energy reduces CO2 emissions, and a suggestion that the viewer or listener searches online for information on Act on CO2 literature.

Therefore, the Minister's unreasonable rationale for blocking those advertisements is bogus. The Minister is perfectly entitled to his personal views on global warming and climate change, but the public perception

is that the Minister's personal view is contrary to that of his Ministry. It should not be even a matter for debate whether the Minister can order his Department to hold his views — he cannot. The Minister must be aware that with his title comes responsibility and leadership — responsibility to listen to the voices of the vast majority of people in the North, in Europe and, indeed, the world.

Global warming is a major concern for the planet. People want to do something — no matter how small — to try to counteract it. The Minister should not discourage such actions simply because he does not believe that small actions make any difference. His job is to encourage and to inform. However, by blocking those advertisements, he has done none of the aforementioned, and, instead, has brought derision and ridicule on his Department and on the Assembly.

If he is not prepared to carry out his role responsibly, I must support the call for the Executive to launch a cross-departmental campaign to address climate change and relieve the Minister of the burden that he so obviously has no wish to carry.

The Executive must be prepared to listen to, and I quote Joan Ruddock:

“the best science, the most up-to-date information and the evidence”

in order to ensure that we meet the targets that are set out in the Programme for Government. Either that, or else if the DUP Ministers on the Executive rally round their sceptical colleague and refuse to play their part, we can assume that the line from ‘The Sunday Times’ on 15 February — and I have learned the tactic of using the Sunday newspapers as a source of reference from the DUP — would seem to be a claim well-founded when it stated:

“Power has gone to their heads, and some senior DUP members, including Wilson seem to be revelling in their new-found notoriety.”

I apologise to Peter Weir; I spoke for three minutes and 15 seconds. I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: My colleagues and I will support the motion as amended because of the words that appear on the Order Paper, not because of any oratory powers or scientific persuasion from the Members who proposed the motion or those who tabled the amendment.

It seems to me, as Stephen Farry made the point during a debate this morning, that there is something rather ridiculous in the fact that Members who had nothing to say during the debate on the draft Renewables Obligation Order can devote time to this sort of private Member's motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: This place's name is supposed to refer to its status as a legislative Assembly, not as a debating

society. It is sad that more Members are in the House at this stage to take part in a debating society than were present when serious legislation was being discussed by a Minister from the DUP Benches who seems to have a greater understanding of the issues than her successor as the Minister of the Environment.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for giving way. Mr McClarty talked about the importance of renewable energy to the economy, and so on. However, when the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was in the Chamber, Mr McClarty — and I think he was present — did not have a word to say about the matter. Perhaps no one had written a script for him on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Ford: I would not want to be too embarrassed by agreeing too much with the Minister, so I will leave that issue hanging.

It seems that the Minister's performance during his time in office has amounted to a continual statement that he does what he is obliged to do. Indeed, he probably does. I do not believe that he could ever be got under the ministerial code for not doing what he is obliged to do.

The problem is that a Minister who does the minimum that he is obliged to do, and then speaks against the spirit of the Programme for Government's undertakings to reduce CO2 emissions, does not seem to be providing the leadership that we are entitled to. That is my major concern with the way in which he is carrying out his actions.

As Senator Pat Moynihan might have said, Sammy Wilson is entitled to his opinions but he is not entitled to his own facts. The facts, as understood by the overwhelming majority of opinion, are quite clear. I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate he will remember to give me the figure that he could not provide in the Environment Committee — it was how much CO2 I have saved by using my Translink SmartPass throughout this year, compared to the emissions that I might have caused had I been using a car.

The Minister of the Environment: I am sure that the Member is dying to hear what his carbon footprint is. According to the number of miles for which the Member claimed travel expenses last year, he generated 1.4 tons of carbon. That is considerably less than other Committee members; however, had he used his SmartPass continuously, he could have reduced that amount by 75% to 0.36 tons. He still has a long way to go.

Mr Ford: I note that the Minister is not capable of answering the question that I asked him, which was how much I had saved, but he got his cheap jag in anyway.

The issue was raised about whether DECC was attempting to impose its particular set of English advertisements on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Minister told us that the Scots, and now the Welsh, have rejected the DECC advertisements and are doing their own thing. However, that is the fundamental difference between the Scots, the Welsh, and this Minister — as yet we have seen no advertising campaign from the DOE on the matter.

It may well be that simply concentrating on switching off the standby button was not of a high enough standard for Sammy Wilson to allow his Department to approve the advertisement. The question then is this: if he is going to maintain that argument, what advertisements will we see? That is why it is vital that we see real action across the entire Executive, and not just on an advertising campaign. Climate change is a cross-departmental issue, yet it seems to be going unrecognised.

If we are going to deal seriously with climate change, it must be looked at by the entire Executive. Different Departments have responsibilities, whether it is for energy efficiency, renewable energy — as we discussed earlier — the warm homes scheme, or for greater incentives to use public transport. All those are vital necessities, and they require action across the entire range of Executive Departments. This does not merely involve the question of whether a particular form of advertisement is shown.

Earlier this morning, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, when debating the draft Renewables Obligations Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, sought to defend the approach of the Executive and spoke about various things that were happening on a cross-departmental basis. However, it seems to me that those actions are extremely thin on the ground. There may be discussions among Ministers and small groups of officials, but virtually nothing is being rolled out — at a time when initiatives on the green economy are being flagged up by President Obama in particular, and when action is taking place in other parts of the UK and in other countries in Europe. There is nothing to show that there is real, consistent, coherent action taking place here.

We have heard about the difficulties in getting renewable energy from wind power under way under PPS 18. There is a range of things not being carried through across the entire range of Executive responsibilities. If the Minister is going to tell us that he is refusing to have the actions of the DECC imposed on him, but that he is doing better himself, it seems to me that he and his colleagues have a great deal of explaining to do.

Mr Ross: I agree with Mr Boylan on one point: environmental issues have been a hot topic in the

Chamber since the current Environment Minister took up his post. We have seen a positive debate resulting, both in the Chamber and among the public, about how we should address climate change, the causes of climate change, how the Government should implement policy, and how we should affect our individual lifestyles. We should all thank the Minister for ensuring that we have that debate.

It is unfortunate that some people over the past number of weeks, and in the Chamber today, have chosen to say that the Minister has banned the advertisement from our TV screens.

The Minister has not banned the advertisement; indeed, I saw it last night while I was reading up for this debate. He has exercised his constitutional right to decide on how to promote devolved matters. That is fundamental to the meaning of devolution. It means that on devolved issues such as the environment and climate change, Northern Ireland Ministers must be able to decide for themselves how to promote Government policy. The Minister's decision is an important constitutional marker; those in the Chamber who lambasted various direct rule Ministers over the years should be glad that local Ministers are now able to call the shots.

11.45 am

The Act on CO2 campaign did not seek the views of the Northern Ireland Executive, or, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland. It is, in effect, an England-only strategy. For those who repeatedly, and often quite rightly, say that we cannot simply transplant GB legislation or strategies into Northern Ireland, this is a clear example of just that. I would like to think that, if the Executive are to promote any message, they would carry out their own research and opinion polling in Northern Ireland rather than rely on data from elsewhere. Indeed, as Mr Weir said, the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales chose not to run with the Act on CO2 advertisements. The Scottish version did not carry the Act on CO2 logo, because it, along with the advertisement's strapline, is an England-only logo.

We have talked about the Department for Social Development's energy-saving message, through which I am aware that the power to save energy is at my fingertips. That Department does not use the Act on CO2 logo; perhaps the SDLP Members should talk to their Minister about that issue if they feel strongly about it.

The role of the Executive is important; the motion and the amendment ignore the fact that the Executive are collectively responsible for promoting the Programme for Government targets on emissions. The Minister of the Environment's decision not to use the Act on CO2 advertisements does not mean that the core message will not be heard. For example, DSD promotes household

energy efficiency in conjunction with the Energy Saving Trust, and its advertisements appear on our television screens all the time. The Department for Regional Development has a role in encouraging more of us to leave our cars at home and use public transport. Mr Weir mentioned the role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the sustainable energy group that was set up by Arlene Foster.

The decision not to use the Act on CO2 strategy does not mean that we will miss our targets. It would be naive to promote that argument, because to do so is to say that one advertisement alone will make a difference. Such an argument makes assumptions about the views of the Northern Ireland public and what it will or will not buy into. Without any local research being done, that is a poor state of affairs.

The recent debate over here on climate change has demonstrated that the general public have diverse views on the issue. Mr Boylan mentioned the Big Brother house; the numbers of people who have contacted the Minister in the constituency office that I share with him in Larne, and in his ministerial office, demonstrate that the vast majority of the public support his views and support the fact that we are having a real debate on the issues.

I wish to return to a point that was made by Mr Ford and by the Minister. Tommy Gallagher and David McClarty talked about the importance of renewables, but it was significant that no one from their parties spoke in the preceding debate on the motion proposed by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That is telling, and it shows us the real motivation of those two parties in this debate. The Assembly's time would be better spent on promoting the message of energy conservation and on real environmentalism, rather than trying to score cheap political points. For those reasons, I oppose the motion and the amendment.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. It is quite clear that the Committee for the Environment has no confidence in the Minister; nor do the environmental lobby, university students in Belfast or many of his party colleagues have any confidence. However, an eccentric children's TV presenter who has not been seen for 20 years supports the Minister, as well as one or two people in Larne, by the sound of it.

The Programme for Government clearly states that action is needed to reduce our impact on climate change. The DUP signed up to that and to tackling the impact that human activity has on climate change. Why, then, did the DUP appoint someone —

Mr T Clarke: The Member is insinuating that the DUP has signed up to all of that, as if Sinn Féin is some sort of wonderful party. I omitted to write to the

Minister about a matter that he raised during a meeting of the Committee for the Environment in the Senate Chamber in connection with a person who had been involved in environmental crime. The Member had written to the Minister to try to get that person cleared of that environmental crime.

Therefore, I am curious to know how Mr McKay can stand here today and claim to be the panacea for everything to do with environmental issues, and yet, in another instance, he wrote to the Minister to try to assist someone who caused an environmental crime to get off.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his contribution. I ask him to recheck his facts and, indeed, to reread the letter, if he has actually seen it. In that letter, I clearly state that the environmental laws need to be upheld. However, I oppose the way in which the procedures were carried out and the fact that they were not carried out quickly enough in that instance. The Member should check his facts.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: I will not give way again.

Why did the DUP appoint to that Ministry someone who consistently makes a mockery of the party? Sammy says that the rest of the DUP is wrong, because the party's manifesto says that it believes that human activity influences climate change. Not only is he giving a two-finger salute to the environmental lobby, he is giving the two-finger salute to his own party. Where is the party's Whip in all of this? When is he going to take account of public opinion and evict Sammy from the DUP Front Bench?

The Executive are committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25% on 1990 levels by the year 2025. Greenhouse gas emissions have already decreased by 6%, which is welcome. However, much more needs to be done.

I also support the amendment. The issue of climate change needs to be mainstreamed across different Departments, in particular the Department for Social Development and the Department for Regional Development, because they, too, have responsibilities. As Tommy Gallagher outlined, there are many opportunities for job creation, particularly in the field of renewable energy. The Executive should look at that issue in a more joined-up way. It is imperative, therefore, that we act on CO2 emissions, that Ministers adhere to the Programme for Government and that they address the issue of climate change on a cross-departmental basis.

Today, at 12.30 pm, the Assembly all-party working group on climate change will meet a representative of

the Met Office who will outline the dangers that weather-pattern changes pose to this society and others. The Minister is welcome to join us, if he wants to learn something.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that it will not be a shock to the proposers of the motion or the amendment that I do not support either of them. As some of my colleagues have said, this is nothing more than political "stuntery". I do not believe that —

Mr McClarty: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: If the Member holds on, I will give way in a minute; I have only just started. As my colleague pointed out, Mr McClarty has already had 10 minutes to speak, and much of his contribution was not on the issue.

The Minister was right not to support the advertisement. The Assembly and the Executive, as a whole, have a responsibility to deal with the issue of climate change. As other Members said, the Minister for Social Development has a responsibility to tackle the issue and is doing so. The Minister of the Environment made the right decision to use his discretion not to fund the advert.

However, I accept that climate change is a reality; it has been a feature of the history, dating back hundreds of years, of our planet. Perhaps climate change is not a phenomenon, as others might suggest. Some scientists believe that there was an ice age; so what happened to the ice if climate change did not cause it to melt? Low and behold, we are now told that climate change may be the result of industrialisation, cars, aeroplanes and other types of energy use. If that were the case, what brought about climate change before the industrial revolution? The Minister's views are clear —

Mr McKay: I find the Member's comments quite strange, because his father was a consistent supporter of the passage of the Climate Change Act 2008 at Westminster. Does the Member agree with the Environment Minister's opinion that human activity does not contribute to climate change, despite the fact that DUP party policy clearly states that human activity does contribute to climate change?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: I will respond first and then I will give way.

I have no difficulty in supporting the view of my party, and I believe that the Minister has been right to open up the debate. Scientists are now disagreeing with one another on the issue, so no one should be concerned about having different opinions. The

Minister has opened up the debate, and people should have a right to express their opinion.

Mr McClarty: At the beginning of his speech, the Member mentioned that the motion was nothing but “political stuntery” — his words, not mine. If the motion is “political stuntery”, why did his party think it necessary to table a petition of concern?

Mr I McCrea: The fact that I said the motion was political stuntery should be evidence enough. The Minister’s views about the human impact on climate change are clear.

Mr T Clarke: The Member mentioned the human impact, and David McKay talked about human activity. Does the Member agree that Mr McKay’s human activity, as a member of the Environment Committee, has not contributed much because he has the worst attendance rate of all members on that Committee?

Mr I McCrea: The one benefit of Mr McKay’s non-attendance is that his carbon footprint is not as bad as that of some other Committee members. *[Interruption.]* I did not say it was the only benefit. The Minister has been right to express —

Mr McKay: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: I have given way enough — I need to finish off.

The Minister has been right to have the courage to express his views on the matter — the fact that scientists are now starting to change their minds is evidence of that.

Let us look at some of the wider aspects of the issue. The Ulster Unionist Party says that it is worried about climate change, but one aspect of that concerns methane. As everyone knows, most methane comes from farm animals. I take it that the Ulster Unionist Party, and those who support the motion, support farmers being made redundant and animals being taken off farms so that methane is no longer an issue.

As far as I am concerned, the motion is political stuntery and I hope that the House comes to its senses and opposes it.

Mr McCallister: The way that the debate has gone has been surprising. *[Interruption.]* Thank you. The Minister would probably be better going back to teaching than being Minister of the Environment.

It is bizarre that DUP Members have referred to the motion as political stuntery when their party has tabled a petition of concern. Mr Ian McCrea’s rebuttal of that assertion was less than convincing. DUP Members have used the words “political stuntery” throughout the debate, but the fact that they stand by the petition of concern that their party tabled is in itself a political stunt.

The Ulster Unionist Party is very supportive of cross-cutting Government measures, and we accept that many parts of Government need to be involved in the climate-change debate. However, the lead on the issue should come from the Department of the Environment and be headed by the Minister.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Well, why not?

Mr T Clarke: The Member said that the lead should come from the Department of the Environment. Is that why his party took one of its Members — who used to drive a three-litre, six-cylinder Jaguar — off the Environment Committee?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

12.00 noon

Mr McCallister: I am glad that the Member has such details on what we all drive. I assume that he is talking about Mr Gardiner. Mr Gardiner was moved to the Health Committee; that was simply as a result of parties changing Committee memberships. It is no big deal. The DUP moved Alistair Ross to the Committee for Regional Development. Lots of Committee members move — what is the issue there?

The Act on CO2 campaign provided an excellent opportunity for individuals, families, businesses and the Executive to reduce Northern Ireland’s carbon emissions and to save money. The Department of Energy and Climate Change was willing to pay for the campaign. Essentially, the Minister of the Environment turned down, on Northern Ireland’s behalf, a free opportunity to help us to reach targets that are set out in the Programme for Government, and to save money. That is a disgrace.

To quote one of Mr Wilson’s statements:

“I think in 20 years’ time we will look back at this whole climate change debate and ask ourselves how on earth we were ever conned into spending the billions of pounds which are going into this without any kind of rigorous examination of the background, the science, the implications of it all.”

If Mr Wilson is speaking on behalf of Northern Ireland, as Minister of the Environment, it is prudent to examine the evidence on which he bases his opinions and his own “rigorous examination” of the evidence.

Mr Wilson has, on occasion, referred to, and it now appears that he has based his opinions on, a report of 500 scientists that documents doubts about man-made global warming. What Minister Wilson was more reluctant to tell us was that that report was authored by Joseph Bast and James M Taylor of the Heartland Institute in America.

First, I should point out that Joseph Bast is an economist, and James Taylor is a lawyer: neither of

them is a scientist. Secondly, it should be noted that the Heartland Institute is funded by Exxon Mobil, one of the world's leading oil companies.

Professor James McCarthy, of Harvard University, in his evidence to the US Congress, stated of Exxon-funded ideological advocacy groups, of which the Heartland Institute is one:

“These groups promote spokespeople who misrepresent peer-reviewed scientific findings or cherry-pick facts in an attempt to mislead the media and public into thinking there is vigorous debate in the mainstream scientific community about climate change.”

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Well, briefly: I do not have much time.

Mr Poots: Given that the Member is so convinced of climate change, and his acceptance that cows, for example, are one of the highest producers of methane, will he give an assurance to the Assembly today that he is going to dispose of all his cows and plant trees on his farm?

Mr McCallister: When I started to speak, I wanted to take on some of the points that we need to look at collectively across Government: it is about how we use — *[Interruption.]* Is he suggesting that he is going to get rid of his livestock? Is he going to get rid of his car, his jeep? Does he not drive a jeep with a three-litre engine as well? Did I not see a green —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members to address all remarks through the Chair.

Mr McCallister: Mr Deputy Speaker, the Member would do well to look at his own lifestyle, as he drives a huge Isuzu Trooper Jeep, and is, of course, a livestock farmer as well.

We need to look at how we can use technology to harness that methane, and work with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and other Departments.

It is good to see that the First Minister has appeared to back up his embattled Minister of the Environment before people try to evict him from the House. *[Interruption.]* It is interesting to note that the DUP has not let —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: It is interesting that DUP Members have not let their colleague Jim Wells in here today to speak. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr B Wilson: I support the motion and the amendment, but feel that we should go much further. The Minister's response to the advertising campaign is totally unacceptable. It undermines the UK Government's policy on climate change and the Executive's Programme

for Government. The Minister is responsible for implementing the Climate Change Act 2008, but says that he does not believe in man-made climate change.

It is difficult to see how he can implement such a policy if he does not believe in it. His views are incompatible with the role of Minister of the Environment.

Instead of quoting dodgy scientists, who are sponsored by oil companies with an obvious vested interest in having people use more energy, I appeal to the Minister to attend the meeting of the all-party working group on climate change at 12.30 pm. If he were to go, he would hear from the distinguished scientist Alex Hill, the chief adviser to the Government from the Met Office in London —

Mr Poots: I note that the invitation to that meeting says that climate change “may” be affected. How things “may” pan out is what we are discussing; no one is definitive on this subject.

Mr B Wilson: If Members were to attend the meeting, they would find out about the effects of climate change.

The Minister of the Environment: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr B Wilson: If the Minister were to go to the meeting —

The Minister of the Environment: Unfortunately, I will be unable to attend that meeting, and that is a great cause of concern to me. Given that the Member will be there, perhaps he will ask the representative from the Met Office how often the Hadley Centre has got its predictions wrong — I do not just mean its long-term predictions, but even its short-term predictions. Indeed, he might ask about the centre's weather predictions for this winter — I believe that it predicted that we would have one of the warmest winters on record.

Mr B Wilson: I will take those points on board. However, the overall argument on climate change has been won; the science proves it, and it is time that the Minister actually listened to what is being said.

The Minister's decision also raises serious questions about censorship and about whether he has the right to deny Northern Ireland viewers the opportunity to see the adverts that promote energy conservation. Given escalating energy bills and the level of fuel poverty that exists, any advice on energy conservation would be extremely useful to the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, to turn down free adverts that promote energy conservation is —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: No, I am sorry; I have a great deal to get through.

When I first heard the Minister's comments, I issued a press statement — as I do regularly whenever he comments on climate change — condemning his decision. The response to my routine press statement was significant. Within 10 minutes of issuing the statement, my phone was red hot with calls from journalists throughout the islands and Europe who were asking for interviews on the subject. I got calls from the BBC News Channel, BBC Radio Foyle, 'Stormont Live', RTÉ's 'Newstalk', UTV, Channel 4, Citybeat, 'Drivetime' on Radio Scotland, Downtown Radio —

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: No, I am sorry; I have a limited amount of time.

There was such a response from throughout the UK because the media could not believe that an Environment Minister does not believe in climate change. That morning, I did eight TV interviews, and I did a similar number of radio broadcasts during the day. Further afield, the issue was picked up by newspapers in Australia and Canada. Why was there all that interest? A Minister of the Environment who does not believe in climate change is a major — and unique — news story throughout Europe and the world. Unfortunately, the story reinforces the view of many UK listeners that Northern Ireland people still live in the Dark Ages. The Minister certainly raised Northern Ireland's profile.

Furthermore, local public opinion —

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it permissible for a Member to totally mislead the House by blandly stating that the Minister does not believe in climate change? That is a totally misleading statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: First, the Minister will have an opportunity to respond to those statements; and secondly, it is unparliamentary to accuse a Member of misleading the House. Therefore, the Member should continue.

Mr B Wilson: I wish to withdraw the word "misleading". The situation, as I understand it, is that the Minister does not consider man-made climate change —

The Minister of the Environment: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Why has the Member withdrawn something that he did not say? It was my colleague Dr William McCrea who used the word "misleading". When the Member gets it wrong, he should be punished for it, but if he has not used the word "misleading", he should not have to withdraw it — he is confused.

Mr B Wilson: I shall finish what I was saying.

We were overcome by public opinion. We set up a "Fire Sammy Wilson" petition to which 2,290 people have contributed. We hope to hand that petition over to the Department this afternoon. The Green Party feels that Sammy Wilson's role as the Minister of the Environment is incompatible with his views on climate change, and he should resign.

Mr Shannon: Many DUP Members listening to the debate feel that a modern witch-hunt is being conducted against our colleague, the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson — a man who refuses to agree with everyone else when they are adamant that the world is flat; a man who has his own opinion, which is an issue in itself.

When I was a youngster, which was not yesterday —

Mr Weir: If, as many of us believe, the debate is a witch-hunt on the Minister, I am sure that the Members who are behind that witch-hunt would like the Minister to be burnt at the stake in a carbon-neutral manner.
[Laughter.]

Mr Shannon: I hope that no Members wish to see him burnt at the stake, but that is just my opinion.

There is, clearly, an issue about carbon emissions, which concerns me, as a parent, because my boys come home and tell me about it. We realise that there is an issue to be addressed, and the Minister has tried to do that. He has attempted to show the people of the Province that things are not as clear-cut as they appear. The fact is that opinions other than the scientific one exist, and those should be publicly expressed and considered.

Mr Beggs: The Member said that the Minister was trying to make the issue as clear-cut as possible. Will he not agree that the Minister is actually confusing the issue, because no one knows whether he believes that carbon emissions have any impact on climate? It would be helpful if the Minister were to indicate whether he accepts that increased CO2 emissions contribute something towards climate change.

Mr Shannon: The Minister will have a chance to respond to that in a few minutes.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member not agree that it is more important that we work towards agreed targets rather than agreed opinions?

Mr Shannon: Let me put it another way: let us work together towards the targets rather than be confused by some of the issues that people have raised here.

I will give an example of the misuse of figures — and Members who represent fishing communities will understand that the scientific angle is not always right — that relates to the Irish Sea. Fishermen are prevented from landing fish that they see in their boats and on the radar but which scientists say are not there.

The real reason for that is to allow fishermen from Spain, Portugal and perhaps other European countries to catch the fish that scientists say are not there. Scientists are saying something contrary to what the fishermen are saying. That is fact, not fiction.

A simple search on the Internet of the Committee on Climate Change website shows that Northern Ireland is responsible for only 3·4% of UK carbon emissions, while England is responsible for some 77·1%. Even taking into account the size difference of land mass, if Northern Ireland equalled the size of England, with our current output, we would emit almost 28% less, which easily beats any targets that have been set. Those are facts. We are not being complacent; we are being realistic. In a global context, Northern Ireland's output is less than 1%, which means it comes last on a table of countries' carbon emissions.

I am very conscious of the time, but I want to make a couple of other comments. Most importantly, why should our devolved Government be forced to advertise party-political issues on behalf of the Labour Party? I was not aware that devolved Governments were subject to party-political pressure that transcended the constitutional powers that were devolved to them.

Oor Meinstar isnae afeert o' shakin things up – yin oonly needs tae see tha DOE adverts fer speedin' an satebelts tae unnerstuan that whun a herd lien haes tae be tuk – it wull be tuk. Hooinever, why shud we be pit doon tae shooderin a' load which isnae oors tae shooder.

Our Minister is not afraid to shake things up. One need only see the DOE adverts about speeding and the wearing of seat belts to understand that he takes a hard line when necessary. Why, however, should people be subjected to shouldering a burden that is not entirely theirs to shoulder?

12.15 pm

Our Minister is an educated man with a clear point of view. He is entitled to ensure that a balanced perspective is presented to the people of the Province. As I and other Members highlighted, the burden is not ours alone to shoulder. Money would be better spent on action that makes a difference to the people of the Province than on advertising.

I am a supporter of devolution, as I hope are all Members. As such, I cannot support a motion that seeks party-political decisions in the manner of direct rule. I oppose the motion and the amendment.

The Minister of the Environment: It is good that, once again, the House is having its usual intellectual debate on such issues. I assure the Member for South Down, Newry and Armagh, or wherever —

Mr McCallister: I am a Member for South Down.

The Minister of the Environment: I assure the Member for South Down that I feel in no way embattled today, nor have I ever felt embattled on the issue. I will never feel under pressure from the toy soldiers of the “new force” — or the new farce — who sit in that corner of the House.

I accept that a petition of concern will be presented this afternoon. However, I wish to make it clear that, since I raised the issue, my Department has received nearly 400 pieces of correspondence. Those people took the time to sit down and write letters, as opposed to sticking their names on the bottom of a petition. Of those 400 correspondents, some 80% support my stance. In a poll carried out by UTV, over 80% of the 3,000 people who took part support my stance. I have received approximately 900 letters on the subject at my constituency office, about 85% of which support me. I do not, therefore, feel embattled. The issue continues to require debate, and I am glad to have been able to stimulate it.

The debate has been one of contradictions. Anyone can count the number of 4x4s in the Assembly car park. When I did so on my way into the Building this morning, there were 10 — and I admit that one of them is mine. All 10 vehicles have engine sizes of 2·5 litres or more. Most of the cars in the car park have engines of over two litres. They probably belong to Members sitting on the Benches and giving lectures on acting —

Mr Gallagher: Some belong to Members from the Minister's party.

The Minister of the Environment: Yes; I acknowledge that.

Some Members are lecturing the Assembly on CO2 emissions. Is it any wonder that the public get sick and tired of being lectured to about the restrictions that they must bear? The Member for Lagan Valley highlighted the contradiction when he made an intervention during the Member for South Down's speech.

Some Members protest and complain about how every action taken on CO2 emissions has an impact on their constituents. At some point in the debate, I hope to have an opportunity to illustrate that further contradiction with quotes.

The ultimate contradiction, as was pointed out, is that nationalist parties tell me that, rather than the Assembly's imprint being on any action to save energy, we should simply follow, poodle-like, the example of DEFRA at Westminster. That is despite DEFRA having made it clear to me, the Scottish and Welsh Ministers, and the EU that it wishes to pursue an England-only campaign.

The debate did not start too well when the Member for East Londonderry Mr McClarty quoted one of the

presidential hopefuls in the American elections; to begin a speech with a quote from a loser is not a great start to any speech. However, a party of losers will always want to quote losers.

Let us look at some of the things that the Member said. First, he said that my stance makes people in Northern Ireland look like dangerous radicals — he probably meant to say dangerous nutcases. I will read some of the quotes that have appeared in the newspapers this week from people who are on Mr McClarty's side, and perhaps some Members on that side should do some reading on the issue.

In 'The Times' this morning, Gordon Brown's leading green adviser's solution to the dilemma that we face with climate change is to cut the UK population by 30 million. Who is the nutcase? I know that my party has proposed that the Assembly should be cut in half, but we do not mean that Members should be eradicated — we simply mean that we should get them out of this place to save a bit of money.

A book by James Lovelock was serialised in 'The Sunday Times'. I bought the book because I thought that the newspaper quoted him wrongly, as he went even further and said that the things that have to be done to solve the problem are so radical that we might have to suspend democracy. Again, who is the nutcase?

Professor James Hansen recently gave evidence to the public inquiry into the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station, and he compared it to the gas chambers. He compared the trains that brought the coal to the cattle trucks that brought people to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. That is the kind of nonsense that we are hearing from some people who are allied to Mr McClarty.

Mr McClarty went on to talk about the importance of messages on energy saving. I have no difficulty with such messages. Indeed, the Executive put out messages on energy saving. My Department is not actually responsible for that — it is the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. Perhaps SDLP Members could take the matter up with their Minister, because the Energy Saving Trust deliberately decided not to sign up to the Act on CO2 advertisements and went down the route of commissioning its own advertisement. I do not know how much that cost. Sinn Féin is also getting precious about the issue, but the Department for Regional Development also decided not to sign up to the Act on CO2 advertisements, and it put out its own energy saving messages.

Mr I McCrea: Given that the Minister has referred to two Departments so far, have the Ministers of those Departments ever raised their concerns or opposition to his actions?

The Minister of the Environment: No, they have not raised their concerns, even though I wrote to them. The Scottish and Welsh Ministers have said that there

is a need to tailor messages to a local population, and decisions were made to not use the DEFRA campaign. Indeed, I made an offer to the Minister of the Department of Energy and Climate Change that we could examine a UK-wide energy saving advertisement, which could be used by all Administrations. That was six months ago, but I have yet to hear from him. Therefore, let us not get the idea that I want to waste energy.

The energy conservation messages are going out. However, it is not just me who has decided not to use the Act on CO2 line — other Departments have also decided not to use it. As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, DEFRA is beginning to realise that there is a kickback, and it is realising that my view that energy saving should be emphasised, rather than acting on CO2, is a much more effective way of getting the message across.

Dr W McCrea: In light of the information about those two Departments, which are represented by the very people who are trying to take action against the Minister, is it not really proof that the motion is nothing more than a stunt?

The Minister of the Environment: We all know that it is a stunt, but I do not mind. They can engage in stunts if they wish; I think that the public will understand that also.

Mr McClarty also waxed eloquently —

A Member: He did not.

The Minister of the Environment: Well, perhaps he did not wax eloquently, but he spoke about my view of the impact of the renewables obligation, and the benefits that we might receive from that. However, as has been pointed out, he sat through this morning's debate on that issue and did not have a word to say about it.

However, I cannot miss out Mr Gallagher, who is, of course, very concerned about this matter. He moved the motion of no confidence in the Environment Committee, and when I visited the Committee, he did not attend. Perhaps that shows just how concerned he was. He had the opportunity; I was at the Committee for two-and-a-half hours and he could have questioned me at length and given me the benefit of his scientific views. However, I do not believe that scientific views that are based in the pre-Galilean era are of much use in discussing this issue.

Galileo — and perhaps I should tell Mr Gallagher this — discovered that the earth actually revolves around the sun; not that the sun revolves round the earth. The sun does not move closer to the earth. Mr Gallagher told me that I had ignored the science. I would love to know — and I will give way to him

— whether he can tell me one scientist whose work on this issue he has read —

Mr Shannon: Go ahead, Tommy. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: Well, I think that he is getting the message. I would give him his chance, but I do not have much time left. At least, before I stand up and make a decision or give an opinion, I do the House the favour of reading up on an issue. I would be happy to engage with Mr Gallagher on some of the scientific evidence that I have looked at on this issue. Perhaps, at some stage, he might like to debate that and invite me along to the Committee to give my views.

Had Mr Gallagher been at the Committee when I visited, I would have had the opportunity to tell him how he has acted on CO₂, because Mr Gallagher has become known as the Christopher Columbus from Fermanagh. According to his mileage claim for last year, he has twice circumnavigated the world in pursuit of his Assembly duties. It is a wonder that he has any time to come here; he must spend most of his time in the car. *[Laughter.]*

During that time, he has generated more than 20 tons of carbon; he is the carbon king of this Assembly. There is a perfectly good express bus from Enniskillen to Belfast, and I will give him the timetable for it, if he wants it. Had he used that bus and acted on CO₂, he would have generated only 6.84 tons of carbon and could have reduced his carbon footprint by 60%. Did he do it? Not on your life, because acting on CO₂ is for someone else, not for Mr Gallagher.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for giving way. I know that he does not visit the west very often and may not know the geography very well, but I do not live in Enniskillen. In fact, for me to drive to Enniskillen to get the express bus that he referred to would take 45 minutes. I think that the Minister might do better by finding out exactly where I live and what the implications are for travel before making such a song and dance about it.

The Minister of the Environment: That is why the Member's party has encouraged people to use park-and-ride facilities. With those facilities, one drives to the station, parks one's vehicle and then rides on public transport. Perhaps the Member has not heard of park-and-ride.

There are alternatives. Mr Gallagher has talked about acting on CO₂, but he has not shown any evidence that he is prepared to act in that way himself.

12.30 pm

Mr Ford, who is not in his place, said that I had done all that I am obliged to do. I have done that, and I will continue to do so. However, he said that I had not shown leadership on the issue and that I had not got

into the spirit of it. I have looked at his record — he may say the right words, but look at his actions. Mr Ford welcomed the launch of Aer Lingus flights from Belfast International Airport, which was a good catch for the South Antrim constituency.

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

The Minister of the Environment: I have one minute.

Mr Ford welcomed that. Aeroplanes generate CO₂, but he realised that his constituents would benefit.

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

The Minister of the Environment: I would have loved to have had time to go through the comments that other Members made. The one thing that I will say is that this decision was made on the basis that, first, I wanted to ensure that the Northern Ireland Assembly had its place; secondly, I wanted to ensure that we had an effective message; and, thirdly, I did not want to use propaganda put out by DEFRA in England.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I realise that I have five minutes, so I will be as concise as possible. Mr McClarty said that the Minister is at variance with the Department, the public and the stance that has been enunciated publicly by the Executive. He also mentioned the planet Exxon.

My colleague Mr Gallagher mentioned the incompatibility of the Minister's views with the Programme for Government. He also spoke about the Queen's University study on the efficiency of outputs and contribution to greenhouse gases.

I listened raptly to Mr Weir's contribution. He is not in the Chamber now, but there was a common thread in the contributions from the DUP Benches. He used examples of every other Department's ability to meet the targets relating to greenhouse gases and the protection of the environment. He showed how it is done, but wanted us not to look at his Minister and what he has not done, or, in fact, what he has said.

Mr Boylan referred to the lack of leadership and example that is being shown by the Minister.

Mr Ford referred to the need for a cross-departmental approach to the renewables issue — the warm homes scheme, public transport, etc.

Mr McKay mentioned the Environment Committee's vote of no confidence in the Minister. I was at that Committee meeting.

Ian McCrea said that the Minister was right not to support the advertisements, and he drew attention to my colleague Margaret Ritchie, who, I am glad to say, showed leadership in this area and showed the way forward. I am glad to see that, in highlighting that, the Member was, inadvertently, complimenting her for her

leadership and for the example that she showed in that regard.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I do not have time to give way, because this is the winding-up speech on the amendment.

We then came to the Minister. I saw students in the Gallery during the debate, and I wondered what they were learning from it. Mention was made of contradictions relating to car parking; the American election; party politics; Gordon Brown's adviser; the suspension of democracy; gas chambers; Galileo; stunts; and Christopher Columbus. The Minister dealt with anything except the real issue.

The real issue should be read into the record. It was interesting that the Minister did not even show up for the hour-and-a-half debate on earth hour. His colleague Minister Dodds responded on the matter. His other colleague — Mr Wells, the "Mr Green" of the DUP — is absent today. It is important that the reasons why action on climate change is urgent are read into the record.

Successive reports of the UN intergovernmental panel on climate change, the most recent of which involved over 3,800 scientists from over 150 countries, have put the reality of human-induced climate change beyond any doubt. Evidence indicates that cuts in global greenhouse gas emissions are needed to keep the global average temperature rise below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. If that is not attended to, it could have the following implications: in Africa, potentially, between 350 million and 600 million people will suffer water shortages; in Asia, up to one billion people will suffer water shortages, as supplies dwindle; in Australia and New Zealand, there will be between 3,000 and 5,000 more heat-related deaths a year. That is the reality of what we face. Furthermore, in Latin America, up to 77 million people will face water shortages.

I am not here to get sucked into the mire, the morass and, indeed, the mists of flippancy that have been bounced about here today. That is the reality of climate change; that is why the SDLP tabled its amendment to the motion. I am glad — indeed, honoured — to have been associated with the amendment that Mr Gallagher has crafted and brought before the Assembly today. I welcome the support from other Members for that.

The Minister must set aside the flippancy and treat a ministry with responsibility for the environment as exactly that. We must deal with the world realities that we face; this is not a narrow, sectional, party-political or, indeed, parochial issue. I acknowledge that the Minister received 400 letters of support — it is great to have a fan club.

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

Mr McGlone: However, this issue is much more important than having a fan club. I ask Members to please support the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I ask Members to read the motion carefully. It indicates the concern about the attempt to restrict the viewing of the Act on CO2 message in Northern Ireland and the failure to fulfil Programme for Government requirements. Therefore, the motion is not a stunt; it addresses some very serious issues.

A petition of concern was presented, and it would appear that every member of the DUP has signed that, other than the Minister of the Environment, who may have signed it and then had his signature scored out. I am not quite sure what happened, but the evidence given to me indicates that every member of the DUP signed the petition of concern, which was intended to block the vote on the motion.

A number of Members, including David McClarty, Tommy Gallagher and Daithí McKay, have highlighted how the Minister's position is contrary to the targets set out in the Programme for Government, and that is also stated in the motion. There are very specific references in the Programme for Government that one cannot dance around. For example, it states that we will:

"play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change."

If it is the case that we can have an impact by adding to climate change, the opposite is also true: that is, we can have an impact on reducing climate change. The Programme for Government accepts that we are having an impact on climate change and that it is possible to take actions to minimise that. That document also mentions our "carbon footprint". Therefore, in attempting to ban the Act on CO2 advertisements because of his personal beliefs, the Minister is acting against the Programme for Government. That document also includes a specific target to:

"Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025".

The documentation representing Northern Ireland that was sent by the Minister of the Environment to Ed Miliband, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, is concerning. In that letter, the Minister of the Environment states:

"This campaign promotes anthropogenic climate change as gospel and as you are no doubt aware, this is contrary to my views as Minister of the Environment in Northern Ireland. I do not believe that man-made greenhouse gas emissions are the main cause of climate change and I do not believe that the 'Act On' messaging should appear in Northern Ireland."

The Minister is imposing his personal views; there is no doubt about that. As I said earlier, that is contrary to the Programme for Government, and that is the reason for the motion. There is a serious intent behind the motion being proposed. The Minister's letter continues:

"I do not wish to see 'Act On' used in Northern Ireland and I do not wish for climate change messages to be promoted by other Whitehall departments here."

The Minister is even attempting to restrict Whitehall Departments communicating any message here. He proposes some very interesting aspects. He writes:

"I propose the following Principles of Working for officials to follow across the UK"

Of which point No 4 is:

"No 'Act On' media promotion can be bought in a Devolved Administration unless approved by that Administration."

This is an interesting bit:

"Leakage must be minimised using postcode lockouts, when available,"

If that is not attempting to ban an advertisement, I do not know what is.

He goes on:

"and the additional costs this may incur should be factored in to the resource requirement and the value for money assessment of the media promotion."

We have our Minister trying to dictate additional costs to the entire United Kingdom to promote his personal views. That is not credible: hence the reason for bringing the motion forward.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: We have had a debate. I am attempting to sum up the debate. It is important to appreciate that.

The Minister wrote to not only Ed Miliband, but to Geoff Hoon, the Secretary of State for Transport, stating:

"your officials have attempted to launch a UK wide campaign on eco-driving".

How terrible for the Secretary of State for Transport to try to encourage energy efficiency in driving. The rest of the United Kingdom is trying to promote those views. Northern Ireland is being ridiculed in the eyes of the rest of the United Kingdom.

I could have understood if that had come from a Scottish-nationalist-dominated Minister in Edinburgh. However, I find it strange that a unionist Minister is taking that stance, is trying to separate Northern Ireland, and is ridiculing Northern Ireland as regards actions that are taking place in other parts of the United Kingdom. There has been a major failure on the part of the Minister to give leadership in that area.

I will now turn briefly to some of the comments made by other Members. David McClarty highlighted an issue to which I have still not heard an answer: is the Minister a fool, or is he deliberately misleading others for political and other ends? I have not heard the answer to that. I specifically asked during an intervention whether the Minister believed that climate change was in any way affected by man, and the Minister failed to respond. He used language to

suggest that he does not believe that it is the main factor, but does he believe that man contributes to it? We still have no answer to that question. Until the Minister accepts the Programme for Government, and accepts that man does contribute to climate change, he is not giving leadership on the matter.

Tommy Gallagher called on us all to endeavour individually. This is a real issue, and we all have to try to take action. For the record, Minister, I have changed my car: I have a Mini with much lower CO2 emissions within the stable that my wife and I have. I find it rather cheap for the Minister to go on the attack, and pick individual members of the Committee for the Environment and produce figures on their CO2 emissions. He is trying to deflect from a very serious issue.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I am trying to sum up my views, and I will not be deflected on that matter.

Mr Weir said that the Minister was not acting against the Programme for Government. I hope that I have demonstrated clearly that the Minister's action is acting against the Programme for Government.

Cathal Boylan highlighted the fact that the Act on CO2 message also contained an issue about energy efficiency. Given the way that oil prices have been going, that is something on which we all need to start to take action now. We all ought to be trying to reduce our energy consumption and, thereby, reduce our CO2 consumption.

We should bear in mind that oil has peaked. The world's oil supply is diminishing and that is why the price of oil went through the roof over a year ago. Yes, the world's economy is in decline and there is now less demand for oil. However, one cannot invent new oil. We get one go at using it, and it cannot be reinvented. There can be no doubt that oil is a diminishing supply and, therefore, we should be acting accordingly.

Some Members asked why we should accept all that scientific evidence. It is the best evidence that is available and there are credible theories behind it. Members should remember that, a short time ago, there was the issue of the ozone layer opening up, thereby enabling greater levels of light to enter and affect the earth's climate — particularly at the Antarctic — and a decision was taken to ban CFCs.

Guess what happened — the scientists got it right. The hole in the ozone layer has started to close again, so sometimes scientists get things right. Until there is evidence to the contrary, we should act on this matter, not only to protect the environment and minimise climate change, but also to protect our pockets — as the Minister and others have said — and to protect us all against the diminishing oil supply.

12.45 pm

David Ford highlighted the need to legislate on these issues. There can be no doubt about that. He also pointed out that the Minister must lead by example, which has not happened. Alastair Ross seems to be a sceptic. It seems that he is happy to follow the Scottish nationalist agenda and simply do something different for the sake of being different.

I thank the Assembly's Research Services for obtaining transcripts of the advertisements. No one who reads those advertisements will see anything offensive in them. I hope that many people will take the opportunity to read them. It is important that we move on and that proper action is taken. It is important that we respect the Programme for Government and take action to protect our environment.

The Minister loves attacking others, but he drives a 4x4 "Chelsea tractor". What sort of example is that for the Minister of the Environment to set? The Minister is also a double-jobber, so he probably flies to and from Westminster in one day. He must have a huge carbon footprint. There is no doubt that, on occasion, he flies back and forwards two or three times each week in order to do both jobs. There are very practical issues that indicate that he is not setting a good example as an Environment Minister. I wish that he would take that aspect of his job more seriously and lead by example on this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion, and I am content with the amendment.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 29.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Gallagher and Mr McGlone.

NOES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr T Clarke and Mr I McCrea.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that a valid petition of concern on the motion has been presented. Therefore, the vote on the motion will be postponed until a time to be determined by the Business Committee.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that the vote on the motion on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign will be the first item of business on Monday 30 March.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Primary Schools

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

Mr Storey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings in the recent report from the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate that in primary schools the overall quality of provision was not good enough in one third of schools; that standards attained were not good enough in one quarter; that there was too significant a variation in the standards of literacy and numeracy attained; that the quality of teaching was in need of improvement in one lesson in every five; that the quality of planning was inadequate in one school in every ten; and that the quality of principals' leadership is an area for improvement in one quarter of schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to place greater focus in early years and primary education, including the low level of funding and the pupil-teacher ratio, encouraging greater parental involvement and placing a greater emphasis on early intervention and numeracy and literacy.

This afternoon, not only in this debate but in that which will follow, we will deal with issues that are of the utmost importance to many, if not all, families in Northern Ireland. As a result of these debates, we will have a focus, for the right reasons, in relation to education.

We are lectured regularly about how an education system in Northern Ireland — which matches pupils to the most appropriate school for their individual needs — somehow leads to inequality and low levels of performance. That is a tired argument that the Minister has regularly sought to employ. She has tried to present herself as a champion of equality and excellence when, in fact, she represents neither of those.

However, when we get down to considering the information — the facts of the case — the reality is very different. That is where the Minister has often run

into difficulties in the past. She has an inability to decipher facts and acknowledge, let alone face up to, realities. Nonetheless, the evidence remains: stark and true, it continues to cry against the Minister in her policies, practices and priorities.

According to the Education and Training Inspectorate's 'Chief Inspector's Report 2006-2008', we are forced to conclude that it is not just the case that the Minister fails when she does not prioritise: she also fails when she does prioritise.

Let me give an example. Consider Irish-language education, which is something to which the Minister has given priority and into which the education system pours some £20 million of public funds. At this juncture, I must say that, unfortunately, the Minister has used the Irish language as a political weapon.

What did the chief inspector's report have to say about the Irish-medium sector? It said that there had been a slowdown in the growth of the Irish-medium primary sector. Crucially, it also said:

"Teachers across the sector need to pay due attention to developing their own Irish language competence."

It did not refer to "excellence" but merely to "competence".

There is a world of difference between excellence and competence. The Minister might aspire to excellence in the performance of her duties; the rest of us would be pleased if she could simply improve the state of competence.

According to the chief inspector's report, even with regard to the Minister's pet project — the Irish-medium sector — she has failed. The obvious conclusion is that there are teachers in the Irish-medium sector who are barely competent, if at all.

Let us consider a few more facts. Long before pupils sit assessment at the ages of 10 or 11, there are differences. For example, the millennium cohort study found that by the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are already one year behind more advantaged children in their social and educational development. The Minister has sought to blame academic selection for all the educational ills of Northern Ireland. By that, of course, I refer to academic selection at 11 years of age; not three years of age.

In the Minister's world, the influence of grammar schools and the effect of academic selection at age 11 in some way reaches down through the years to three-year-olds, and is the primary cause of all the disadvantages in the education system. Surely, that cannot be the case. Anyone with eyes to see ought to be able to conclude that that is not so. It ought to be clear that those types of differences are not the fault of the selective system or of grammar schools, nor are they down to academic selection at age 11. If the

Minister really wishes to deal with inequality and if she is really in the equality business, she would prioritise that fact instead of her failed attempts to impose her ideology on Northern Ireland.

The fact is that children who attend a good quality preschool have better cognitive and intellectual outcomes. There is a marked difference between them and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research from the United States indicates that investment in preschool education can bring about long-term savings up to 13 fold. That demonstrates the need to invest more in early-years provision and in primary provision. We still await the Minister's decision as to what is happening for children between birth and the age of six. We wait, we wait and we wait.

The chief inspector's report outlines a number of areas in which primary provision must improve. Taking that report in the round, it does not make good bedtime reading for Northern Ireland's education system. There are issues that need to be addressed and there are issues that must be addressed. Overall standards; varied literacy and numeracy levels; quality of teaching; quality of planning; and quality of leadership at senior management levels are all issues that the inspector highlighted and that need to be tackled. It is through tackling those matters that we can make improvements, not through continuing to talk down the successes in our education system, which is the envy of others.

We must improve outcomes for everyone. We cannot afford to have young people with no qualifications. However, the level of underachievement in Northern Ireland is not as significant as the Minister and others would have us believe. I know that the Minister is somewhat concerned about the issue of achievement. Look at the report from the chief inspector, and look at the research that was requested by the Education Committee back in December. That information contradicts the Education Minister's persistent claims about high levels of underachievement in Northern Ireland's education system. Of the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom, only England performed marginally better than Northern Ireland in relation to the percentage of pupils who received no grade results at GCSE level in 2005-06. Northern Ireland's figure of 3.1% was much less than Scotland's 4.6% or Wales's 6.8%. Furthermore, the percentage of Northern Ireland pupils who failed to achieve at least five A to C grades at GCSE level was the lowest of the four home nations by some distance.

Not only is there the information received by the Education Committee, and the inspector's report, there is another assessment contained in the programme for international student assessment (PISA) results. So often, the PISA results are used by the Minister to indicate that we are failing and that we are falling far

behind. However, what did PISA find in its assessment of our education system?

It says that Northern Ireland's performance is broadly in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; we outperform the OECD average in science, and Wales with respect to reading. We want every pupil in Northern Ireland to reach their potential, and my party will continue to develop a number of proposals to seek to improve and seek to ensure that we move forward.

The Minister must address seriously the issue of special needs, which is included in the report. We are still waiting for the Minister's final view on the future of special needs. The chief inspector makes particular reference in the report to special needs. He is very concerned about the provision and about what is happening in special-needs schools. In fact, he made reference to the challenges in special-needs schools. I ask the Minister whether she is prepared to consider those and to meet the DUP and other Members to address the issue of special-needs schools.

There are worries in particular boards because special units are being closed down and the Minister still has not brought forward her proposals. She has accused my party of blocking those proposals. In the light of the report and of the concerns that are out there, will she explain how she will address those needs?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo.

I support the motion. That may be a surprise for some who listened to Mr Storey's speech. However, unlike the Alliance Party, which was somewhat sensitive about Sinn Féin's contributions to a debate yesterday, we support the motion, not the contributions from the Members on the opposite Benches.

After listening to Mr Storey, I am not sure what motion I am rising to support. Is it an anti-Irish-language motion? Is it a motion to attack the Minister? Or is it a serious attempt to improve standards in primary schools? The wording of the motion concerns improving standards in primary schools and reflecting on the inspectorate's report.

Mr Storey singled out the Irish-language sector for, in his words, "underachievement", but, given the mammoth task with which that sector has been presented and the mountain that it has had to climb, its achievements are amazing. Can there be improvements? Yes, there can be, and there should be. Should there be investment in the Irish-language sector? Of course.

Parents want their children taught in the medium of Irish, just as other parents want their children to be taught in the medium of English. Under the Good Friday Agreement and the 1998 Act, parents have every right to have their children taught in Irish. The

Department of Education, under the stewardship of Sinn Féin, will ensure that that right is protected.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not give way at this stage.

Academic selection is the old favourite issue. If the Members opposite were to listen to what Members on this side of the Chamber said, they would realise that we do not blame all of the woes of the education system on academic selection. However, when children in primary schools are divided halfway through the year and one set is sent to one side of the room and given colouring pencils and the other set is sent to the other side of the room and taught towards the test, there is no way that achievement in schools can be equal across the sector.

Sinn Féin recognises that there is good in the education system and that there is also poor management and skills. That is why the Minister has set out a programme of policies which are all centred on the principle of improving standards across the education sector.

The inspectorate's report is stark reading, but it should be a surprise to no one. The Members opposite have lectured this side of the House on many occasions, saying that we have a world-class education system.

2.15 pm

My party says that we do not have a world-class education system, but that within the system there are world-class educationalists providing excellent education. However, the system itself is not world class. Therefore, all the policies that the Minister has brought forward aim to improve standards: the introduction and support of the revised curriculum; 'Every School a Good School'; the education and skills authority (ESA); and investment in schools.

Mr Storey: If, as the Member says, those are all improvements, why is there a chorus of people, such as the Catholic bishops, telling the Member's party and the House that serious issues with respect to the ESA must be addressed because it is not capable of delivering the very improvements that he says are paramount to education?

Mr O'Dowd: The Catholic bishops are telling us that they are concerned that the Catholic ethos will not be preserved under the ESA. I am glad that the Member is defending that the Catholic ethos be taught in schools.

Mr Storey: I did not say that.

Mr O'Dowd: That is what the Catholic bishops have said: they are concerned that the Catholic ethos will not be preserved in schools under the ESA. If the DUP supports that demand, that is an honourable statement from that party. Sinn Féin protects the rights of schools to maintain their ethos. The Catholic

Church has every right to protect the ethos of Catholic schools. If there has to be —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will, in one moment.

The reason why the time to deal with the Education Bill has been extended is in order to hear as many views as possible — as the Chairperson of the Education Committee, Mr Storey, has, quite rightly, said — and to facilitate further discussion if needed. I will give way to Mr McCausland.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member, therefore, assure the House that he will support, in every way, the ethos of the controlled sector and the cultural rights of children who are educated in that sector? Will he ensure that as the Minister tries to move forward with the ESA, that that will, indeed, be enshrined in legislation?

Mr O'Dowd: I can assure the Member. My party advocates a sectoral support group for the controlled sector so that the cultural ethos of schools in that sector is protected.

I want to deal with Mr Storey's final comments, in which he referred to special educational needs. Seriously — I must say that I am amazed that the Member opposite is able to stand in the Chamber and demand that the Education Minister tells the House what she is doing about special educational needs when his party, and his party alone, has blocked investment of £25 million in special educational needs because of its religious fundamentalist views on life. You are not prepared to allow children of single parents to be treated in an equitable way in the education system.

The review of special educational needs is vitally important for the education system. Your party — and your party alone — is blocking it. You cannot, therefore, stand in the Chamber and demand that someone else does something that you are blocking.

Mr K Robinson: I commend the Members who have brought a most important motion to the House.

The motion highlights the stark fact that our education system is in disarray. Children, parents and teachers face uncertainty as the current school year moves towards its final term. While the Minister gallops along on her ideological crusade — for all the world resembling "Donna Quixote" as she tilts at the windmills of post-primary provision — her Department still fails to address the problems highlighted in the damning Audit Office report 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools', published in 2006, which showed that targets were not achieved despite investment of around £40 million.

At that time, the Department's response was that a review of the school-improvement programme was also planned. At present, that same Department has

more reviews under way than there are in the West End. It has reviews into provision for children from nought-to-six, literacy and numeracy, special education, teacher education, ICT, and so on.

This timely report by chief inspector Goudie notes that “provision is simply not good enough” and “standards are too low”. He states:

“Learners are thereby significantly disadvantaged and, as a result, our society as a whole is diminished. In short, there is still much work to be done to raise expectations and to close the achievement gap.”

Those are the chief inspector’s words, not mine.

I want to address the areas in which it is glaringly obvious that action, rather than review, would make a significant difference to the educational prospects of all our children.

Paragraph 33 of the inspector’s report notes the lack of positive role models, especially for boys. The Department has failed to address the issue of the low percentage of males who are entering the profession and the disturbingly low number of male teachers in full-time posts, especially in early-years classes in primary schools. Most male teachers tend to be in the older age range, and, as they retire, the percentage of male role models will continue to decrease, specifically in areas that are already marginalised. Action is required, Minister.

Young teachers leaving college are unable to gain full-time employment and, consequently, to expand their professional expertise. Furthermore, the continual loss of the most experienced members of the profession dilutes the impact of the teaching force in the classroom. Despite a guideline issued by the Department in 1992 — if I remember correctly — problems associated with the re-employment of retirees to the detriment of young teachers are still unaddressed. Action is required, Minister.

A significant number of pupils in primary schools have special educational needs that must be identified quickly. Individual programmes must be put in place to remedy the problems, and support must be given to parents, pupils and teachers in order to help them address those issues. However, there is a shortage of educational psychologists across the five education and library boards. That has caused a horrendous backlog of pupils who are waiting to be assessed in schools, and schools are being forced to draw up lists to deal with the allocated number of pupils that need to be seen. Action is required, Minister.

For many years, composite classes have been a common feature in smaller rural primary schools where, because of the expertise of teachers, the supportive approach of parents and pupils’ excellent attitudes to education, a good quality of education has been maintained. However, the number of composite classes

in schools in urban areas, where attitudes to school are often less than positive, is increasing. In that setting, composite classes do not help the drive to raise literacy and numeracy standards. Action is required, Minister.

Primary schools are struggling, and principals have highlighted the inadequate funding of primary schools and the cumulative impact that that has had on schools that are trying to balance their moneys. It considerably increases the burden on principals in the day-to-day running of their schools. After all, principal teachers are not trained accountants: they are trained teachers. Again, action is required.

Now enters the answer to all our educational woes — the ESA. That wonder horse will raise standards. However, the Roman Catholic Church, the controlled sector, the integrated sector, the voluntary sector and a wide range of politicians, including those on the Education Committee, have reservations. Moreover, the chief inspector said:

“There is a real and significant challenge ahead for ESA in fulfilling these purposes, while establishing a more sustainable system and meeting parental choice through the maintenance of differing types of provision.”

Finally —

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

Mr K Robinson: I have said repeatedly in the House that children do not fail at the age of 11; the current system fails them long before they reach that age. Indeed, it is failing many in our —

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

Mr K Robinson: — marginalised communities before they even enter formal education. Urgent action is required, Minister.

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

Mr K Robinson: I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo inniu.

I am pleased to participate in the debate, and I thank the Members who have brought the matter to the Assembly.

I congratulate the schools, and I congratulate the teachers who are doing a good job and achieving good standards. As the chief inspector’s report has highlighted, there is, undoubtedly, need for improvement in some areas. The motion tends to focus on the empty part of the glass and highlights the negative rather than the positive. Having said that, I am not suggesting that we can afford to be complacent. We must continually strive to ensure that the proposals outlined in the chief inspector’s report are implemented and that subsequent reports do not constantly revisit the same areas.

It is totally unacceptable that in one third of our primary schools the quality of provision is not good enough. However, the motion homes in on the primary sector and largely ignores other sectors, including the post-primary sector. We need to consider the whole education system that is the subject of the report.

One area that I found noteworthy is that of literacy and numeracy, which has already been mentioned. In light of all the investment that has already been made in that area, and of the Westminster Public Accounts Committee's report and other reports, it is somewhat alarming that the chief inspector is still questioning the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation of literacy and numeracy in primary schools. One fifth of pupils are failing to reach standards appropriate to their age by the time they leave primary school, and we are told that there is insufficient intervention for those children with difficulties in numeracy.

One would have thought that, by this stage, literacy and numeracy would be a priority in most primary schools, at least to the extent that monitoring and evaluation would be taking place across the board. It is difficult for schools to take corrective action if the problems are not being identified. Without effective monitoring and evaluation in schools, the effectiveness of any future literacy and numeracy strategy will be very much weakened.

It is pleasing to learn from the report that the quality of leadership and management in three quarters of primary schools is good or better. However, it is disappointing that in one quarter of primary and post-primary schools the leadership does not reach that standard and is, in fact, in need of improvement.

School-development planning is mentioned by the inspectorate as an area in need of improvement. Leadership is key in the success of any school, and without adequate leadership the whole school effort is weakened, and pupils' learning suffers as a result. We cannot tolerate a situation in which school leadership is insufficient in one quarter of primary and post-primary schools. The inspectorate proposes more effective and robust processes —

Mr K Robinson: The Member makes a valid point. Does the criticism of leadership in schools not highlight the fact that the principals of those schools are being asked to take on a burden over and above the educational burden that they have been trained to assume and are being asked to carry out administrative and social-inclusion tasks, and a whole plethora of things that have been added to the burden of a principal in recent years? Is that not the point that I was making earlier, and will the Member not agree with me on that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have one extra minute in which to speak.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is commonly recognised in schools that the number of initiatives having to be dealt with by school leaders is placing an intolerable burden on them. There is obviously a need for greater support for school leaders — not only support, but continual professional development — that will enable them to meet the challenges that are outlined in the chief inspector's report.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I also welcome the fact that 80% of lessons taught are good or better and that 50% of those lessons are deemed to be good or outstanding. We should acknowledge that achievement, but we cannot accept a situation in which 20% of lessons taught are not up to standard. Almost one third of the lessons observed in post-primary schools are in need of improvement, with one fifth of English lessons requiring improvement strategies. A regression has been noted in pupils' numeracy skills at the stage of transition between primary and post-primary education. It is also worrying that the quality of planning in 10% of primary schools is in need of improvement.

Many improvements have been noted by the inspectorate, and we should congratulate schools on those achievements, but there are still major areas in need of further improvement. There is a huge amount of work to be done, and the report illustrates the challenge that the new education and skills authority will face. However, I believe that, with proper support and back-up resources from the Minister and the Department, schools will meet that challenge. Go raibh mile maith agat.

2.30 pm

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party will support the motion. Through you, Mr Speaker, I ask Mr O'Dowd to check the figures, whereupon he will find that my party has supported Sinn Féin motions more often than his party has supported DUP ones.

We support the motion for mainly the final section, which calls on the Minister to take the various initiatives outlined in the motion. The final line, which asks for:

“a greater emphasis on early intervention and numeracy and literacy.”

highlights the nub of the problem. The present system, as has been highlighted by the chief inspector, is failing our children, particularly those who live in areas of high social deprivation. In the words of his report:

“Improving the standards in literacy and numeracy remains a major challenge”.

He says that there is a need to raise standards overall, and:

"Schools must ensure ... that all of their pupils, whatever their ability, achieve a level of essential skills in line with their full potential."

Mr Storey made the same point about potential. We do not have to produce Einsteins; we just have to ensure that we get the best out of everyone.

All of that surely points directly towards targeted early intervention to nip the problem in the bud and avoid statistics such as those contained in the chief inspector's report about attainment standards in reading, writing and arithmetic at transfer age. We know that, left unattended, those deficiencies will carry through to the end of school age and into later life. How can pupils progress to higher learning if they are lacking in basic reading skills? I have no problem with that section of the motion; the rest of it gives me some cause for concern.

The chief inspector noted that the overall quality of provision was not good enough in one third of primary schools, and that standards attained were not good enough in one quarter of primary schools. That means that he is quite satisfied with those that were attained in two thirds and three quarters of primary schools, as Dominic Bradley rightly pointed out. For me, however, the chief inspector's primary concern was about the proportion of our workforce that is lacking completely in qualifications. It is interesting, therefore, that the proposers of the motion and their party seem so wedded to the educational system that has delivered that outcome. The chief inspector also highlighted the problem of the uncertainty about post-primary transfer. We will debate that issue later, so I mention it only to highlight to the Minister that yet another important voice has emphasised that there is extreme and widespread concern.

The three clauses of the motion that emphasise the inspector's comments about the quality of teaching, the inadequacy of planning and the quality of principals' leadership cause me concern. Ken Robinson rightly referred to that a moment ago when he mentioned the burdens that are placed on head teachers. It is one thing for the chief inspector of schools to mention those things in a dispassionate and analytical manner in the context of a wide-ranging report. It is quite another to see them highlighted in a brief Assembly motion that does not commend the many good outcomes that are noted in the report. Teachers, and particularly principals, who are watching this debate will need reassurance, especially from the proposers of the motion, that it is not an attack on their professional standards. Other DUP contributors to the debate will, perhaps, comment on that.

Mr Storey: I am quite happy to respond to that point. My party has always valued, as have others, the educational excellence of our teaching profession. However, no one — the Minister or any of us — can

say that the report does not have an important role to play in informing us and ensuring that we put in place mechanisms that can address the issues that are raised in the report.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Lunn: I accept what the Member says.

Morale is low enough in our schools, and those who work in them are among our best, but hardest-pressed, public servants. Ken Robinson is absolutely right about the demands that are placed on head teachers in particular. Having said that, I commend the final section of the motion, and my party will support it. It is indisputable that our primary schools are a comparatively underfunded part of our schools system, and that, as a result, much of the work that is required to boost basic literacy and numeracy cannot proceed. That is a ludicrous situation. We end up spending huge amounts of public money on literacy and numeracy in later life, when the problem can much more easily be solved right at the start of a child's education. I am sure that we all agree about that, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Miss McIlveen: It goes without saying that my party values the contribution of staff in our schools, but we cannot ignore, in the words of the chief inspector, that we are failing substantial numbers of our children and their families, and are failing in our provision.

The issue is not, nor should it be, about party politics or academic selection. However, it should be focused on the scandal of how, in the twenty-first century, there is a failure to meet the most basic needs of more than 20% of our children in the education system. It should be about how we intend to dress this matter because, blatantly, the current strategies have failed to work.

The chief inspector's report makes sobering reading and identifies clearly that one fifth of children leave primary school after seven years without the ability to read, write and count to the appropriate standard. A total of 40% of children leave primary school without reaching the appropriate standard in numeracy. That is simply unacceptable, and has enormous consequences for those children in respect of their future educational achievements and employment prospects. That signifies gross educational inequality, because those children are primarily from the most disadvantaged areas and backgrounds.

Children who are entitled to free school meals are twice as likely to leave school without any qualifications. Care-leavers are 20 times more likely to leave school without any educational qualifications. As few as 23% of pupils from the most deprived backgrounds achieve five or more GCSEs, compared with 64% of pupils

from other backgrounds across Northern Ireland. Of the total number of young people who took GCSEs last year, 25% failed to gain a single pass at grade C, effectively depriving them of any qualification that is valued by employers.

As children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds go through the education system, they fall further behind. That creates an ever-widening opportunity gulf that, by age 11, some children will never overcome. Surely, we should tackle that gulf, head on. The answer does not lie with helping children aged 11 or 16; it lies much earlier — before children even start school — and rests with parents by giving them the capacity and capabilities to support their children educationally. Research has shown that if we invest only £1 in the life of a child, we will make the most impact and gain the highest return by investing in his or her early years.

The ability gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children open up early — in the first few years of a child's life. With our early-years strategy and provision, we can begin to address and prevent disadvantage. There is no comfort for the Minister in the chief inspector's assessment of early-years provision, because it identifies clearly the variation in quality. Less than half of nursery provision is deemed to be "very good" or better, and, in the voluntary and private centres, it is just over one third. Indeed, that indicates a decline in overall effectiveness of the provision.

If the Minister really wants to make a difference to the equality of educational opportunity, she should address the provision and funding for early years. Where is the strategy for children aged nought to six, and why have we waited so long for its publication? It seems that early-years provision is not a priority for the Minister. She has failed to make early years either a policy priority or a funding priority.

The other crucial factor in improving educational outcomes for children is the involvement and support of parents. Research has demonstrated that parental involvement is the main factor in making a difference. A key indicator of success in further educational achievement, in particular, is that of parents providing children with early access to books, and reading to their children. One of the few mechanisms for supporting parents' involvement in education and their ability to be a co-educator for their children is extended schools. However, we have seen only the most minimal of such programmes, and the Minister appears to have given little or no priority to that in her Department's budget. She has cut the budget for extended schools, and the future of that programme remains uncertain.

In the recent literacy and numeracy strategy, mere lip service was paid to the involvement of parents in

one paragraph towards the end of the document; however, there was no real sense of commitment to ensure the capacity and capability of parents to support their children's education.

The chief inspector identifies that, in the most effective schools, parents are involved from the outset, they are given comprehensive information on their child's progress, and they are shown how to help through parental workshops.

Make no mistake — this is a scandal, and one in which the Minister plays no small part.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring her remarks to a close.

Miss McIlveen: She continually tells us that she is the Minister of Education. This report tells us that she is the Minister of failure.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the publication of the Education and Training Inspectorate report, which is a necessary tool in identifying strengths and weaknesses across the education sector.

A number of issues are identified in the report, many of which are positive. Some of the issues raised are less positive and areas are identified for improvement. We must not lose focus on the chief inspector's statement that a majority of our children, young people and adult learners continue to achieve well and that there has been improvement over the past two years. That is not to be complacent; there are, without doubt, areas for improvement. However, we must put on record our recognition of the excellent work and standards of our teachers and principals in schools across the North, who ensure that all our children have the skills and education necessary for the future.

For too long, our education system has been focused on inequality. Therefore, it is no surprise that the chief inspector found that the biggest gap in educational attainment — especially in literacy and numeracy — is among those children from socially disadvantaged areas. I have a number of statistics that Michelle McIlveen quoted, and I will not repeat them.

It is time to focus on ensuring that all children receive the kind of education that provides them with the best start and the best skills that they need for life. That means that we must focus on primary-school years, because that is when we build the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and ensure that children who fall behind are immediately given the help that they need. That is why the recent literacy and numeracy strategy focused on classroom teachers as a critical instrument in ensuring the engagement of children in learning and achieving the basic skills.

Making every school a good school is core to the Minister's agenda, and it is the only real mechanism to ensure that all children are given a fair chance of a decent education. The Minister supported the extended schools programme, which is essential in ensuring that children are supported beyond the classroom and are ready to learn when the school day begins. Through the provision of breakfast clubs, support with homework and activities at the end of the school day, the Minister has also ensured that children are best equipped to cope with the school environment.

Furthermore, the extended schools programme has been a vehicle for ensuring the involvement of parents, which is essential for children to succeed. Many parents, especially those from socially deprived backgrounds, may not have had a positive experience in school. In order to ensure that those parents do not pass that attitude on to their kids, the extended schools programme has been used by many schools to support parents to help their children and also to attract parents back into learning. That is why the Minister, despite budgetary restrictions, has continued to support the extended schools programme throughout her time as Minister of Education.

Undoubtedly, there is still much work to be done. The report identifies the issues that need to be addressed, which the Minister will take forward. Sinn Féin and the Minister are committed to making sure that we have the best education system for all our children, not just for the privileged few.

Mr Poots: Given that the Minister has been in her post for less than two years, it would be inappropriate to blame her for everything that is wrong with our education system. Nonetheless, there are things in the report that we need to learn from and take cognisance of. The Minister's actions until now do not provide great encouragement that a report in years to come will point to significant improvements that were made during her tenure.

Once again, a challenging issue in the report is the number of people who leave school without educational qualifications. That is a huge challenge for all of us. Unfortunately, the single focus of the Minister to address that problem has been on academic selection and transfer from primary school to secondary school, instead of where the problem starts. If people want to get to the nub of a problem, they need to go to where the problem starts — not halfway through the process.

The problems start with early-years funding and support. The report repeatedly highlights the benefits of nursery education and the quality of nursery schools. It also highlights the fact that nursery schools achieve higher standards than private-sector playgroups. However, in many areas across Northern Ireland, those nursery facilities do not exist. Why is the Minister so focused, concentrated and driven on the issue of

post-primary transfer but not focused, concentrated or driven on the provision of nursery education for our children?

We need our children to have the right start, and that is what the report states. It states that we are weak at the start of the education process, and as a consequence, we are weak at its conclusion.

2.45 pm

I challenge the Minister to use the findings of the report to get her house in order on education. Let us see that some good has come out of the time that she has happened to be the Minister of Education. That "some good" could be to ensure that in their very early years, our young people are resourced properly and adequately, with the right people and the right education system in place.

Raising education funding by 0.01% was a pathetic effort. That was done by moving the threshold from 1.04% to 1.05% for our primary schools for this year. I say to the Minister that that is not good enough. It is not satisfactory, and as a consequence, the reports that we will get on education and on this particular Minister in the future will read "fail".

Mr B McCrea: I sometimes wonder whether I am living in some kind of land of *déjà vu*. We keep having these discussions over and over again, yet nothing seems to change. The essence of what the Ulster Unionist Party has been trying to say about the education debate is that it is not about the 11-plus; it is about what happens at 11-minus and much earlier. It is about primary school, pre-primary school and nursery education.

The statistics in the chief inspector's report highlight certain challenges. When we look at those, we come back to the universal truth, which is that the single most important determining factor in our children's education is the quality of our teachers, particularly that of our school leaders.

I have tried everything to communicate with the Minister of Education. I have rationalised, pleaded, brought information to the table, and I have — occasionally — let my emotions get the better of me. However, none of those seem to cut it or to make any difference.

In bringing out salient information, if one wants to see what we have to do for the future, one has only to look across the water to Scotland, which has a fully comprehensive system. I borrowed a book from the Assembly Library called 'The Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland', which is a review of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report. It states that around 15% of primary 6 pupils were not reaching the agreed standard of reading at level C. That rose to 26% of

pupils in primary 7 and to 36% of pupils in secondary year one.

The book goes on to state the disparity of results in Glasgow, where there are multiple levels of deprivation. Those are precisely the areas where there are difficulties in reading, writing, scientific endeavour and so on. The lesson is clear: we will not be able to solve the issue without looking at the underlying causes of the problem. Those causes are social and economic deprivation, that is, multiple levels of deprivation. If you do not fix those issues, you will not fix anything else.

I say to the Minister as calmly and as reasonably as I can that we want to see change. We want to focus resources and attention on those schools that are struggling to meet some very real challenges. In that regard, the almost incessant chatter about the 11-plus is a red herring, because it is distracting us from the real job. If people really want to make a difference to the young people of Northern Ireland, and if they really want to see what can be done, the essence of the solution is to make every school a really good school.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member accept that while he and others have been chattering about the 11-plus, the Minister and the Department have moved on with a raft of changes to the education system that are focused solely on improving standards?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will use that extra minute to say that when I was talking about Members chattering, I was not talking just about people on this side of the House; I was talking about people on all sides of the Chamber. Nobody is getting to grips with the issue.

If one considers the matter, one realises that there is much to unite us. There is a common desire to improve the educational underachievement of many people in Northern Ireland, from whatever side. There is no sense in which one person is right and the other is wrong; there are lessons to be learned from all people, but those lessons must be learned. The issue comes down to the fact that we all want to find a way of concentrating resources, as the inspector pointed out, in the schools that need help — the schools that are challenged by really difficult social systems. It is no good for us up here to pontificate about that unless we are prepared to do something about it.

If the Minister were to come — and I have said this to her in the past — with a proposal to give more funding to primary schools, she would find some support. Had she said that for the long-term future of Northern Ireland we must invest more in nursery provision, I think that she would have received support. We must not allow ourselves to become involved in ideological

rants or to go down the road of rhetoric. We must try to find a way to work together on this matter.

There is no bigger test for the Assembly than to find a satisfactory solution to the education debate. It is not about politics; it is about people and all our children. Having put that message across, I hope that the Minister will consider the points that we have raised. The Ulster Unionist Party joins with others in asking the Minister to invest more in primary schools and in teachers. Please put our children before politics.

Mrs M Bradley: On reading the motion, my first thought was of the absolute shock felt by members of the Education Committee when we were furnished with the chief inspector's report. The statistics are worrying, to say the least, so it is up to us to instigate improvements for the future of pupils and of Northern Ireland.

Although the motion concentrates on primary schools, the results for post-primary schools must also be evaluated. There is little in the report of which to be proud. Despite the hard work of teachers, levels of quality, assessment and management hardly reach the dizzy heights. However, given the conditions and abuse through which some teachers must work, that is hardly surprising. Just two weeks ago, my colleague Dominic Bradley tabled a motion pertaining to violence against teachers. Some teachers face violence day and daily, and, therefore, we must not slaughter them for those results. However, we must tackle the system, one that is clearly not working.

The chief inspector has given us guidance on how to improve areas that are not up to scratch, but, in order to make those improvements, we need the means to do so. That is where the Minister can play her part. If that means that she reconsiders her budget allocations, then that must be done. Where there is need, we must attend to it.

One point in the report is particularly alarming. It states:

“Important issues highlighted in a survey report in May 2005 are still relevant. Only one-third of the primary schools have a clear focus on ICT to support teaching and learning in all classes across the curriculum. In addition, primary schools need to develop more systematic monitoring and evaluation of their ICT provision, and to continue to provide appropriate staff development.”

The report must be considered well and acted upon, and that will require leadership, effort and money from the Department. Therefore, I implore the Minister to support schools, give them guidance and, more importantly, provide them with the funding that they require.

Parental involvement is in no sense a new matter. However, parents in my constituency are sometimes reluctant to become involved in the school community, or even to approach teachers about their child. In Australia, there is a long history of parental involvement in the classroom. Parents must take their

turn to take part in reading, play and exercise. I am fully aware that, in order to protect children, parents would have to be assessed and vetted, but the system works there, and, although it would take time to implement and to encourage parents to take part here, it is possible to achieve higher levels of literacy and numeracy and to create a more unified and welcoming education environment for all.

Education and stimulation in the early years are vital and highly recommended. However, a situation exists in which working parents have real difficulty finding places at preschool for their children because of the lack of places and the fact that the available places are already allocated to children whose parents receive benefits.

That situation lies at the door of the Education Minister, but it demands answers and assistance from many other Departments. After all, we are working towards one goal — a better and a shared future that starts at school and, for some, at preschool. A shared future is a shared responsibility. There must be action in order to achieve that, not words on paper that gathers dust on a shelf. We must not let down our children again. I support the motion.

Ms Purvis: I reviewed the chief inspector's recent report on the state of our schools with interest, as did the authors of the motion. The report's findings, which are outlined in the motion, are not great news. However, the report is not all doom and gloom; it also contains a number of positive findings. Others in the Chamber have fulfilled their role by delivering that information.

As regards the long-running debate over the great strengths and unjustifiable weaknesses of education in this country, there were no real surprises in the report for me. We have understood for years the value of early-years education and intervention that involves removing inequalities and giving children their best start in life. Yet we struggle to fully develop, deliver and fund that provision, even in our most deprived areas.

We have known for decades that our primary schools are under-resourced and that that is based on an historical legacy of social condescension — elementary schools were for the masses, and not much was expected of the masses. Nonetheless, we continue to fund our primary schools at the lowest per-pupil level in the UK. It has been known for centuries that children who cannot read and write become adults who are more likely to be economically inactive. In modern society, failings in literacy and numeracy are penalties for life, yet we fail to set and to meet appropriate standards in those subjects for all our children and young adults.

Those are ongoing and serious challenges that require immediate and appropriate attention, but they are not news. The real feature of the report was the

chief inspector's commentary, in which the findings were put in context. In that commentary, he offers direction for those in the Chamber with the responsibility for creating, scrutinising and supporting policy that affects education. He states:

“We must focus our efforts clearly on reducing the gap between those who currently benefit most from our overall education system and those whose educational achievements are constrained by the poverty of social deprivation, of low aspirations, and, increasingly, the challenges of coping with modern society.”

That goal is at the heart of my party's education policies, and I believe that the policy objectives outlined in the motion are the correct means of moving towards that aim. Only by delivering comprehensive early-years provision, fully-funded and resourced primary education, greater support for parental involvement, and a firm focus on high standards in literacy and numeracy will we start to reduce the massive gaps in our education system and, therefore, in our society.

It is also refreshing to see the DUP taking an interest in all primary students and not just those who are on their way to grammar school. We have challenged our primary schools not only with educational attainment, but also with major critical pastoral-care issues, which they have admirably taken on.

Primary schools in east Belfast face particular challenges. Of the 20 most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, 14 are in Belfast, and four of those wards are in inner east Belfast. Those four wards are among 10% of the most deprived areas. Primary schools in those areas face difficulties well beyond the three Rs. Most teachers and principals in those schools embrace the additional responsibilities that come with delivering pastoral and social care as well as education. However, they are in dire need of real, flexible funding that will allow them to meet the changing demands on their schools.

The Minister of Education has delivered several principled statements in the Chamber about where she sees the Northern Ireland education system heading. I support a number of the principles that she has outlined in relation to removing inequalities and creating a system in which all children are selected for something, rather than just academically.

However, the Minister is failing to turn those principles into clear policies that can be implemented. I recognise that there are obstacles to turning the policy objectives of the motion into reality, but I believe that those objectives offer a workable framework that she should consider. I support the motion.

3.00 pm

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate, and I am pleased to speak to Members about quality

and standards in the education system. The wide-ranging nature of the motion highlights the complex issues. There are no simple solutions, but that is not an excuse for inaction. Today, I will set out for Members my approach to ensuring that every schoolchild is supported in reaching her or his potential.

Mar Aire Oideachais, ba ar na páistí a bhí an fócas agam ariamh. Éiríonn go maith le roinnt páistí, agus is ceart agus cóir sin a cheiliúradh. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu, mar is léir go bhfuil Comhaltáí ó gach páirtí ag glacadh leis faoi dheireadh go bhfuil páistí eile ann nach mbaineann na caighdeáin is airde amach.

As the Minister of Education, my focus has always been on children. Some children are high achievers, and we are right to celebrate that. Members from all parties are beginning to realise that other children do not achieve the highest standards. I welcome their realisation because, as Members will remember, when I took up my post as Minister, some parties were focusing almost exclusively on the so-called “world-class” education system and were paying little, or no, attention to the lack of standards or to underachieving children. I am pleased that the Assembly is moving in the right direction. I am glad that the message has been heard, and I look forward to working with all parties to deliver the far-reaching programme of reform that is under way and is specifically designed to address the issues that have been raised today, and those that affect children from all communities.

We have much to be proud of, as our system provides top-end qualifications to the most able pupils. However, it must also be recognised that many more children leave school with inadequate educational achievements. The chief inspector's report highlights the good or excellent work in schools and the improvements that have been made. There is much good practice that should be acknowledged, celebrated and shared.

However, the report also sends out a clear message that more must be done to raise standards. It identifies areas in which educational provision is simply not good enough. I am committed to equality, and that inequality of provision must be addressed. The Assembly must ensure that all pupils, regardless of where they live, background, gender, disability, race or sexual orientation, are given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Subsequently, all children, not only a privileged few, will be able to develop their skills, knowledge and self-confidence, and they will help to build a fairer, better and more equal society.

The chief inspector's report makes it clear that now is the time for strong leadership. He rightly values leadership in schools for the vital contribution that it makes to educational excellence. Political leadership is

equally important. Let us be clear that leadership is not simply about being popular; it is about being strong, making tough decisions and standing up to be counted.

No matter how hard it may seem at the time, leadership is a matter of setting a process on the right track to improve a particular situation. Leadership is about remembering that, at the heart of every difficult decision are the children sitting in the classrooms, and they have only one chance to pass through the education system. For them, I will do what I think is right, whether or not that is easy. I invite all political parties to join me in facing the challenge of showing leadership for the benefit of every child in the school system, because they all deserve that.

The report of the chief inspector, Stanley Goudie, helps to chart where leadership must be shown, and I met him to discuss the detail of the report and his recommendations. I also asked for copies to be made available to all schools and their boards of governors. The permanent secretary of my Department wrote to every principal and the chairperson of every board of governors to highlight the report and the need to take action now.

The importance of raising standards for every pupil and making every school a good school underpins all the issues. Indeed, ‘Every School a Good School’ is the title of the new school improvement policy that I will publish shortly.

Teachers and young people helped to shape our school improvement policy by telling us what drives improvement and what characterises a good school. A key message is that every school should be striving to improve learning and teaching. The Department will set policy, but schools, through self-evaluation, will lead improvement at every level. They will need appropriate support and challenge, and, for that to be effective, we must undertake a reform programme to help schools to raise standards for our children.

Má tá an beartas um fheabhsú scoileanna le bheith iomlán éifeachtach, caithfidh sé teacht leis an chlár leathan leasuithe: leasuithe a thosaíonn sna luathbhlianta sula dtéann páistí ar an mbunscoil; leasuithe ar an gcuraclam; agus leasuithe ar oideachas múinteoirí agus ar riachtanais speisialta agus cuimsiú.

In order to be fully effective, the new school improvement policy must be complemented by that wider reform programme: reforms that begin in the early years before children enter primary schools, reforms of the curriculum, of teacher education, of special needs and inclusion, and reforms that affect how children move from primary school, including transfer 2010.

Some parties choose to ignore the whole area of selection and the effects that it has on underachievement. If those parties continue to read and research into the

causes of underachievement, they will see the gaps that open up at P5, P6 and P7. While some of our children are being taught to a test, and others are sitting at the back of the classroom doing time fillers, children in the rest of Ireland, children in England, Scotland and Wales, and children throughout the world, are learning a broader, much more interesting curriculum. We ignore the link between selection and underachievement at our peril, because the children will suffer the disadvantage by parties continuing to ignore that.

Let us begin at the beginning. A child's early years are vital for development and well-being. The foundations for success are laid in those early years before a child gets to primary school. We must support our children at the beginning of their educational journey, a journey that starts at birth.

The influence of parents can be the single most important factor in a child's ability to access learning successfully. We have programmes in place to support parents as they fulfil their vital role — programmes such as Sure Start, which help to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of preschool children, particularly those from disadvantaged areas. I have visited many Sure Start programmes, including one in Mount Vernon, and, last Friday, I visited a very good Sure Start programme in Downpatrick. We also have the home childcare approval scheme and the early years development fund. Those help to provide a good foundation for children's future learning, as does the preschool education expansion programme, which provides one year of high-quality preschool education for every child whose parents wish it.

Those programmes show our commitment to setting children on the path to age-appropriate learning before they even start school. The importance of early years is why my Department is developing a strategy for that important time in a child's life. The early years strategy will ensure a smooth transition from the home, through preschool settings, to primary school. It will ensure that a solid framework is in place for early childhood to prepare children for life at school and beyond. In order to build on a good start, children need the best possible transition to formal schooling. We have introduced the foundation stage curriculum for years one and two to help to develop confident children who are engaged in learning. The curriculum stage provides a curriculum suitable for our youngest pupils, with the focus on developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they need for a successful future.

I have secured £32 million over three years to support the foundation stage curriculum. That means that, for the first time, all pupils in years one and two have access to classroom assistants. In addition, we are in the process of initiating a fundamental, comprehensive review of the common funding formula, and I welcome Members' comments from all sides of the House that

they want to see money going in on the basis of need and inequality and getting into the most disadvantaged areas. I can assure Members that the comprehensive review will ensure that we get money into our primary schools.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not give way. The Member has had his opportunity.

In relation to extended schools, we have recognised the key role of parents in their children's education. Parents are the first educators and should be part of a partnership to support their children. Extended schools are already building those partnerships: parents are supported to value education, encourage their children and provide stimulating learning experiences. That helps children develop self-confidence and the will to succeed, within a loving and caring home environment. The extended-schools programme is central to that important educational area.

I have written to the Minister of Finance, and I very much look forward to his support for the additional money that I need for extended schools. I welcome the support of everyone in the House to ensure that my Department receives that needed money. I have that money for the following year, as I have mainstreamed it into my budget, but I very much look forward to the Minister of Finance supporting me in that important work.

I turn now to special educational needs and the inclusion review, and in doing so I must join with my colleague John O'Dowd. I have brought my review to every Executive colleague, and I have received comments from every Executive colleague except one. However, to date, there has been a refusal by one party to put that review on the agenda. Although I welcome the comments that I have heard in the Chamber today, I very much look forward to the review of special needs and inclusion being placed on the agenda —

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: I will not give way.

I want a review of special educational needs and inclusion and £25 million on top of the £188 million. I want that on the agenda, and that is where people's priorities must lie, rather than the attempts to block it that we have had in the past. Hopefully, we are now living in new times and we will not continue with that. If we can quickly identify a child who is having difficulties or struggling, early interventions can be put in place to support that child.

Leagtar amach moltaí san athbhreithniú ar riachtanais speisialta agus cuimsiú do chreatlach tacaíochta a bheas níos láidre agus níos cuntasáí agus a thabharfaidh aghaidh ar riachtanais gach páiste a luaithe is féidir, cibé céim oideachais ag a bhfuil siad.

The review of special educational needs and inclusion sets out proposals for a more robust and accountable support framework addressing the needs of all children as early as possible, whatever their stage of education. I have secured £25 million in support of that review, and I very much look forward to moving forward.

As I have said, the transfer test has had a damaging and distorting effect on our primary curriculum and on our children. For those who opted into the test, preparation narrowed much of primary 6 and 7, whereas those who opted out of the test were often marginalised. I am delighted that the distortions of the transfer test are behind us. That — along with the transfer 2010 guidance — will help to address inequalities in the system. I hope that all schools will adhere to that guidance. I especially hope that grammar schools will choose not to practice academic selection and will choose the pathway of equality rather than the pathway of inequality. Transfer 2010 is an opportunity for all grammar schools to make their excellent provision available in a fair manner, for the first time.

Trí aistriú 2010 beidh bunscoileanna agus iarbhunscoileanna araon ábalta díriú ar a bpríomhthasc: torthaí a fheabhsú. The literacy and numeracy strategy aims to raise standards for all young people and reduce the gaps in achievement between the least and most disadvantaged. It is based on existing good practice in our schools.

Delivering on all those reforms relies on education professionals. Yesterday, I attended a very good seminar at the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, along with inspectors such as Stanley Goudie and other inspectors from England, Scotland, Wales and across the island of Ireland. Leadership and the raising of standards, which play a vital role in our schools, were some of the key areas that were addressed.

Recognising the importance of teacher training and leadership development means that we must deliver them as efficiently and effectively as possible. To that end, the education and skills authority, which is due to be established in January 2010, will have a clear duty to promote high standards. Establishing ESA will make better use of available funds, and that is equally important when considering school funding.

We heard the usual rants and prejudice against the Irish language.

Some Members: Time. The Minister's time is up.

Mr Speaker: Order.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Education: I pay tribute to the Irish-medium sector. I have spoken to representatives of all the Irish-medium schools and representatives of the education and skills authority. They are studying the positive findings of the report and the areas in which

there is need for improvement. To quote selectively is not the way forward.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I welcome the chief inspector's report, and I look forward to working with Stanley Goudie and his team in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr McCausland: I am glad to say that there was support from every part of the Chamber for the motion that was tabled by the DUP members of the Committee for Education. That is an acknowledgement of the importance of the issue that we have been discussing.

Mervyn Storey moved the motion by reiterating the point that has been made many times by folk from this side of the Chamber: the Minister constantly links together selection and underachievement. True to type, she did that in the latter part of her contribution today. The failure is not in that regard, but I will return to that subject later in my speech. The issue in respect of the Minister's funding is about policies, practices and priorities. Mr Storey identified those three points. The Minister has the wrong priorities, and, often, the wrong focus.

Differences in educational achievement arise long before assessment at the age of 11. Differences and disadvantages are evident at the age of three. Therefore, there is a need for greater investment in preschool provision, and the benefits that accrue from that will be obvious. Underachievement is not as widespread as is sometimes suggested, but it needs to be addressed as a priority.

John O'Dowd defended Sinn Féin policy, and informed the House that all the Minister's policies are about improving standards — however, he was not convincing. Subsequently, he launched into a bizarre and incomprehensible comment on religious fundamentalism, which baffled folk on this side of the Chamber.

Ken Robinson reminded us of the recommendations that were identified in the Audit Office's 2006 report, 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools'. The content of the Education and Training Inspectorate's report is not new; it has been identified already. Ken Robinson spoke also of the plethora of departmental reviews, and he said that the Education and Training Inspectorate's report brings a breath of reality to the situation. I am glad to say that Ken Robinson talked about social factors, such as the lack of role models for boys in schools, the subsequent importance of having more male teachers, and the difficulties that are being faced by young teachers in seeking full-time employment. It is important to emphasise the relationship between social factors and underachievement in education.

Ken Robinson described the ESA as a wonder horse, and, once again, the Minister proved true to form by reminding the House that the ESA would be the answer to all our woes.

Dominic Bradley said that we cannot be complacent and that the recommendations of the report should be implemented. He also reminded us that substantial investment has been made in numeracy and literacy, but that the problem remains. He spoke about the need for strong leadership in our schools. In an intervention during Dominic Bradley's speech, Ken Robinson said that too many demands and burdens were being placed on school principals, who are not principals, but they are teachers, administrators and social workers — they have to fulfil a plethora of roles. There was agreement on that intervention.

Trevor Lunn commented on the comparative underfunding of primary schools, and that has been identified in the motion. Money can be spent on the later stages of education, but a better return will be achieved if investment is made in the early stages. We want to convey to the Minister that the funding of early-years provision, preschool and the early years of primary school should receive priority.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that it would be beneficial if the Minister were to ring-fence the funding for early-years provision? If she did that, the people who provide it would not be surviving hand to mouth. They cannot plan without ring-fenced funding.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. There is agreement that greater weighting in respect of funding should be given to early-years provision and that the money must be invested there.

Michelle McIlveen spoke about the need to value our primary-school teachers. We can have all the necessary resources — school buildings, and so forth — but we will not get anywhere if we do not have good teachers.

It is important that we value teachers, affirm the work that they do, recognise the difficult circumstances in which they work, and give them all the support that they need. That is where the issue of funding comes in, particularly at that early stage, as it is important to ensure that classes are small and that the pupil-teacher ratio is appropriate.

Miss McIlveen reminded us that one fifth of children leave primary school with a low level of literacy and numeracy, and she quoted a range of figures — which I will not repeat — that highlighted the differential between some of the more disadvantaged areas and other areas. She referred to the need to support parents so that they can support their children. That point was picked up by others at a later stage, and I know that Mary Bradley also brought the role of parents to our attention.

The highest return can be got by investing at an early stage; therefore, the early-years strategy is important. Why are we waiting for that strategy? No policy, no priority — that is the indictment on the Minister.

Michelle O'Neill said that the report shows that a majority continue to achieve well but that we must not be complacent. She also commented on extended schools; however, the problem is that the Minister did not prioritise the extended schools scheme. Mrs O'Neill also referred to the opportunity to engage with parents, which is a point that a number of contributors commented on.

Edwin Poots said that the Minister has been in her post for fewer than two years — it merely seems like a lifetime. Children leaving school without qualifications is an issue, but we need to go to where the problem starts, rather than dealing with it halfway through the education system. That brings us back to the need for good nursery- and primary-level provision. The increase in primary funding that has been obtained so far has been negligible, and that is not good enough.

Basil McCrea said that the issue is not about the 11-plus; it is about what happens at 11-minus. He quoted from a book but did not get removed from the Chamber — I must learn from him how to do that, because I have not quite worked that out yet.

Mr B McCrea: It depends on the book.

Mr McCausland: Yes; it is probably a question of what book one reads.

Mary Bradley said that she was shocked at the Enterprise, Trade and Investment report. The inspectorate has given guidance on improvement, and that is good. We are glad that that guidance is there; the Minister must now take note of it. Mrs Bradley said that the Minister may need to review financial allocations and effectively reprioritise, and she also spoke of the potential role for parents in schools. When she was speaking, it occurred to me that we are told “every school a good school”, but we are talking about every child a good start. Every child must get a good start — that is, a good foundation that will take them right through the education system.

Dawn Purvis spoke of a number of positives in the report; however, she also referred to the historic underfunding of primary schools and the low levels of aspiration, which is an important issue. We need to help children to develop a good level of aspiration and help them to be ambitious so that they can have a good future. She said there was a need for comprehensive early-years provision, and she referred also to pastoral and social care, as well as basic education.

The Minister then spoke and said a number of things that I found interesting. She welcomed the fact that members of all parties are “beginning” to realise that there is an issue of underachievement. That comment was patronising, offensive and erroneous, because those of us on this side of the Chamber who work in communities that have suffered from underachievement for a considerable time have been identifying and

pursuing that issue and have sought to have it addressed. We have done that through such means as our membership of education and library boards, working on schools' boards of governors, working in communities with schools, or working as members of the Committee for Education here. I found the comment thoroughly offensive and inappropriate.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that the Minister seemed to suggest that she was the only person who ever visited any school in the Shankill or in any other area? Will he take this opportunity to say that all of us in this Chamber visit all those schools?

Mr McCausland: In fact, some of us were working on the Shankill Road at a time when her associates were bombing the Shankill.

The Minister said that leadership is not about being popular — my colleague Mervyn Storey said that on that basis, she must be the most effective leader in the world.

Mr McLaughlin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Speaker rule on whether that comment by Mr McCausland contravenes the Speaker's earlier ruling about such comments?

Mr Speaker: I will review the Hansard report and come back to the Member directly, or to the House.

Mr McCausland: I remind the Member that there has long been an association in the past — and I was referring to the past. There has been an association over many years between political republicanism and militant military republicanism. The position is clear, and I made it clear. I said "over years". There seems to be a sensitivity — a deep sensitivity — in some quarters.

The Minister reverted to type and blamed selection as one of the key problems.

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

Mr McCausland: She said that ESA would be the answer to all our woes. Many of us remain to be convinced — I think that she has other convincing to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the findings in the recent report from the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate that in primary schools the overall quality of provision was not good enough in one third of schools; that standards attained were not good enough in one quarter; that there was too significant a variation in the standards of literacy and numeracy attained; that the quality of teaching was in need of improvement in one lesson in every five; that the quality of planning was inadequate in one school in every ten; and that the quality of principals' leadership is an area for improvement in one quarter of schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to place greater focus in early years and primary education, including the low level of funding and the pupil-teacher ratio, encouraging greater parental involvement and placing a greater emphasis on early intervention and numeracy and literacy.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Post-Primary Transfer

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

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria under the Minister of Education's 2010 guidelines; calls on the Minister of Education to re-commission the CCEA test, she abandoned on 2 February 2009, that schools may then use for a maximum of two years; and calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011.

I am pleased that we now have an opportunity to return to this matter, which is, without doubt, the most vexing within the education debate. Indeed, of all the current issues before the Assembly, it is one of the most important.

I do not want to review in detail the history of how we got to where we are today, but I will make a few points. For the Alliance Party to recommend a system of academic selection, even on a temporary basis, is a major shift in its thinking — I nearly said "shame". I emphasise that our basic long-term approach is unaltered. Our commitment to end selection at age 11 is solid, as is our preference for age 14, à la Dickson plan, as the age at which educational choices are made.

The Alliance Party wishes to raise the standards of secondary schools to such a level that parents will opt for them by first choice and not as second best. We have no desire to lower the standards or destroy the ethos of any school. Indeed, it would be completely counterproductive to raise one standard at the expense of another.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No, not yet. Let me get into my stride. Come back in an hour.

We are offering a short-term fix to allow all parties — political or otherwise — to reconsider the way forward. In particular, we are asking the Minister to revisit, in an amended form, the compromise arrangements that she offered last year: a CCEA-formulated test based on the literacy and numeracy components of the revised curriculum, to be available as a standard test to all schools and all pupils.

That initiative has wide support from educationalists: they are not unanimous, but it has wide support. We have consulted widely, and it is fair to say that even those who do not agree have at least acknowledged the fact that we are trying to do something to avoid the looming confrontation caused by the Minister's current refusal to compromise and the threat of independent action by the grammar-school lobby, aided, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by her political opponents.

I believe that if the Minister can be persuaded to run with our proposals, the problems she had with her previous compromise offer, over the legislative basis for the application of a test and the necessary conditions to be attached, could be overcome. No doubt, the Chairman of the Committee will refer to that when he rises to speak shortly. It must be clear that no legal basis is required to commission the test: the legal basis is required to apply the test. The Minister could give the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) the go-ahead this afternoon to complete the work, which, I believe, was largely completed anyway when she last asked it to do the same thing. Given that the Education Committee has also asked for a compromise very close to ours, it is hard to imagine how it could oppose this. Equally, one would think that, in the circumstances, the Executive would not block the issue either — but who knows.

We are reminded constantly that it is all about the children. I am speaking on their behalf in appealing for common sense to prevail.

3.30 pm

I have been asked whether the Alliance Party would be content for grammar schools to use the test to provide 100% of their intake. The SDLP amendment makes specific reference to that question. We do not wish that situation to develop any more than the SDLP does, so we are suggesting a combination of the test results and the best of the Minister's guidelines to provide a balanced intake to all schools, including grammar schools.

We do not wish to be prescriptive about the criteria to be applied; that is a matter for further discussion when framing the legislative basis for setting the criteria. For that reason, although we recognise the merits of the SDLP amendment, we want to keep the terms of our motion simple. Therefore, we will not support the amendment.

We find ourselves in a strange position. If the House had accepted the Minister's 50%, 30%, 20% proposals some months ago, or if the Minister would now accept our proposals or the suggestions of the Committee for Education — which are practically the same — we could make progress. Two offers of compromise have been made at different times, but those, apparently, are

unacceptable. Currently, however, we are considering the departmental guidelines — or our compromise — as the way forward.

The Alliance Party could work with the guidelines, but it is abundantly clear that others cannot. The question is whether the guidelines are enforceable. Legally, they probably are, but are we prepared to countenance enforcement actions against schools or head teachers who allow preparation time for grammar-school tests or allow their premises to be used in a way that contravenes those guidelines? Will we really take legal action? What sanctions will we apply against those head teachers? Will we cane them? Will we affect their funding in some way? The situation is ludicrous and unnecessary.

Are teachers expected to defy the advice of their unions and suffer the wrath of parents who want their children to be prepared for, perhaps, several different tests? Do we really want all that pressure to be heaped on 10-year-olds? Do the Association for Quality Education and other groups want to go down an unregulated road that is strewn with legal minefields? I do not think so; we do not need to do that.

The motion, if accepted by the Minister, will resolve the confusion for parents, pupils and teachers, and it will provide the Assembly with two further years to deliver democratic consensus. There is a feeling that that just cannot be done, but there are plenty of things around this place that people said could not be done. People are sitting in Government together who were — as they keep reminding us, no less so today — sworn enemies just a few years ago, and they are reaching agreement. Sometimes they sulk for a few months, but they get back to business. Things are being done that would have been unheard of a few years ago, so this issue can also be resolved.

We think that we have the support of large sections of the educational establishment, including the Churches, headmasters, the general public and the Transferor Representatives' Council. The SDLP amendment also refers to a group of educators to try to find a way through this situation, which could be helpful. In fact, that is probably inevitable. However, it is the Department that eventually has to make the decisions, which is why I am appealing to the Minister. I do not think that I am breaking any confidence by stating that I believe that the Catholic bishops will also broadly support what we are doing.

Today, for varying reasons, I believe that we will receive the support of most of the parties that are represented here. I am under no illusions: different agendas, ambitions and endgames are involved. However, I do not care. If we are prepared to put our core principles on hold for the greater good, it is reasonable to ask the rest of the parties to do the same.

It is fair enough if they have different agendas, but we can co-operate for the next two years and try to bring some order to the situation — otherwise, confusion and unacceptable pressure will be placed on our primary 5 and primary 6 children.

To reject the motion is to reject the only route away from chaos. Everyone involved with education, which means pretty much our entire population, will be watching carefully to see how we deal with the situation. Minister, it is over to you — join with us. The Minister is often quoted as saying that it is all about the children. It is time for her to prove that she means that. I ask her to support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “2010 guidelines” and insert

“; calls on the Minister of Education to ensure the provision of a CCEA test, as she previously proposed, for a maximum period of two years; believes that no school should be allowed to admit its full year 8 pupil quota using the outcomes of that test alone or using any other test; recommends the admission criteria as outlined in the Minister’s statement on transfer 2010 on 2 February 2009 and welcomes the first criterion as a means of ensuring that all schools help tackle social deprivation; and further calls on the Minister of Education to set up a new educator-led working group tasked with building a sustainable consensus on non-selective transfer whose recommendations the Executive and the Assembly would use as the basis for legally binding regulations from 2011 at the latest.”

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an leasú don rún a mholadh. The SDLP’s position on post-primary transfer is, and has always been, unambiguous. Since the party’s foundation, its members have campaigned for the abolition of the 11-plus. We believe it to be academically unsound and socially unjust. We welcome the fact that it has been confined to the dustbin of history. However, we cannot stand by and tolerate a situation whereby eight years after the 11-plus was abolished, we are less than eight months away from chaos and anarchy in the education system.

The SDLP is not afraid to show leadership on the issue. We have listened to what people have said, and we will continue to engage. At this stage, we are all aware of the public uncertainty about the transfer issue. We cannot afford to ignore that. It behoves us all to do everything within our power to ensure that parents, pupils and teachers have clarity on the issue. It is for that reason that our party has tabled the amendment.

The 2006-08 report by the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate, which we debated earlier today, echoes the public’s views when it states:

“The uncertainty about the practical implications of DE’s outlined proposals for the review of post-primary education remains a concern for individual schools, parents and pupils.”

To my mind, the Alliance Party’s motion is somewhat unclear about whether it seeks to support the original proposed use of the CCEA test. To some extent, Trevor Lunn has clarified that in his speech. We were unsure

whether the motion supports the use of the test to admit a percentage of pupils — a different percentage each year — with all children in year 3 being admitted by application of admission criteria only, or whether it supports the use of tests to select 100% of the intake for grammar schools. Trevor now confirms that it supports the former, so I do not know why he cannot support our amendment.

Not only that, it was unclear whether the Alliance Party’s motion precluded the use of other tests, and we have clarified that in our amendment. Moreover, the motion does not point towards the future. Given those ambiguities, it was difficult for us to support the motion, which is why we tabled the amendment. I appeal to the Alliance Party to join us in supporting the amendment, because, as Trevor outlined, they are largely in agreement with major parts of our amendment.

The clear consensus is that an unregulated system is not desirable and that an interim regulated system is needed. The SDLP amendment offers that regulation as a short-term solution, pending agreement on a longer-term outcome. Our party’s amendment supports the continuation of such a regulated system for two years, but a system that is not solely dependent on a test.

As outlined in our policy, our party members would prefer that transfer take place without the use of test. However, given the exceptional prevailing circumstances, we believe that the partial use of the CCEA test is preferable to the use of an unlimited number of other tests in an unregulated system.

Mr Kennedy: I am interested to hear the Member outline what is now, presumably, SDLP policy. Has that policy been explained to the largely middle-class parents of Our Lady’s Grammar School, Sacred Heart Grammar School, Abbey Christian Brothers’ Grammar School and St Colman’s College in Newry? Those parents do not support the policy that has just been outlined.

Mr D Bradley: I doubt whether those parents, whose views Mr Kennedy seems to know so intimately, vote for his party: they are more likely to be supporters of our party.

We know from the chief inspector’s report — which was debated earlier today — that many post-primary schools, particularly in the non-selective sector, are continuing to feel the effects of demographic decline. Enrolment figures have dropped by almost 4,000, and more than one third of schools have fewer than 500 pupils, which is potentially disastrous. Demographic decline is going to worsen over the next few years, which will lead to unplanned outcomes in the form of school closures in some areas. We need to act now before that situation occurs.

The arrangements for Key Stage 4 pupils must be fully in place by 2013 to ensure that schools can

deliver the range of choice needed to fulfil the requirements of the entitlement framework. Area-based planning needs to continue in order to ensure that each area has an opportunity to shape its future educational provision. That does not mean a one-size-fits-all solution or one that is imposed on local areas from on high; it means a solution that best suits local circumstances, whether in Newry, which Mr Kennedy mentioned, Omagh, Derry, Lisburn, Enniskillen or anywhere else.

The chief inspector put his finger on one important aspect of the public pulse on this issue, namely the uncertainty about the practical implication of the Department's proposals. People want to know what the outworking of those proposals will be for their local area, and it is only through the area-based planning process that they will see what those local outcomes will be. That is why it is so important for the process to continue and for local plans to be agreed in each sector and between the various sectors.

We can build parental confidence by telling parents what their local schools will be, how those schools will co-operate and collaborate and how their children will access those schools. In addition to the immediate problem of transfer in 2010, there is lack of knowledge and information about how education will be delivered in each local area in the years that will follow, which is compounding the existing uncertainty.

If parents are to have a degree of confidence in the system, they need to know the results of area-based planning and be able to see — in the words of the chief inspector — what “practical implications” the Department's proposals will have for children in their local area. The SDLP believes, and proposes in the amendment, that an educator-led working group will be well placed to find sustainable consensus that will lead to a permanent solution for the future. That proposal and, indeed, all the main aspects of the amendment, have support in the wider educational community, and that will be confirmed in the future.

There is no doubt that we need change in our education system in order to meet the demands of the global economy, particularly during the economic downturn. We need change in order to address the shortcomings so clearly outlined during the debate on the chief inspector's report. We need change to tackle the long tail of underachievement and the large number of pupils who leave our schools without proper qualifications. We need to bring certainty to pupils, parents, teachers and schools, and the proposals in our amendment will help to do that. I commend the amendment to the House and ask Members to support it. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

3.45 pm

Mr Storey: I rise to speak as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The debate is timely for two reasons: it provides an opportunity for the Committee to put on record its position on the unregulated system of transfer that is before us and, more importantly, it provides Members of the House with a last-minute opportunity to give a clear and unequivocal message to the Minister of Education so that primary-6 pupils, parents and teachers are not subjected to further unnecessary uncertainty and stress.

Immediately after the Minister of Education's statement to the House on 2 February 2009 on the transfer 2010 guidance, the Committee requested that she come to a meeting of the Committee as soon as possible to discuss her proposed guidance. Having received no reply, the Committee discussed a widespread and growing concern about an unregulated transfer system at its meeting on 18 February, and agreed to write to the Minister. The Committee's letter of 20 February to the Minister — and a follow-up letter of 2 March, written after the Committee had received confirmation that the Minister was prepared to appear before it — made crystal clear the extent of the Committee's concern about an unregulated transfer system. There was a consensus within the Committee that that was the least desirable outcome for children, parents and schools. Both letters are available on the Committee's website, under the heading “Committee Responses”.

Those letters are important and are central to today's motion because they set out the Committee's proposal to the Minister to reconsider the use of her own CCEA test as an interim compromise arrangement. The letter provided evidence of widespread concerns over an unregulated system, and asked the Minister for full and urgent consideration of the core principle of using a regulated test for an interim period, which would not distort the primary curriculum. I stress to Members that no other conditions were attached to the Committee's proposal. Clearly, the detail of an interim solution required further work.

However, just 30 minutes before the Committee met the Minister of Education on 10 March, the Committee received the Minister's briefing note for the meeting. At the second bullet point, it stated:

“I will not agree to the Committee's request.”

The note went on to say that the CCEA test had been cancelled, and that it was commissioned as a contingency measure. After nearly two hours of robust discussion, as Chairperson of the Committee, I asked the Minister of Education whether she would allow the Committee to flesh out proposals. I also put to her a final question. The Hansard report shows that all parties represented on the Committee stated their

positions on the Committee's proposal. My question was as follows:

"Is it your intention to reflect on those considerations, or are you telling the Committee that you will not consider its request as outlined in the letter of 20 February?"

The Minister's answer is all important to today's debate:

"I always reflect on everything that the Committee says to me. I have been clear about Transfer 2010 — it is the Department's policy. There will not be a CCEA test. We have to move forward now under Transfer 2010 in the interests of all our children."

As Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I shall end by listing the evidence of concerns about an unregulated system, which we put to the Minister in the Committee's letter of 20 February. Those are —

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am deeply concerned that the views of the Education Committee are not being fairly reflected by the Chairperson in this debate. I ask you to examine the Member's speech because it does not reflect the Education Committee's stated position. No position has been agreed by the Education Committee on this matter.

Mr Speaker: I certainly did not call the Member as Chairperson of the Committee.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has consistently referred to himself as Chairperson of the Education Committee. He is speaking as Chairperson of the Education Committee, and I contend that his remarks do not reflect the agreed position of the Committee.

Mr Speaker: I will look at the Hansard report, and I will come back to the Member directly, or to the House. To clarify that point: from the Chair's point of view, I certainly did not call him as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. He may have reflected that himself as a Member.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I made it abundantly clear. It seems as though some Members have difficulty with their hearing. I am speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The Member is quite entitled to raise his concerns. If he is questioning the accuracy of the Hansard report, the accuracy of the letter that was sent to the Minister of Education — and the Member was present when that letter was approved — or if he has a difficulty with his own intelligence, that is his problem not mine.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order. The Member has just confirmed that he is speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. There is no agreed position from the Education Committee in relation to this matter. There is no agreed statement from the Education Committee on this matter. I maintain that the position that is being given by the Member is inaccurate.

Mr Speaker: As I said to the Member earlier, let me look at the Hansard report and I will come back to you directly, or to the House.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Obviously this is an issue that has caused grave concern — and I speak now not as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, but as a Member. However, obviously, I am glad that the Minister —

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

Mr Storey: I am just glad that the Minister of Education finds this issue so funny. Well, it is not funny whenever she has —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: Well, I will say this, Mr Speaker: it is not funny for the Minister of Education, who allows a situation to develop —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: The Minister said that she will not continue with academic selection. We will see by the end of this week, when other statements are made, as to whether that is still her stated position.

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member takes his seat.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Storey has confirmed that he was speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. I would like to place on record that in the letter of 20 February, from the Committee to the Minister on the issue of CCEA tests, I expressed the reservations that our party has on that issue. I said that we feared that it would become a permanent fixture, and I reiterated that point at the Education Committee's meeting on 10 March. I just want to record our party's stance on that issue.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I have said so many times in the House that I would prefer it if Committee business was not discussed on the Floor of the Chamber. I have made that absolutely clear on many occasions. Whatever happens within a Committee should stay within a Committee. It should not come onto the Floor of this Assembly for any debate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i gcoinne an rúin agus an leasaithe. I am against the motion and the proposed amendment. It is worth noting that among the letters to the Minister — which have been so referred to in the debate — was a letter from a principal in Lisburn, speaking against academic selection, upon which the Chairperson of the Committee for Education failed to reflect.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not give way.

Is there an agreed position in the House on the unregulated system, I wonder? I have taken a leaf out of Mr McCausland's book and delved deep into the libraries of this institution, into the dusty alcoves, and found many an interesting speech, which, I suspect, will not have me thrown out, but I will repeat it. These are interesting words:

"I think that there's not a stalemate and let's dispel this myth that somehow if we went into an unregulated system that the wheels would fall off the educational cart, that's not the case. I have every confidence in the educational system, in the teachers in that system who have had to take, I have to say, a huge amount of change over the years."

Those are not my words, but those of Mr Storey, speaking in favour of an unregulated system, if I am quoting him correctly, and I am quoting him correctly — from 'Stormont Live' on 21 December 2008.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

I also find it interesting that the Alliance Party and the SDLP, which have again stated in the Chamber that they are opposed to academic selection, bring forward motions which enshrine academic selection in our future. The SDLP tells us that, since its foundation, it has been opposed to, and campaigned against, academic selection. That is very admirable indeed; but it is decision time.

It is time to stand up and be counted on the issue, because for 40 years —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

Those who support the grammar-school system have got off the hook on every occasion. Forty years ago when the SDLP was formed, many people were lobbying to have academic selection ended, because, in the words of the SDLP, it is "socially unjust and academically unsound". Why, in 2009, are we talking about continuing for another two years with a system that a majority of people accept is wrong? The SDLP is really saying that it wants to continue with it for another two years, when it has already continued for 40 years from 1967.

On Sinn Féin's watch, the system will not continue. The state will no longer sponsor academic selection in any way, and we will not allow the small minority of schools to dictate to the majority of schools how the education system should be run.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

It will not happen on our watch.

On many occasions, I have listened to and debated at length with the DUP on academic selection. I remain somewhat bewildered about why that party supports it.

I do not understand why it brought the issue of academic selection into the constitutional negotiations at St Andrews. Where was the demand in the unionist community to bring that matter to St Andrews? I do not remember marches, protests or any sort of demand from any community or sector to bring such an issue to St Andrews. The DUP brought the matter to St Andrews — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: The DUP got crumbs off the desk of the British Government.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

The DUP has achieved a political stalemate on the matter. It believed that it had secured the future of academic selection. It may have done so in the legislation somewhere, but it has not done so in terms of the Department of Education funding or supporting it. We have to move beyond selection. In the earlier debate, Miss McIlveen outlined the fact that education underachievement is most prevalent in deprived working-class areas. We all have such areas in our constituencies, so why did the DUP make academic selection one of the issues at constitutional negotiations?

In many cases, the very reason for education underachievement is that children are told at age 11 that they are a failure. There is no point in supporting children at the age of three with extra resources if, when they get to 11, they are told that they are a failure because of two one-hour tests. In the future weeks and months, the pressure should be applied to the small minority of schools who insist on continuing with academic selection. They should be told that the game is over.

Mr B McCrea: I rise to bring a bit of calm and decorum to this overheated House. I have a vision. I see a runaway train, driven by the Minister of Education, hurtling towards Cassandra crossing. The Minister of Education has taken away the bridge and said not to worry because the train will jump the chasm anyway. Have I ever heard anything as ridiculous in my life?

When I heard John O'Dowd pontificate about failure, I was struck by the abject failure of the House to get any possible solution. Compromise was mentioned, but there is no such thing as compromise in this place. The Minister of Education said that she wanted to see leadership. When one has leadership with no followers, one gets dictatorship. This is a dictatorship; it is going nowhere and it will bring this place down. The Minister should think about the political consequences of her action.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way — I am not sure which Member, but I am

grateful anyway. Does the Member agree that, sadly, the Minister of Education is now the Minister of mediocrity?

Mr B McCrea: I cannot agree more. This is about mediocrity and about make-do and mend. This is not about the future or about vision.

That is a disgrace. The Minister of Education will leave her legacy, on which people will look back. I am not sure whether Members have seen the film called 'The Age of Stupid'. Now is the age of stupid: the age of inability to find compromise and to provide genuine leadership.

4.00 pm

We are in the process of bringing out facts and figures. People refer to "a privileged few". Let me say that 42% of children attend grammar schools. That is not a privileged few. A significant number of children attend secondary modern schools. They have a perfectly good, fantastic education and love their schools. They are not a privileged few. However, 25% of the school-aged population has problems with educational underachievement. That has nothing to do with the 11-plus; it has everything to do with social deprivation.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the previous Members to speak said that there is no demand for academic selection. Is it not the case that a survey carried out by the Member's predecessor as Minister of Education, and who is from the same party, found that 64% of parents who responded wanted the retention of academic selection? That nails the myth that there is no desire among the public for academic selection.

Mr B McCrea: Absolutely: Mr Weir makes a good point very well. It answers precisely Mr O'Dowd's position.

I do not read from notes often in the Chamber. However, I was given some notes, which, when I read them, I thought were good. I have, therefore, decided to share a few of them. One issue that they raise is that since the Minister has taken up office, she has, unfortunately, presided over a dysfunctional and ill-thought-out set of reforms that have caused much angst, confusion and even anger in the Chamber.

It is time for the Minister to adopt a different, less abrasive style, like mine. It is time for a new period of sensible consensus to emerge on post-primary transfer. That will not be easy. However, it is the Assembly's duty to try to do more. It is on the record that the Ulster Unionist Party, although it recognises why grammar schools have set out their own entrance tests, does not believe that that is a sustainable basis for transfer into the future.

The claims of victory that come from certain quarters appear ludicrous to parents, children and

teachers who face educational chaos. The Minister must realise that if she continues on her current course, parents, teachers and, above all, children will suffer. In reality, we, politicians, suffer little. We can have fun with our little political rivalries and postures. However, children and the public will hold us to account.

The motion is sensible and will give the Assembly, the Minister and the Executive the vital breathing space that they need to move forward with some form of consensus. Make no mistake: unless everyone agrees, nothing happens in Northern Ireland. To that end, I welcome the recent input of the three main Protestant churches. They want a sustainable solution.

My party also accepts that the 11-plus has had its day; it was designed for a different time. In the past, my party argued for the test's limited retention in order to ensure some continuity and balance in order to deliver schools from chaos. However, it is now happy to support the recommissioning of the CCEA test, which the Minister unwisely abandoned. There will be serious issues with regard to its design and piloting, but the Assembly must come up with something.

Even at this late hour, it is within the Minister of Education's power to prevent the education system from falling further into chaos. She can set aside her ideological prejudice and put children's welfare first. She can support the motion's principles.

My party supports the substantive motion.

Mr McCausland: I, too, support the motion. I welcome the fact that colleagues in the Alliance Party have brought it forward.

The first part of the motion reminds Members:

"That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria".

That is the situation, which, I am aware, is difficult for some members of Sinn Féin to acknowledge and accept. However, it is a reality. They have not managed to abolish academic selection.

They have failed utterly and miserably to do that. That is because during the discussions at St Andrews, the DUP addressed the issue of selection, and the current provision whereby it is possible to select children for a grammar school on the basis of academic criteria was retained. Therefore, that provision will not be given away, and Sinn Féin is impotent in that it is incapable of taking it away.

John O'Dowd told the House — very forcibly — that a minority should not dictate to a majority. I am glad to hear that. However, the point was made that survey after survey has made it clear that the majority of people in Northern Ireland favour the retention of an appropriate form of academic selection. In one survey, even a majority of Sinn Féin supporters said that they favoured the retention of academic selection.

Therefore, it is not a case of a minority dictating to a majority. The position is absolutely clear: the majority of people in Northern Ireland support the DUP view, which is shared by the Ulster Unionist Party.

The motion recognises the reality, rather than the unreality and the pretend world in which Sinn Féin wants to live. It calls on the Minister to recommission the CCEA test — which she abandoned on 2 February — in order that schools may use it for a maximum of two years. In other words, there should be a two-year breathing space that will provide an opportunity both for proper debate and real discussion and for calm reflection on the issue, rather than the confrontational and bullish approach that we have seen the Minister and her party demonstrate. I remember her party leader's comment to the effect that the Minister's role is to implement Sinn Féin policy. The Minister is trying to implement a policy, but it is one that she is incapable of implementing because of the provisions of the St Andrews Agreement.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: OK; why not?

Mr O'Dowd: Is the Member telling us that after two years of quiet reflection, the DUP will agree to abolish academic selection?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention, because it gives me an extra minute in which to speak.

The key point is that reflection is not about predetermined outcomes; it is about consideration. The fact is that the DUP is prepared to sit down and have a proper discussion, but not one that involves the head-to-head confrontation in which the Minister has indulged over what we were told earlier has been the past two years. She has indulged in a confrontational, bullying approach through which she has told the House that she is the Minister and that that is that. That is not the way in which to get the consensus that we need on the issue.

At the moment, there is no consensus even in the academic world. I could speak to one academic in the field of education in Queen's University who will give me one view, but another in that sphere will give me a contrary view. The Minister tells us that everybody except Sinn Féin is out of step. However, that is not the case. She does not recognise the reality of the legislative position or the reality of the variety of views on the issue.

Over the years, there has been no proper discussion of the matter. If we were given the opportunity to have that interim period, some security for parents and children would be provided, there could be debate on

the matter, and the issue could progress from the current stand-off. However, an unregulated selection system is in place, regardless of whether the Minister likes it. I acknowledge that it is not the best system, but it is much better than her other option of having no selection. The Minister has acknowledged that a CCEA test that would not have an impact on the teaching of the revised curriculum could be introduced. Therefore, there is no justification for the Minister's position and every justification for supporting the motion.

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

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta labhairt ar an rún agus ar an leasú inniu.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate on the motion and the amendment, although I will be unable to support either.

I believe that the Alliance Party's proposal is a complete departure from that party's policy position. I listened carefully to the explanation and rationale that was offered by the proposer of the motion, but the proposal lacks any coherence or detail on how any interim or compromise position would work in practice in relation to grammar-school intake. For example, the absence of any reference to social deprivation fatally undermines the proposal.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: I would rather get into the argument, if that is OK. I will see how I get on and will, if I can, leave some space for an intervention.

The absence of any reference to social deprivation seriously undermines the entire rationale for dealing with the inequities that exist in the current system, and to argue for preserving that system, in many ways, betrays that party's position.

I took the trouble to read the Alliance Party's position; it supports the abolition of the 11-plus, and it argues that schools should not be allowed to use academic ability to decide who should be given a place. That party's policy is also that children should progress to study a common middle-school curriculum for three years and argues that existing schools could provide what it describes as a middle-school education; that is an important point.

The policy position of the Alliance Party is also, importantly, that the election of a particular educational route should be deferred until the age of 14. Those views are the basis of consensus and agreement. It is regrettable that the Alliance Party should depart from that. I am reminded of the day that the Alliance Party Members re-designated themselves in the Assembly to provide support to the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. I also recall that, in relation to that episode, the Alliance Party promised to

never again abandon its principles; I suppose that this is a case of “*déjà vu* all over again”.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No. Please allow me to develop the argument.

I will explain my opposition to the SDLP's amendment. Although the middle section of the amendment is drawn directly from the guidelines produced by the Department, the opening statement sits curiously against the SDLP position, as defined by Dominic Bradley 18 months ago. He described the compromise proposals as a clear climb down from the Minister's stated position on academic selection. He railed:

“The Minister has caved in to pressure from those who are opposed to reform.”

He also said that bringing forward compromise proposals was:

“the thin end of the wedge for the continuation of the 11-Plus into the future”.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No. I hope that I am annoying you, because I am quoting the facts.

Today's amendment can only be described as yet another U-turn, and a betrayal of the mandate to abolish academic selection that the SDLP, since its inception, has sought from the electorate. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: Before I was interrupted, I was making the point that the SDLP is abandoning its mandate. We heard some reference today to that party's consistency; where is the consistency? Some people will see that party's position as contradictory and illogical, and that is probably the kindest remark that could be made about the SDLP argument that we heard today.

It is important to state that the process in which we are now involved is a one of necessary change — it is not change for the sake of change. It is a process of change with the sole aim of developing and building on the successes and the good, strong points of the current system, while addressing the serious inequalities and weaknesses that also, undoubtedly, exist.

What I have heard from across the Floor is that all parties are articulating a desire to have an education system that delivers and produces the sort of educational outcomes that we need, as a society, in order to face the challenges that will emerge in the years ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If Members have private conversations to hold, please hold them outside the Chamber.

4.15 pm

Miss McIlveen: It looks like this council is still trapped in groundhog day on this issue. It should be clear to all of us by now that it simply does not matter what Dominic Bradley and Mr Lunn say about post-primary transfer — or whether Basil McCrea takes a heart attack in the middle of the debate — the Minister will simply ignore us.

Mr Kennedy: Which council is it?

Miss McIlveen: We can continue to put forward motions, but she will still pay no attention whatsoever, because they do not fit in with her party political agenda.

The DUP has been very clear on this issue. We fought to retain academic selection: it is what parents want, and it is clear that it is what more schools and teachers across the communities are willing to now say that they want, despite the bullying tactics of the Minister, who has now left the Chamber. The Department —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member withdraw the remarks that have caused the Minister of Education to walk out of the Assembly? *[Laughter.]*

Miss McIlveen: Indeed. Despite the Minister's bullying tactics, the Department and her friends in INTO, it will not make a lot of difference.

We believe that academic selection is best for our children's education and for having an effective and well-equipped workforce for the future of Northern Ireland. On that basis, it is obvious that the DUP cannot accept the SDLP's amendment. I had to laugh when I read that one of the political bloggers — a former SDLP special adviser — had suggested that the amendment represented an attempt by the SDLP to seek to break the 11-plus deadlock. Unfortunately, if this amendment is the best that the SDLP can do then I am disappointed at its lack of imagination and understanding of the position of the two unionist parties and of the legislative reality that is in place.

Surely the SDLP knows that the DUP will not back the amendment, as the retention of selective transfer remains a key part of our education policy. The Minister —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No; I have plenty to say. The Minister, Sinn Féin and the SDLP must accept the fact that academic selection is staying and that nothing can be done without the agreement of those on the Benches on this side of the House. Only when that is accepted can we move forward. The problem that Northern Ireland faces time and again is that some parties work towards aspirations rather than dealing with political

realities. Given that academic selection has been retained through legislation, it would have been a much more productive use of the SDLP's time to put forward a proposal incorporating that fact in a way that would be of benefit to children across Northern Ireland.

In February, the Minister told us to think of the children.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: I have plenty to say.

We do think of the children; we also think of the education system, parents and society in general. We think about what the Minister is doing to children, parents and schools through her intransigence. We think about the emotional strains that are being placed on families throughout Northern Ireland while the Minister plays party political games with our children's futures for some ideological aspiration.

The parties should be working together to formulate a system of academic selection that addresses the flaws in the old 11-plus. I am not wearing rose-coloured glasses and thinking about the wonderful system that it was; but its problems can be addressed, and the Minister must remove her own blinkers on the matter. She previously said that the CCEA could produce a test; if that is the case, then it should be done. I do not agree with claims of chaos and scaremongering about entrance tests, but I do feel that the current unregulated system is not ideal.

The DUP has always been clear on that point; we previously proposed that a CCEA test — to agreed specifications — should be set for a period of up to three years, and that such testing could and should be carried out in primary schools. That period could be used to settle on a long-term method for transfer, and for any new system to allow for the continuation of academic selection. Any replacement test would have to address criticisms of a high-stakes nature; susceptibility to coaching; poor differentiation of results, and the time delay in waiting for results. Such problems are not insurmountable, given the progress of technology.

The DUP had also proposed the establishment of an agreed panel of experts with experience of transfer procedures, which would advise the Department of Education and the Assembly on the development of the best arrangements for us in Northern Ireland.

The Minister chose not to listen and not to seek consensus; she continues to plough her lone furrow — and stuff the consequences. I back the Alliance Party's motion —

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

Miss McIlveen: I fear that the Minister will once again ignore the will of the Assembly, the will of parents and the common will of our children.

Mr Kennedy: In addressing the motion, it is interesting to reflect on where we have come from. On 10 November 2008, the Assembly passed an Ulster Unionist Party motion, which stated:

“That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to end the uncertainty facing parents and teachers of children in Primary 6 by continuing with the existing post-primary transfer test until a replacement is designed and piloted by CCEA.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 35, p4, col 2*].

That resolution is guidance. Of course, the Minister recently issued her own guidance, for which schools must have regard; they cannot disregard it. That means that a board of governors can simply put the guidance on the agenda of a meeting, read it, have regard to it, decide that the guidance is not for that school and then move on. The guidance that the House gave the Minister last year, however, is slightly different. The Minister is subject to the ministerial code, which contains a Pledge of Office.

On 8 May 2007, the Minister told the House:

“Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Education, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p7, col 2*]

Paragraph (f) of the Pledge of Office states that the Minister affirms:

“to support, and to act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly;”.

Is the Minister, therefore, in breach of the Pledge of Office, and how many votes will the Minister ignore before she is finally willing to engage?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member join me in considering the supposed advantages of the St Andrews Agreement that there would be no solo runs by any Minister and that academic selection would no longer be an issue?

Mr Kennedy: I agree with the Member's sentiments. Unfortunately, we are now in educational gridlock, which is in nobody's interest.

The close similarity between the motion in today's Order Paper and our motion of last year means that my colleagues and I are happy to endorse the motion; however, we cannot support the SDLP amendment. It is too prescriptive, particularly as it appears to rule out entirely a role for academic criteria in a post-primary transfer process. If there is to be consensus, it must ensure that concern for social justice is united with, and not set in false opposition to, concern for academic excellence. The amendment, although well intentioned, unfortunately fails that test.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: Briefly.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member recall that Mr Lunn clarified the Alliance Party's position when he outlined the terms of the motion? He said that the motion is not intended to be test-dependent alone and that the Alliance Party also wants non-academic criteria to be contained in the guidance. Therefore, any party that supports the motion will be supporting the view of the Alliance Party as Mr Lunn expressed clearly.

Mr Kennedy: I accept the Member's point; however, that is not established explicitly in the motion. It may be implicit, and that might have been the intention of the motion, but when and if the motion passes it will not include an explicit reference to such a system, unlike the SDLP's amendment.

The debate over post-primary transfer has been ongoing for well over a decade, perhaps longer. If the Minister and her party still do not recognise that consensus and give and take are the only ways forward, I am left wondering whether they want our education system to be thrown into complete and utter chaos as they act out their bizarre Che Guevara fantasies of class strife. Sometimes, I think that the Minister's views were fashioned in the jungles of Colombia.

However, we are where we are. The motion is reasonable, because it attempts to guide the Minister out of the hole that she has dug for herself. The Minister's cancellation of the CCEA test that she commissioned has left our education system in a mess. Restarting the process to develop that test on a short-term basis is the only realistic way out of that position and would provide clarity for schools, parents and children. The unregulated system that the Minister has left us with is unsustainable — she should accept that and seek to improve the situation.

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

Mr Kennedy: The terms of the motion provides that the Minister should offer a short-term solution while the Executive get to grips with the issue.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the amendment. The SDLP totally supports the abolition of the 11-plus, which is socially unjust and academically unsound, irrespective of some of the comments that we heard during the debate.

The 11-plus can segregate and be the cause of much undue stress for pupils, teachers and parents. Our amendment allows for the end of the 11-plus and, essentially, the end of academic selection. It will also allow for an early resolution and a more unified way forward for the transfer of children from primary to post-primary education. There is much confusion about that issue, which has been caused by the bickering and the political point scoring over the past

year or so. It is time that we made the scenario educator-led. After all, the educators will be thrust into the middle of whatever system is eventually put into practice, and it is they who will work to teach and mould the children who may well be the high achievers of tomorrow.

It is essential that children, parents and teachers alike are given some sort of solace amid all the confusion. There needs to be a general test set by CCEA, and no matter where schools are in the league table, they should not be allowed to meet their intake quota from the result of that, or any other, test. That will give all children the chance to excel.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: No, I am sorry.

We agree with the first criterion referred to in transfer 2010, which should, in essence, help to tackle social deprivation. However, we have a concern about area-based criteria in situations where there are post-primary schools sited in the heart of residential areas that are graded as being socially deprived. That is particularly relevant in my constituency. Under the Minister's proposals, children from those areas will be forced into schools in which the bulk of pupils are classed as underachievers and linked to social deprivation.

We commend the amendment to Sinn Féin and ask its Members to support it if they are serious about the abolition of academic selection. Are they going to sit back and allow the top schools to create their own selection process that cannot be regulated, which will allow them to take a *carte blanche* approach, do as they wish and answer to no one?

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: No; I am sorry, I refused before.

With our amendment, there can still be some control, and guidelines can be issued for all schools to adhere to. Within the past hour, we were discussing the chief inspector's report, which outlined a mixed bag of standards and quality through primary and post-primary education. If we cannot sort out the mess around academic selection, I dread the next report.

I urge the Minister to listen to the people and commission a standard test for the next few years to allow an educator-led working group to create a non-selective transfer procedure that can be used as a basis for a legally bound regulation. The Minister should give the educational professionals the chance to succeed where political footballers have evidently failed. Our children and the educators are those who suffer.

It is time for it to end. We cannot and should not expect the educators, the children or their parents to go forward with a deregulated system; it is not fair.

I support the amendment.

4.30 pm

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I acknowledge the support of Trevor Lunn and the Alliance Party for the ending of academic selection. However, I am disappointed that they and he are not following through on their party policy on the matter.

I am also disappointed that the Education Committee has failed to reach a consensus to date. I note that the Chairperson of the Committee is attempting to misrepresent the Committee, as he did previously when I appeared before them, when he claimed to speak for all of the members when making statements. It was obvious that he did not speak for everyone, as my colleague John O'Dowd has stated.

The motion is yet another attempt to block or slow the process of change that I have set in motion. That process is designed to provide a first-class education for all of our children. The system that the proposers of the motion wish to keep in place was a failed one, and I have already made it clear that the status quo is not an option.

As I stated to the Education Committee two weeks ago, last year's test was the last 11-plus. That system was designed 60 years ago, and it is clearly not fit for the modern world. Not only was it outdated, but it was fundamentally wrong, based on academic apartheid, and it condemned the majority of our children as failures. In my opinion, no child is a failure. For that reason alone, there will be no further state-sponsored testing at 11 years old.

Cur chuige neamhoiriúnach agus neamhleor is ea an roghnú acadúil; cur chuige éagórach amach is amach atá ann. Tá córas oideachais uainn atá bunaithe ar an bpáiste agus a fhreastalaíonn ar riachtanais shaol an lae inniu.

Academic selection is an inappropriate and inadequate approach to education. It is also unjust and fundamentally wrong. We need an education system that is child-centred, and meets the needs of our modern world. I am anxious to see change that delivers for all of our children, and allows each of them to develop their own individual strengths and talents — a system that builds on the individual strengths that every single one of our children possesses, whatever that strength is. The singular focus on academic ability must be replaced by a focus on all talents and aptitudes.

In the absence of regulations, I have issued guidance. The policy of the Department of Education is transfer 2010. Schools will be obliged, in law, to have regard for the guidance. On equality grounds, and also because of risks of dysfunction, the guidance strongly recommends that schools do not use academic admissions criteria. If a school chooses to do so, it

must provide for itself the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that such criteria require.

Secondly, and more importantly, the Department strongly recommends that academic admissions criteria are not used because of the fundamental inequality and injustice of academic selection.

That brings me to the second part of the motion, which calls on me to recommission the CCEA test to enable schools to use it for a maximum of two years. I proposed the test for three years, not two. I proposed a legislative framework accompanying a test that would limit its use across that three-year period, thus phasing out academic selection. That would have been a transition with a very clear outcome, ending the inequality that is academic selection.

I sought engagement on that proposal over a period of eight months. That opportunity was not taken up, and, because of that failure, and the blocking of discussion on two occasions by the DUP, I took the decision to move on. We are where we are.

People say that I have no power, but the 11-plus is gone for ever, and I welcome and celebrate that. The amendment contains elements that are helpful, notably in their support of the free school meals criterion, and other criteria recommended by the guidance published by my Department on 2 February 2009. However, I find it strange that an approach is being proposed that was condemned as a climbdown last year. My colleague Mitchel McLaughlin has stated that better than I can. The song 'Blowin' in the Wind' comes to mind.

The amendment proposes another working group, as if Burns, Gallagher, Costello and the non-selective systems that dominate the PISA tables have not told us enough already.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When the Minister makes political comments about the SDLP, is she speaking as a member of Sinn Féin or as the Minister of Education in the four-party mandatory coalition?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I made it clear when I called the Minister to speak that I had called the Minister of Education.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Speaking as the Minister of Education, I will not reinstate the failed system for two more years. Many of those who are seeking interim arrangements are merely seeking an extension of the status quo.

Agus sin an fáth nach mbeidh síneadh ar an tesist teipthe, nó ní dhéanfadh sin ach páistí atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste eacnamaíochta a chur faoi dhá bhliain eile den roghnú sóisialta agus an neamhionannas a bhaineann leis.

Let me be clear about why there will be no extension of the status quo. It would mean two more years of economically disadvantaged children suffering the inequality of social selection.

Mrs Long: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: I will not. How did the 11-plus serve this year's admissions process? For admissions in the 2008-09 school year: 77 out of 135 children in Holywood's four primary schools transferred into a grammar school; in the seven primary schools serving the Malone Road area, 214 out of 235 children transferred into a grammar school; in the two primary schools serving the Stranmillis area, 62 out of 93 children transferred into a grammar school. However, in the three schools that largely serve the Sandy Row area, 11 out of 79 children transferred into a grammar school; in the three primary schools that largely serve the Shankill area, 10 out of 104 children transferred to a grammar school; in the seven schools serving the Falls area, the figure was 49 out of 284. Members must represent their constituencies.

Two more years of the status quo would mean two more years of appalling figures, which are clear indicators of profound and damaging inequality. Do the proposers of the motion want me to continue with that socio-economic determinism? Are they really urging me to maintain an admissions process that, with grim certainty, leads to the appalling statistic that, although one in four children in non-grammar schools is entitled to free school meals, the ratio in grammar schools is one in 17?

What would two more years of the status quo mean for primary schools? Do the Members who tabled the motion recognise the fact that they are urging me to allow the continued distortion of teaching in primary schools, as normal lessons are abandoned in order to put children through practice papers in preparation for a test? Some schools begin conditioning at P5. However, those who do not take the test — one third of all children — are left out of preparations and are, therefore, in danger of losing interest and falling behind in achieving basic levels of literacy and numeracy.

Although 10-year-old children in Europe and the rest of Ireland — and in every other part of the world — improve their literacy and numeracy skills, learn languages and participate in drama and sport during the next two years, the Members who tabled the motion want our children to be prepared for a test.

What would two more years of the status quo mean for children who attend non-grammar schools?
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I shall tell Members what it would mean for children in Fermanagh. There are 14 post-primary schools in Fermanagh, four of which are grammar schools and 10 of which are secondary schools. Pupil numbers in Fermanagh have fallen to such a degree that its four grammar schools now educate half of the county's post-primary schoolchildren. The other 10 non-grammar schools educate the remaining half. Consequently, one quarter of the desks in the 10 non-grammar schools are empty.

Of the children who attend those non-grammar schools, 20.3% are entitled to free school meals. Those 10 schools educate 109 children who are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs. In contrast, the four grammar schools are full, and 7.1% of their children are entitled to free school meals. Only nine of their children are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs. Thanks to the 11-plus test and the selection process, Fermanagh has a fundamentally divided post-primary school system, in which 10 schools absorb all the area's various challenges.

An bhfuilimid ag iarraidh dhá bhliain eile den chóras sin a bheith ann do pháistí Fhear Manach? Tá an rud céanna le feiceáil i mBéal Feirste, i nDoire agus in áiteanna eile. An é sin an córas atá moltóirí an rúin ag iarraidh a bheith ann go cionn dhá bhliain eile?

Do we want two more years of that for the children of Fermanagh? The same can be observed in Belfast, in Derry and elsewhere throughout the North of Ireland. Is that the system in which supporters of the motion would like to continue?

I have heard suggestions that the Catholic Church proposals may contain a request for the Department to recommission the test as an interim measure for a set period of years before academic selection would end after some future debate. Any attempt to construct another test would, in my view, be totally contrary to the principles of social justice to which the Catholic Church is publicly committed. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Order.

The Minister of Education: It would be in conflict with the policy of the whole Catholic sector, which is to move away from the current process of academic selection to a more just, modern and fit-for-purpose system.

The third and final part of the motion calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011. I sought to do just that. Indeed, the commission for the CCEA test — now cancelled — was a specific contingency to provide options that might enable agreement on a legislative framework for transfer 2010 and beyond — the challenge presented to us all by the St Andrews Agreement.

I twice brought forward proposals to the Executive for just such a legislative framework. Those proposals reflected my party's opposition to academic selection, but also acknowledged the views of educationalists with whom they were developed, and the views of pro-selective colleagues in Government. Why else would I propose three more years of academic selection, even on a declining basis? Those proposals were not even discussed. That is why I abandoned them, that is why I decommissioned the CCEA test, and that is why I decided to proceed with the guidelines.

The absence of a test and regulations is a result of the refusal to engage politically — and the blocking of any discussion of my proposals at Executive level — by the DUP. Twice I brought proposals to the Executive. That failure to engage caused uncertainty for parents, teachers and children, and was the most pressing reason for any decision to move forward on guidance.

I reiterate that in the absence of political agreement there will be no state-sponsored test: I will not reinstate the status quo. I have set out the criteria that will be used to transfer children to post-primary education from 2010. The Department's transfer 2010 guidance provides admissions criteria that are already widely used and which promise clarity, and — for the first time ever — fairness.

Any entrance test that operates outside that guidance is in a legal minefield, as some grammar schools proposing such an approach are finding out. If they continue, they will generate a damaging confusion for parents and pupils. Therefore, I again urge them to consider carefully the consequences of standing outside the system and of breaking away.

The transfer 2010 guidance has been issued for public consultation, and I have written to parents of primary 6 pupils to explain the content. The guidance is not preferable to regulation; however, if it is followed, it will deliver an effective and fair system of post-primary transfer. It will also deliver a system of post-primary transfer that will help to answer the wider and desperately urgent reform agenda of embracing demographic decline and schools sustainability, the delivery of the entitlement framework and underachievement. If departmental policy and the guidance are followed, we will have, for the first time, a system of transfer based on social justice, equality and excellence.

Rather than continue to knock on doors that have already been shut in our faces, rather than revisit ideas of proposals blocked, then blocked again, I call on those genuine people who support change to grasp this opportunity to end once and for all the practice of forcing 10-year-old children to sit tests in order that some can access the education to which all should be entitled.

The train has left the station. Transfer 2010 is departmental policy, and I look forward to working with every Member to build an education system of excellent quality for all children.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Loan: The debate addresses an issue of fundamental importance to society. If we were living in a normal society with a normal Government, the failure to bring forward a regulated method for the transfer of children from the primary to the secondary sector of education would, undoubtedly, cause the fall of that Government. That is the challenge facing the Minister, and she has not answered it.

I do not deny that the Minister's task has not been easy, given that the unionist parties, who fundamentally oppose the removal of academic selection, occupy precisely half of the seats in the Assembly. However, many people in the community to whom I speak, including educators and parents, are reflecting with great anxiety on how the Minister has confronted this difficult task.

The SDLP amendment is a serious attempt to get the Assembly out of an extremely difficult situation. It is a substantial and comprehensive amendment that deserves the serious consideration of the Assembly.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the test referred to in the amendment is the same one as originally proposed by the Minister? At that time, the SDLP had reservations, but she reassured us that the test could be used without distorting the primary-school curriculum in any way.

Mr O'Loan: I certainly found the comments of the Minister, and of Sinn Féin's spokesperson on education, strange, and I will probably refer to that later.

Let us consider the party positions on the motion and the amendment. The SDLP supports the motion, as amended; the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party support the original motion; and Sinn Féin supports neither. The Alliance Party supports the motion, having brought it forward — its members seem to agree with much of the amendment, from what they said, but essentially the original motion is the position that it wants to sustain.

Those party positions demonstrate the weakness of the original motion. The parties that support the motion are those that are absolutely opposed, in principle, to academic selection and those that are adamant that it must continue. The motion is not a compromise, as one Member attempted to say. It would not deliver a solution; it would not be an instruction to the Minister to create a workable system.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin's isolationist position today is indicative of what it has done on education before? Martin McGuinness went

down the route of privatisation through PFI, and Caitríona Ruane is now going down the route of privatisation through having a private test set for academic selection.

Mr O'Loan: There is no doubt that we are walking into an unregulated system. However, I do not find the position of the Member's party any more constructive than that of the Minister's party.

The fundamental failure of the Alliance Party's motion is that it does not specify the proportion of pupils to be admitted using the test. That is why parties with quite different principles were able to support it. The motion gives no indication of a pathway or timetable towards creating a system of regulated transfer without academic selection. All of those things are provided in the SDLP's amendment.

I will comment on the remarks that were made by Members. Dominic Bradley argued that the amendment was required in order to address the uncertainty. He pointed out the weaknesses in the Alliance Party's motion and he argued the potential for the entitlement framework and for area-based planning to deliver a system that would have the confidence of parents. I listened carefully to speeches from Democratic Unionist Party Members, including Mervyn Storey, Nelson McCausland and Michelle McIlveen. I struggled to discover what they might contribute to a consensus, but I did not find it.

Nelson McCausland made some reference to sitting down and giving due consideration, but he gave no indication whatsoever as to what he would bring to the table in such discussions. Without that offering from the Democratic Unionist Party, we will not begin to break the current stalemate.

Mr Storey: As the Member is a former teacher who taught in a grammar school in Ballymena —

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

Mr Storey: What advice does the Member have for parents whose children are facing entrance tests for schools in Ballymena?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I call Dr Farry to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech on the substantive motion.

Dr Farry: This has been an incredible debate on probably the most important issue on which the people of Northern Ireland are looking to the Assembly for answers. In the Assembly, we have to deal with real-world choices. The choice facing us is not about whether to abolish the 11-plus and move to a situation in which there will be no academic selection. The real-world choice facing us is whether to have a regulated system that includes academic selection for an interim period, to provide some breathing space, or

to have an unregulated system that includes academic selection. That is the choice facing us, and we must face up to that reality. We cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand and deny what is happening in the wider world.

Mrs Long: With regard to the specific point that was made about social inequality — and I agree with the Minister that there are issues concerning selection and social equality — does the Member agree that it will be more socially divisive to have an unregulated system in which people who are already most advantaged will be best able to negotiate their way through that system?

Dr Farry: Absolutely. The Minister made great play of quoting figures in relation to what happens in different communities across Northern Ireland, and she laid down the challenge to people in the Assembly. However, that challenge must be handed back to the Minister — come back this time next year, after the test has been introduced for a year, and quote the new figures. What we will find is that social inequality in the system will be even worse, and things will not have changed one bit for the better.

We cannot have the situation whereby a Minister opts for ideological purity and says that what she has done is Sinn Féin's position, while, at the same time, washing her hands of the consequences of that policy for the rest of our society. As Mr O'Loan said, we must have a regulated system for Northern Ireland, and to not have that is an act of rank irresponsibility.

The Alliance Party is perfectly clear about its policy and preferred option. We have had that policy for many years throughout the debates on the issue, and I thank Mitchel McLaughlin for setting it out so well. However, we have to adjust our views to meet the realities that we face, and, when facts change, it is only right that opinions change to meet those facts. I dare say that, at different times, virtually every party in the Chamber has shown some degree of responsibility in changing their policies to reflect the new circumstances facing them. Indeed, if we go through the history of Sinn Féin, it has changed policies on many occasions, and we would not be in the situation of power sharing today had it not changed its position on a number of issues.

Mr Poots: Not only is the Alliance Party looking to realities, but the person whom Ms Ruane liked to quote — Stanley Poots, the headmaster of Dromara Primary School — was not speaking on behalf of 30 schools in the Lisburn area and is actually having pupils taught and prepared for tests in his own school, as well as in the other schools that he purported to represent.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. I may come to that point in a moment.

I want to be quite clear about what the Alliance Party is trying to do today. First and foremost, we are trying to avoid a complete disaster facing the education system in Northern Ireland due to an unregulated system; and, in doing so, to provide a breathing space for a consensual solution to emerge. We will keep our fingers crossed on that, because we have not reached it thus far. However, that is our ultimate responsibility, and we should not lose sight of that.

An unregulated system is a damning indictment of the failure of the Assembly to deal with the most important issue facing our society. There will be massive consequences for children and parents from an unregulated system. There will be increased trauma from this system, even more trauma than is currently faced through the 11-plus. Some children will face not two tests, but, potentially, three tests under the Association for Quality Education's (AQE) system. Indeed, the Catholic system may introduce its own tests at some point in the near future. It is not beyond the realms of possibility for some children to take tests under both systems. How many tests are those children going to be facing? Therefore, children will be facing not only more tests, but they will be doing them in a different environment from their own primary school, adding further to the trauma.

Mr D Bradley: Can the Member confirm — as was outlined earlier by Mr Lunn — that the motion means that only the CCEA test should be used, and used in conjunction with other, non-academic admissions criteria?

Dr Farry: I can give a “yes” to both of those points, and I will come to that in further detail, too.

Primary schools are placed in a totally impossible situation at the moment. They want to follow the guidance from the Minister and be responsible, but they are also listening to the views and demands of parents. In practice, many primary schools will be trying to facilitate parents' wishes on this issue. Some parents will opt for additional, external coaching. When that happens, it will play into the hands of those who have the money to pay for that coaching, further increasing the inequality in the system. Is that fair?

There are huge problems for the grammar schools that will be conducting the tests. No doubt there will be an increased risk of legal challenges occurring —

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has spoken quite eloquently about parents who want their children to take three or four tests. What about those parents who do not want their children to take tests? What about those parents who are, in some circumstances, forced to have their children take tests because they believe that those tests will lead to their children going to the best school, even though that may not be the reality.

What about those parents? Do those parents not have rights?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his intervention. Certainly, no one is forced to take a test, and I have a lot of sympathy for what the Member is saying. That is why the Alliance Party wants to work with Sinn Féin to achieve a consensual solution that does not involve academic selection in the longer-term. However, we must deal with the realities at the moment. Although I believe that grammar schools would be foolish to go down the route of independent testing, the reality is that they are determined to do so, and I cannot stop them from doing so.

Mrs Long: Neither can the Minister.

Dr Farry: The Minister cannot either, nor can anyone else in the Chamber. Therefore, our responsibility is to meet that reality in the best way possible, through a regulated system, which is offered by the CCEA test.

I accept the abolition of the 11-plus. That is the difference between the motion tabled by the Alliance Party today and that tabled by the UUP last autumn. The Department itself has devised the CCEA test, and that is a point worth stressing. Therefore, when the Minister talks about matters of principle, the Minister has already conceded the point through commissioning a CCEA test for development. She has referred to it as a contingency option, but that point has already been conceded by the Minister. The CCEA test will be based firmly on the existing curriculum. It does not involve any skewing of teaching in primary schools.

In relation to what Dominic Bradley said, I believe that the CCEA test should be used as one option for schools with respect to admission, alongside the best of the other options in the transfer 2010 guidance set out by the Minister. I do not dismiss that document one bit — there is certainly value in it. However, we must use that guidance in line with the realities of what is happening on the ground — in particular, the socio-economic criteria within that are of some importance.

We must also bear in mind that what the Alliance Party is suggesting is a time-limited breathing space. That time must be properly used to try to find some consensus. Indeed, if people are talking about a new working group of educationalists, that is something that is worthy of consideration.

5.00 pm

The Minister has talked about compromise proposals not being accepted. The Alliance Party has always been prepared to engage on those proposals, and I encourage the Minister to put those back on the table, if she feels that that would be a better way forward. We are more than happy to talk about them, and I am sure that other parties would do likewise.

The Minister says that the compromise proposals were taken off the table because other parties would not engage. That means that the children of Northern Ireland are being punished because there is a lack of political agreement; it does not strike me as being a lack of leadership.

The SDLP amendment is a matter of tactics. Our motion is, deliberately, general in nature. It is based around the principle of putting the CCEA test back on the table as an option, for use by receiving schools. Tactically, we are trying to build as much consensus in the Chamber as we can, rather than being specific.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I will not give way. I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

The consensus that the Alliance Party is trying to achieve is one that is supported across society in Northern Ireland. Our consensus is more widespread, and I do not suggest that there is consensus around the proposals outlined by the Minister. The Catholic Church and the Protestant churches will reflect that later this week.

This is our last chance to take a step back from the brink. I urge the Assembly to use this chance wisely.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria under the Minister of Education's 2010 guidelines; calls on the Minister of Education to re-commission the CCEA test, she abandoned on 2 February 2009, that schools may then use for a maximum of two years; and calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Portadown College Newbuild

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr Simpson: Portadown College is one of the jewels in the crown of the Craigavon-based Dickson plan for education. It has an outstanding academic track record and has been a great influence for good across the generations.

I visited the school no later than Thursday of last week and was, once again, greatly impressed by the staff's commitment to delivering excellence for young people in their care.

Portadown College has been awaiting a new building for too long. In the past few days, I received from the Minister a response to a question for oral answer that was not selected for answer in Question Time. She said:

"The Department has completed its assessment of a revised economic appraisal for Portadown College which was submitted by the Southern Education and Library Board. The Board has agreed to undertake further work on the option to complete a replacement school on the playing fields on the lower part of the existing school site."

That determination to press ahead with building on the playing fields is causing major concern at the college. The board of governors is of the opinion that the building of a new school on the playing fields is an unsatisfactory way to move forward. There are six objections to that intention. The school would disappear from view and be blocked by the natural amphitheatre that would be created by building the new college in a hollow.

Furthermore, the school would lose its playing fields for an extended period. The school holds a Sportsmark award, and it competes in the highest level of regional competitions in a variety of sports.

It has one of the largest A-level and GCSE physical education centres in Northern Ireland. When new playing fields are constructed, they are not immediately ready for use. That will extend the time during which those resources are unavailable, and that will have a detrimental effect on the students.

Locating new pitches on the elevated part of the site would be problematic. The proximity to neighbouring

houses and the main Killycomain Road would create a child-protection issue, as those pitches would be very exposed. Another problem is that health and safety issues and good-relations issues could be created by such things as rugby balls being kicked into gardens, breakages of windows, or rugby balls being kicked onto the Killycomain Road. The current location of the playing pitches is ideal and means that those issues are not a cause for concern.

Portadown College is a landmark school in the town. It has a proud history of academic and extra-curricular success. It has occupied its current position for approximately 60 years and is, consequently, a recognised landmark fronting onto the Killycomain Road. Changing the location of the school to the lower part of the site would raise significant objections from the local community. It is believed that, in particular, residents of the Gilford Road would object to that.

The current plan does not offer any solution to ongoing traffic problems on the Killycomain Road. Locating the new school on the footprint of the current buildings and demolishing the preparatory department would facilitate a satisfactory solution to that problem.

As with any school, traffic will be a problem at certain times of the day. However, the ability to take buses off the main road and into the school site through the proposed construction of a turning circle would be helpful and would reduce congestion. That would be made much easier if the new building were sited on the current footprint.

If the new school were located on the current playing pitches, the access arrangements for cars parking on the school site would also be of grave concern. The front of the school on the Killycomain Road would, essentially, become a large car park, and security issues would arise. A school building on the Killycomain Road frontage would be a much better solution, as that would allow for parking at the rear of the building, which would be more secure and less visible from the main road.

The current proposal to build on the playing fields appears to be based on the economic appraisal that was carried out in 2002-03, in which only two options were considered. Those two options were a refurbishment of the current school and a rebuild of the school. Since that time, the preparatory department has closed. The result is that the locating of a new school on the current footprint of the elevated part of the site has become a feasible option, as much space has been cleared as a result of that closure.

According to current Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) estimates, there is no significant cost differential between the two options. The leadership of Portadown College is satisfied that a phased construction and demolition of the buildings on

the current footprint is manageable. Noise and poor air quality are not currently problems and are not a reason to relocate the buildings.

I ask the Minister to instruct officials from her Department to visit Portadown College so that they can see for themselves the case for locating the new building on the current footprint. It is an outstanding college that offers an outstanding education to those who attend it — and provided such an education to those who attended it in the past. A new building would be very welcome. I hope that the Minister will agree that, since it will be a building that will serve Portadown College for many decades to come, it is essential that it be got right.

Those points were made by those who are on the front line of education — the very educationalists to whom the Minister wants us all to listen. I ask her to listen to what they are saying on this occasion.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this debate on Portadown College as it provides an opportunity to discuss the broader issue of post-primary provision in the controlled sector in the Craigavon area. I was recently in Portadown College with the Education Committee, where we held a very successful meeting. We were very well treated and welcomed by pupils and staff; it was an enjoyable experience. Even from the lecture theatre in which the meeting took place, it was clear that the school needs to be replaced. It is severely run down. The fabric and interior of the building are, without doubt, in need of replacement.

However, I have a broader concern about the Southern Education and Library Board's provision of post-primary education in the Craigavon area. There are two proposals from the SELB: one is to replace Portadown College; the other is to replace Lurgan College. Both of those are fine grammar schools in their own right, and both provide education under the terms of the Dickson plan.

In a recent meeting with the SELB, I was deeply concerned that it did not have an overall plan for the provision for post-primary education in the controlled sector. The plans to replace Portadown College are justified, but when I study the plans to replace Lurgan College, I ask why Lurgan College will be replaced while the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School is in its current condition. It is not adequate for the provision of education to the pupils who attend it.

When I posed that question to the SELB, it could not tell me why it has brought forward two proposals to replace two schools in the absence of an overall plan to replace the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School, which is attached to the old buildings of the Lurgan Technical College. Its space is restricted, it has no playing or sports facilities, and — even in its

interior — it does not provide adequate space or provision for the children who attend it.

I note that Mr Simpson referred more to where the Portadown College newbuild should be placed, although I am not aware of the technical details. However, there is a requirement for a wider debate about controlled provision in the Craigavon area because the current plans of the SELB are inadequate. To go ahead with two newbuilds at two colleges and leave out the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School is an inequitable provision of education.

Mr Gardiner: Some time ago, I became concerned when it was announced that there would be a 10-month delay in the newbuilds for Portadown College and Lurgan College. I wrote to the Minister of Education to enquire about those delays. At the time, I was concerned that many capital-spend projects across the Northern Ireland Departments were being kicked into the next financial year in a concerted effort to cover up the growing black hole in the Budget.

At first, I suspected that Portadown College and the Lurgan College newbuilds could be victims of such a move. In response, I received a categorical assurance from the Minister of Education that that was not the case. I put that response on record in the House today because it is important that the House record the facts. I say that because, since last November, there has been mounting evidence that the budgetary black hole has grown to alarming proportions, despite repeated denials by the Finance Minister.

It is conservatively estimated that there is a deficit of at least £1 billion. Only last week, the Finance Minister wrote to the Finance Committee and suggested a rewriting of the priorities in the Programme for Government, for which my colleague David McNarry has been calling since last October.

That means that the budgetary pressure to delay Government capital-build projects must logically be a factor in Government thinking and possibly even in planning. It is for that reason that I want the Minister to reassure me that delays in the Portadown College newbuild project are in no respect due to pressure from the Minister of Finance and Personnel to save money and to kick capital-build projects into next year.

5.15 pm

In her reply to me last October, the Education Minister said that the amended Lurgan College newbuild, which incorporates the historic old building, had now passed the economic appraisal stage at the Department of Education and has been sent to the Department of Finance and Personnel for final approval. That was good news for Lurgan College, Lurgan town and the surrounding villages.

However, she also told me that the amended Portadown College newbuild was still under consideration in the Department of Education's economic appraisal stage. She told me that that was because it would involve the expenditure of additional money and that it would have to pass that stage before it could be processed. The Minister told me that that additional expenditure would have to be justified under both the economic-appraisal guidance directions and 'The Northern Ireland Practical Guide to the Green Book' before it could progress to the next stage.

In her letter, the Minister added that the SELB resubmitted the economic appraisal for the Portadown College newbuild for the third time on 24 November 2008 and that it is currently being appraised by the Department's advisers. The Minister told me that the Portadown College scheme needed to be able to prove that it represented value for money, given that there was an increase in the capital expenditure involved. That was some four months ago, so I will listen with interest to the Minister's comments today to find out what stage the process has now reached.

That situation raised another issue. Why could the relationships between the SELB and the Department of Education not be adequate enough to ensure that those delays were avoided? Did the SELB have to rewrite its building specifications because it failed to provide adequate building specifications to the Department in the first place? Alternatively, did the Department fail to respond quickly enough to the SELB? I would like the Minister to answer those questions.

Whatever the cause, it is my constituents and their children who have suffered as a result of those delays, and I object to that situation in the strongest possible terms. I hope that the Minister will sort the problem out quickly so that both Lurgan College and Portadown College get the badly needed newbuilds that they so deserve.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this Adjournment debate on the Portadown College newbuild, although I note that some Members have used this opportunity to expand the topic of the debate to include newbuilds in the Upper Bann constituency.

I had the privilege of working with Portadown College in my previous job in the Health Service. The college carries out extensive outreach work across the community and is well respected as a centre of education excellence in the constituency. I, therefore, lend it my support.

Over the past two years, I have written to the Minister to try to tie down a time frame and a date for work to commence. I agree with Mr Gardiner; we need to find out where the gridlock occurred. Did it happen at the education board or at departmental level? Given

that answers vary from time to time, we need a direct answer to that question.

It would also be pertinent if the Minister could tell us what impact the economic downturn is having on the school-building programme. Yesterday, I specifically asked the Finance Minister about projects to rebuild schools, and, unsurprisingly, he said that that was a matter for the Minister of Education.

Will the Minister offer some reassurance about the delays that exist across Upper Bann and, particularly, the delays with the newbuild at Portadown College? Will the money for that newbuild be there in the next financial year? Many people in the construction industry, never mind children and parents, are depending on it.

I spoke to Mrs O'Hare, the principal of Portadown College, some months ago. She expressed concerns that, coming into the GCSE and A-level exam period, there was not enough accommodation for all the exams to take place on site; that is a matter of grave concern to us all. Young people are under enough pressure and stress without their school accommodation being unfit for purpose.

I concur with those people who are trying to tie down a definitive date on which the work will start. I support Mr Simpson's comments about the school's excellence, outreach work and location. Given the school's proximity to the playing fields at Bachelors Walk, I urge those involved to consider working alongside Craigavon Borough Council on shared facilities; that is partly the way to go.

I note Mr O'Dowd's comments about Craigavon and wider planning for the future, but surely the sustainable schools policy is something on which the Minister and the Department should be taking a lead and giving some direction. I am sure that the Minister is aware that the Catholic-maintained sector in Upper Bann is already at an advanced stage of looking at collegiate-type models with the amalgamation of junior high schools and the senior high schools of St Mary's and St Paul's, and Our Lady's Grammar School. I would be interested to hear the Minister's view on that because, surely, schools need direction when they are planning.

Will the Minister comment on the viability of Portadown College? I understand that its feeder schools are in the Newry and Armagh constituency as well as in Upper Bann and that there is always a fight for places. I support the Minister's view that we should provide educational access for all children, regardless of their social and economic background. We should provide all our young people with an excellent education.

St Teresa's Primary School in the Lurgan area has been on the agenda for a work plan for considerable

time, and the Department and the SELB are batting the ball around in respect of business cases and where the fault line lies. I would be pleased if the Minister would outline whether the money is there and when that work will start.

Mr Moutray: I congratulate my friend and Upper Bann colleague, David Simpson, for securing the Adjournment debate on such an important issue.

My three children and I have benefited from an education under the Dickson plan, and I have been a consistent advocate of the plan. Along with other local schools, Portadown College has helped to deliver an excellent academic experience for generations of young people. The Minister may have concerns with some aspects of the Dickson plan, but it enjoys the approval and support of the overwhelming majority of people in the area.

I add my voice to the points raised by David Simpson in his opening speech on the proposed newbuild for Portadown College. The case for a newbuild on the existing footprint of the school speaks for itself. I welcome the agreement of the Minister and the Department that a new school ought to be built. The real issue is: which is the better option? Any fair-minded observer would conclude that the case for building on the existing footprint has been made conclusively.

The benefits of that option are as follows: it is cost effective, in that any difference in cost between the options is minimal; it preserves the college's location as a prominent feature of the area; it does more to minimise traffic-flow problems; it preserves the sporting side of the college in a much more continuous way, and, crucially, it also preserves the playing fields as an integral and unified part of the college; it does more to aid relationships with people who live close to the school; and it avoids the potential personal-security issues that may arise from the current proposal. These are telling arguments, and the Minister should give them serious consideration.

On another point, the Southern Education and Library Board and the board of governors of Portadown College have serious health and safety concerns over window frames that do not hold glass securely. It is imperative that the issue of location is resolved; otherwise expenditure in the region of £500,000 will be required to address that urgent issue.

I trust that the Minister will listen to the concerns that have been raised today, and, as a result, will act swiftly to progress the newbuild on the current footprint — and also the much needed newbuild for Lurgan College.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to join with other Members, especially those from the Upper

Bann constituency, to speak about the need for Portadown College to have a newbuild as quickly as possible.

The impact and outreach of Portadown College in providing education extends beyond the constituency of Upper Bann. Many of the primary schools that supply pupils to Portadown College are situated in my constituency of Newry and Armagh.

I pay tribute to the principal, her predecessors and all the staff at Portadown College for the high-quality education that they have provided over many years. In providing such education, sporting achievement and the full remit of the educational curriculum, Portadown College has an excellent record.

It is clear that the school estate at Portadown College is in dire need of refurbishment and replacement. It has taken its place in the queue for many years. The board of governors, teachers, staff, parents and pupils have been very patient as they wait in expectation for work to begin. It is time for a clear statement of intent to be made to the House by the Minister.

I do not wish to make a political point, but the Minister and her predecessor and party colleague Martin McGuinness did not place much emphasis in supporting newbuild projects for grammar schools. The record of the Department of Education under their leadership confirms that. I want an assurance from the Minister that she will not allow her opposition to grammar schools — or her party's opposition to grammar education — to impact in any way on the logical case that has been put forward for provision of a newbuild for Portadown College. We have also heard the case for Lurgan College.

I am very happy to support an urgent rebuild for Portadown College, so that it can continue its outstanding record of providing high-quality education.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I thank Mr Simpson for bringing forward this debate about the proposed major capital scheme for a newbuild at Portadown College. It affords me an opportunity to address Members' concerns about the progress of the project. I listened carefully to all who have spoken.

I reject the comments that were made by Danny Kennedy about my colleague Martin McGuinness, which were in poor taste and do not reflect reality. Mr Kennedy said that I am opposed to grammar school education, but nothing could be further from the truth. If Members read what I say carefully, they will find that I am asking that, for the first time ever, grammar schools make their excellent education available to all.

What I am opposed to is the inequality in the system, not to any particular part of the system. I ask that the Member not make inaccurate comments.

5.30 pm

In March 2006, a scheme was announced for Portadown College. However, in April 2007, the Southern Education and Library Board advised the Department that it wished to review the agreed economic appraisal to take account of the potential additional provision to be provided by the Sports Council and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL).

Mar is eol do Chomhaltaí, tá sé ríthábhachtach go mbaintear úsáid mhaith as na hacmhainní atá ar fáil don Roinn Oideachais agus go dtugtar cuntas iontu. Tá sé tábhachtach mar sin go mbíonn gach breithmheas eacnamaíochta, lena n-áirítear an ceann do Choláiste Phort an Dúnáin, san áireamh.

As Members know, it is vital that the resources available to the Department of Education be put to good use and accounted for. It is therefore essential that all economic appraisals, including revised economic appraisals such as the one for Portadown College, be in line with the requirements of the 'Practical Guide to the Green Book', produced by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Equally, it is important that Departments work together, and all Members have told me that they want to see that happen. Members want DCAL and the Department of Education to work together, and I have pledged my support to that.

To date, three revisions of the economic appraisal have been considered by the Department's professional advisers. The need for further work was explained at a meeting between the Department and the SELB. Once the Department has agreed a revised economic appraisal, we will work with the Department of Finance and Personnel before putting the scheme forward to proceed with planning. I know that Members are interested in the area-based planning process. Full area planning will involve four related key components: area plans; asset management information; strategic investment plans; and project level appraisal, or economic appraisals and business cases.

The proposed education and skills authority will have operational responsibility for area-based planning and will work closely with educational interests, which will have an important role in the process. The Department will have a policy guidance and approval role. Full implementation of the approach will be taken forward when the ESA is fully up and running. I know that Members are concerned about the time that has elapsed since the scheme was announced. However, I emphasise the importance of ensuring that the principles of appraisal have been applied correctly and that the decision on how best to provide suitable accommodation for current and future pupils attending Portadown College is robust and presents value for money. The Southern Education and Library Board has

advised that the period of construction for the scheme is about three years. It is estimated that the replacement school will be completed by 2012-13 at a current market value of £15 million.

On-site work is progressing on 27 major capital schemes, and a further 74 major schemes are at various stages of planning; those schemes are being taken forward in conjunction with the relevant authorities. Approval for construction work to begin on those projects, and indeed on all capital projects, will be subject to the necessary planning and building processes being satisfactorily completed and the availability of resources in any particular year. Approval will be subject to, and take account of, departmental policies, including area-based planning and the sustainable schools policy. There is no question of our not having the resources for the capital projects that we have outlined. As I said, those projects will be subject to, and take account of, departmental policies.

I welcome the fact that a new school for Portadown College is central to the SELB's plans for Portadown and the wider Craigavon area. The aim is that Portadown College will work in partnership with the local further education college, the Portadown campus of Craigavon Senior High School. That will ensure that the full range of the entitlement framework can be delivered to young people in Portadown. Members know that I believe very strongly in collaborative working and in focusing on outcomes for pupils in an area rather than on the needs of individual institutions or buildings. That is the way forward for education. Many more schools are now engaged in innovative and creative approaches to collaborative working through the area learning communities, which represents a significant change. I sincerely hope that the proposed new facilities will represent a real resource for pupils, not just in Portadown College but in the Portadown area and beyond.

The Department was informed by SELB officers in December 2008 that Portadown College had withdrawn from the Craigavon area learning community due to "other significant priorities and planning challenges".

I hope that the school will have another look at that, because it is important that the 21 learning communities across the North function well. They are an important part of our education —

Mr Kennedy: Is that blackmail?

The Minister of Education: Of course it is not blackmail. In light of your earlier comments, please do not add insult to injury. It is part of the Department of Education's policy, and it is important that all the learning communities are given that role. We have to put children first, and I encourage all schools to play an active role in their learning communities.

Tá mé ag súil go mór leis an tionscadal a bheith críochnaithe sa bhliain 2013 nuair a bheas an fhoireann agus na daltaí — agus an pobal i gcoitinne, ar ndóigh — ábalta leas a bhaint as áiseanna nua-aimseartha le tacaíocht a thabhairt dá n-oideachas agus dá bhfoghlaím shóisialta.

I look forward to the completion of the project in 2013, when staff, pupils and the wider community will be able to avail themselves of modern, up-to-date facilities to support their educational and social learning experiences in the area.

Mr Simpson: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: Sorry, I have finished.

Adjourned at 5.36 pm.

