
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu Outbreak in Mexico and USA

Tuesday 28 April 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I draw your attention to yesterday's Hansard report, in which Mr Basil McCrea made a couple of remarks about the Minister of Education during Question Time. Perhaps a ruling can be made on his remarks, the first of which was:

"She is, in fact, discriminatory, and is dealing unfairly with many people in our society." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p138, col 2*].

He went on to say:

"She is sectarian, she is trying to divide us". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p138, col 2*].

I wish the Speaker to make a ruling on my point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Maskey. I will refer that point of order to the Speaker, and he will make a ruling at a later date.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Speaker has received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the current status of the swine flu outbreak in Mexico and the United States.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to make a statement to the House on the current status of the swine flu outbreak. I report to the Assembly that, as a result of the evolving global situation and spread of cases, the World Health Organization (WHO) has changed the level of threat for swine influenza from phase 3 to phase 4. The change to WHO phase 4 means that there is evidence of increased human-to-human transmission and indicates a significant increase in the risk of a pandemic, but it does not necessarily mean that one is inevitable.

Given the concern about that development, my Department and the Public Health Agency are monitoring the situation extremely closely to assess the implications for public health in Northern Ireland. We continue to liaise closely with the Health Protection Agency and Departments in the UK, particularly the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health, as well as with the Department of Health and Children in Dublin.

Yesterday, I took part in a meeting of the Civil Contingencies Committee. It was chaired by the Secretary of State for Health, Alan Johnson, and involved input from all devolved Ministers. After I have made my statement, I intend to participate in a further meeting of that group.

I also held extensive discussions with my chief professional advisers, and I briefed the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The issue of swine flu cuts across all Departments, and I will regularly update my Executive colleagues.

I have also spoken to Mary Harney TD, the Minister for Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland.

Northern Ireland has robust plans in place to deal with this development. I have issued contingency plans for hospitals, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and social care providers. Over the past few days, I have issued urgent advice to GPs and hospital clinicians, and I will continue to update them as the situation evolves. We will continue to ensure that we are prepared and that the public are protected to the maximum level possible. Northern Ireland has stockpiles of antiviral drugs for a worst-case scenario, and those drugs will cover up to 50% of the population. Current evidence suggests that, other than those in Mexico, the

cases to date have had a mild flu-like illness that responds well to the antiviral drugs that we have stockpiled.

My Department will now put in place a number of steps to maintain our own vigilance and responsiveness. Those steps include advising the public on the public health risk and the measures that they need to take in preparation for a potential pandemic. That advice will comprise information leaflets for every household and an advertising campaign, which are both being finalised. We will also continue to advise health professionals on identifying suspect cases, and regional policies and pandemic-management arrangements will be reviewed and refined.

I reiterate the simple but very effective measures that everyone can take in these circumstances. Influenza spreads easily from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It also spreads through hand-to-face contact if hands are contaminated. Therefore, good hygiene practices, such as frequent hand washing and using tissues to cover the mouth and nose for coughs and sneezes, will be the most effective measures that people can take to protect themselves.

Individuals should listen carefully to Government advice, which will be made available via the media and distributed on printed material. People should consult the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website if they are considering travelling to any affected areas. The current advice is against all but essential travel to Mexico. Information and advice for travellers will be available at all airports and ports. Our enhanced monitoring and reporting will identify people with symptoms that need to be investigated further.

At this point in time, no confirmed cases of swine flu have been found in Northern Ireland. However, as the Chief Medical Officer said, we should expect that there will be cases in due course. The Government have prepared detailed plans and procedures already to ensure that the country will be able to deal with cases of swine influenza. GPs across the country have been notified and made aware of the symptoms and of what to do if they suspect that a patient has pandemic flu. Hospitals are well prepared and have specific plans to deal with a pandemic. We have stocks of antiviral drugs that will be used to treat all those who become ill.

I trust that Members will understand that, as a result of these exceptional circumstances, I will be unable to respond to the motions that have been scheduled for today. It is essential that I participate in a number of important planned meetings on this serious public health threat. However, I will be pleased to respond to any issues that Members may have on those motions if they write to me about the matters in question.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the Minister for coming back to the House today to keep us up to date with what is happening. I have no doubt that the robust plans that the Minister outlined are in place. However, a number of cases, albeit unconfirmed, has been identified on this island. What will be the implications for us if those cases are confirmed?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It has been reported from the Irish Republic that none of those cases has reported positive. At the moment, there are no confirmed instances of swine flu in Northern Ireland or, as I understand the information from Dublin, in the Irish Republic. Scotland has two confirmed cases, and England and Wales have no confirmed cases. I have no doubt that there will be an increase in the number of people being tested, because people who have concerns will contact their GPs. I also do not doubt that tests will be run on a number of occasions. We will have to wait and see how many positive tests arise and then decide what the consequences and specific counter-measures will be with respect to the prescribing of antiviral drugs.

Mr Easton: How close are the experts to developing a vaccine for this type of flu? I noticed that some tour operators were cancelling flights to Mexico. Is the Minister's Department advising people not to travel to Mexico, and does that advice include travel to the United States?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said in my statement, when it comes to travel we follow the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which is advising people that they should travel to Mexico only if it is essential to do so. I am not aware of any advice to people that they should not travel to the United States.

It is estimated that it will take between three and six months to identify and develop a specific vaccine. There are sleeping contracts in place with manufacturers so that production can begin as soon as the vaccine is identified. Through those sleeping contracts, an order is in place for vaccines to protect the population. All of that has been planned for and is in hand, but we have to wait for the specific virus to be identified and for the vaccine to be developed before it can go into production. The UK is acting as one unit on the issue, and sleeping contracts have been put in place on behalf of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for coming back to the House to update us and for his continuing vigilance. Given the increased human-to-human contact, the fact that the virus appears to be attacking mainly healthy young adults whose immune systems are at their optimum and the concern that the virus is becoming more virulent, is the Minister confident that

the antiviral drugs will be effective should they be necessary?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the worst-case scenario, antiviral medicine would cover 50% of the population, and we have stockpiled that amount. All the UK countries are stockpiled to that level. The Mexico flu virus is susceptible to those antiviral drugs, so we have that protection. Clearly, the best step after that is to develop a vaccine quickly. As everyone is aware, viruses mutate, and that is an ongoing battle in the area of antiviral drugs.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for returning to keep the Assembly informed of what is happening on this important issue. I noticed that he mentioned the media. Is the Minister in contact with the media, and are there communications with the general public? It is fine for the Minister to inform the Assembly yesterday and today, but communications with the general public are of vital importance. Does the Minister have easy and immediate access to the media to keep everyone informed of the position?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Public information is one of our key pieces of work. Leaflets will be issued to every household, and that will be supported by a major advertising campaign. The Civil Contingencies Committee will agree a UK-wide media and public information plan. I have also taken steps to ensure that there will be posters and information at ports and airports.

I am also having discussions with Mary Harney, because many people who travel to Northern Ireland come through Dublin Airport. Therefore, we must ensure that we have complementary processes for the provision of information.

10.45 am

Certain protocols are in place. For example, a pilot who flies an aircraft into Belfast or elsewhere and has a passenger who reports feeling ill must radio ahead to the airport to arrange for a doctor to be waiting there. The same protocol applies on ships. Those are long-standing protocols that are still in operation. Public information is important and is a key issue in our UK-wide discussions.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to update Members further on the swine flu situation and for the robust measures that the Department has already put in place to counteract the virus should it come into Northern Ireland.

Will the antiviral drugs that the Department has in stockpile be able to eradicate the flu virus in humans, should it come into Northern Ireland? Although the Minister has already touched on that issue, it does no harm to reaffirm it.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can give Mr Buchanan only the advice that I have received, which is that that virus is susceptible to the antiviral drugs that the Department has stockpiled.

Ms S Ramsey: Like other Members, I thank and commend the Minister. I understand that he is working 24/7, which demonstrates the importance of having a local Minister in control of such a matter.

When does the Minister hope that flyers will be available? I am sure that he agrees that there is much public concern. The sooner that correct information can reach people's homes, the easier it will be on them. It may also be useful for the Minister to speak to the media to ensure that their reporting is measured, not only in news bulletins but in talk shows. We do not need the media to add to concern on the issue.

Given that the Assembly will not meet in the Chamber during the rest of the week, I ask the Minister to keep Members informed so that we can act as conduits of information to our constituents.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with Sue Ramsey's comments, and information is important. Flyers will be available, and the Department is currently approving the information that will appear on them. Public information will be made available through the Civil Contingencies Committee's UK-wide campaign. An emergency control centre is already up and running, and a telephone helpline will be set up soon so that people can ring for information.

The Member raised a point about the media: it is important that public information is disseminated rather than the media issuing adversarial, political-type information. Specifically, the aim is to ensure that the public understands the importance and seriousness of the situation without any undue scaremongering.

The situation is still a long way from a flu pandemic, and we hope that it will not reach that level. However, as I said in the Chamber on Monday 27 April 2009, we will prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House this morning. I welcome the fact that a helpline will be established, which will be useful; I hope that it is set up soon. Is the Minister satisfied with the level and exchange of information, not only between this Assembly, the national Government at Westminster and the various devolved institutions but between Governments and health agencies throughout the world?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The response is international, national and local. Internationally, it is being led by the World Health Organization, which collates information from Governments worldwide. Nationally, we collate that

information and work together through the Civil Contingencies Committee, which is part of COBRA, and that work is a team effort. Locally, work is focused on the dissemination of information through the health and social care system, acute primary care, the Ambulance Service, and so on. That is what the Department is doing.

There is a need to spread information widely among the public, and all Members and Departments have a part to play.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Agriculture Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in agriculture sectoral format.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, I will make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the tenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the agriculture sector.

The meeting was held at Farmleigh House, Dublin, on Friday 20 March. The Executive were represented by the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson MP MLA, and by me, and the Irish Government were represented by Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The statement has been agreed with Sammy Wilson, and I make it on behalf of us both.

At the NSMC plenary meeting on 23 January, Ministers noted the discussion of the recent animal feed contamination incident and its impact on farmers and producers across the island. We agreed to continue to work closely to complete the measures that the Irish Government and the Executive have put in place to tackle the matter. We also agreed to strengthen our co-operation in dealing with major incidents of this nature and requested our officials to review and, if necessary, revise the existing arrangements.

Ministers welcomed the consultation on the development of the draft all-island animal health and welfare strategy and agreed to convene a cross-border event in 2009 to bring together key stakeholders to discuss the delivery of the strategy. The Council noted the progress on the development of the strategic approach to plant health and pesticides. Senior officials from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are reviewing and identifying current and new areas of interest in plant health and pesticides and are developing a programme of work. The Departments will submit a joint report to the Council in early autumn 2009.

The Council discussed the outcome of the health check of the common agricultural policy (CAP), including increased modulation and related implications, changes in market management mechanisms, the management of milk quota expiry and simplification of the single farm payment scheme,

including cross-compliance. Ministers broadly agreed on those issues; any differences in approach arose from the different circumstances that apply North and South. Simplification is one area in which both Administrations recognised the possibility of useful gains.

The Council also referred to the current state of play in the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations. Ministers shared the view that they wanted a fair, balanced and ambitious outcome that would not undermine Irish and EU agriculture and acknowledged that the EU had made a significant contribution to the negotiations. The Council noted the benefit of continued discussion among Ministers on issues of common concern on the EU common agriculture policy and the WTO and requested that officials remain in close contact on such issues. The Council agreed that its next meeting in agriculture sectoral format will take place in June 2009. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): In the Minister's statement and in the press release that was issued after the meeting on 20 March, she said that both jurisdictions:

"agreed to strengthen our co-operation in dealing with major incidents of this nature and requested our officials to review and, if necessary, revise the existing arrangements."

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development agrees that a review of the existing arrangements is necessary, particularly given that, in their own words, the authorities in the Irish Republic were aware from the middle of November 2008 of the high level of dioxins in samples and informed the Department in Northern Ireland three weeks later in December after they had taken steps to protect their own industry. Will the Minister therefore confirm that there was a complete absence of co-operation on that incident, the consequences of which still reverberate throughout the pig production and processing sectors in Northern Ireland?

Furthermore, will she tell us which parts of the processes are weak and outline what action is being taken to rectify those weaknesses? Finally, will she explain how our industry can trust and co-operate in an all-Ireland animal health strategy, given that the dioxin incident demonstrated the absence of trust and co-operation and the desire of one partner to rush to save its industry at the possible expense of our industry in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Member asked a number of questions. One thing that I certainly agree with is that a review is needed, and there will be a review, both in the South and in the North, to see what lessons can be learnt. I welcome the fact that the Committee will take part in that review and will make its experiences known and its views heard in the South.

I have already discussed with Brendan Smith, my counterpart in the South, the need for an early warning mechanism so that there is no lack of communication in future. Such a mechanism would allow us to automatically let each other know when something happens in one area that has an impact on the other. We will certainly do that. I have a commitment from Brendan Smith that, when both reviews are completed, we will discuss how we can organise ourselves better to ensure that we learn valuable lessons from the dioxins incident and that it does not happen again.

As Members will know, significant consultation has been ongoing on the all-island animal health and welfare strategy. Stakeholders are keen on that strategy, because it can help to deliver less bureaucracy and can simplify arrangements for the majority of trade on the island, which is North/South. Farmers like the fact that they can trade with more ease on the island in cattle, sheep and pigs. Farmers want the strategy. It is a Programme for Government (PFG) target, and it will help us to help the industry in the future.

Lessons have been learnt from the dioxin incident, and the strategy is now more important than ever, as it will ensure that we have the tools to enable us to protect our industry. Whatever is happening on this island, on other islands or around the world, we need to have the effective tools to help us to protect the industry and trade on the island.

Ms S Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. She mentioned co-operation across the island, which should be welcomed. The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned the review. When does the Minister expect the officials to report on that review? When does she anticipate that the cross-border event planned for 2009 will happen? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We recognised that the review needed to happen after the incident had taken place and had been effectively dealt with. The culling and disposal have now been completed, so I hope that the review will begin shortly and that we will be able to learn lessons from it as quickly as possible. The stakeholder event will take place later this year, either during the summer or in early autumn. It is a useful mechanism through which we can discuss the delivery of the strategy on the island, what it means for us and how it can help us. I look forward to that event.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement and for keeping us informed. Was there any discussion on the expiry of the milk quota system? Is there a difference in policy between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development here and the relevant Department in the Republic of Ireland as

regards the proposed ending of the milk quota regime? Is there any difference of opinion on that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is a difference of policy and opinion, because the milk quota systems, North and South, are very different. Our farmers have benefited from the ability to buy in milk quota from England, Scotland and Wales. We are in a stronger position in relation to the milk quota, and our dairy industry has benefited as a result.

I see Mr McCallister shaking his head. I know about the prices, but the fact is that we are in a stronger position in relation to the quota.

Officials in the South were keen to have an increase in milk quota so that they could work towards the ultimate abolition of the milk quota system and attempt to ensure a soft landing. They achieved a favourable outcome at the WTO. However, the present circumstances and the current auction price of milk would not give anyone confidence in investing in additional quota at this time. We are aware of the difficulties in buying cheap heifers from the continent. There must be a difference of policy on the milk quota, North and South, because there is a difference in practice.

We want to ensure that our farmers do not suffer as a result of the abolition of milk quotas and are best placed to take advantage of the new regime. I understand and accept the difficulties that dairy farmers are facing, including poor auction prices. It will take time to overcome those difficulties.

11.00 am

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement. The SDLP's view is that nothing short of North/South, east-west animal-health hotlines should be set up. Does the Minister concur with that view, and if so, will she agree to put that issue on the agenda of the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in sectoral format in June?

Earlier in the year, the Minister advised the House that she was seeking compensation from the Republic's Government for the consequences north of the border of the contaminated feed incident. She now appears to have rowed back. Why has the Minister dropped that follow-up action?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As the Member pointed out, we asked the South to meet the cost of the losses that were suffered by producers and processors in the North, and I discussed the matter in detail at meetings with Brendan Smith and at the recent NSMC plenary. The South have responded by saying that for legal and financial reasons, they are unable to help.

In my response to the Committee Chairperson's question, I said that an early warning system will be

put in place and the two Administrations will have the ability to let each other know when something is happening. The issue is already being discussed and the project will be taken forward by officials. We all agree that that is the right thing to do. Communication is very important, and the project is timely, given the nature of Mr McGimpsey's statement this morning. The more communication we have, the better we can protect ourselves, and in this case our industry, from the threat of disease wherever it originates.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her statement. She is well aware of the House's desire for new animal welfare legislation in Northern Ireland. We appreciate that she wants to do things on an all-Ireland basis. However, is she conscious of the dangers of North/South co-operation in this instance, where the situation in Northern Ireland is being determined by the lowest common denominator and the person moving at the lowest speed?

Given the desire to have a fair and balanced outcome for EU and Irish agriculture, will the Minister assure the House that her Department's approach in conjunction with the Irish Government to the World Trade Organization (WTO) talks will not be at the expense of agricultural development in the Third World or the living standards of people in those parts of the globe that are based on agriculture?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I said, we want a fair, balanced and objective outcome from the WTO talks for Irish and EU agriculture. No one wants policies that will have a detrimental effect on people in developing countries or on farmers in the North of Ireland and on the island of Ireland. We are trying to avoid an imbalance in the negotiations whereby trade could happen with other parts of the world — not, in this instance, with developing countries — and that other countries would benefit from the negotiations and our farmers would lose out. That is not in anyone's interest.

Although it is not lucrative, I am proud of the fact that many processors and farmers in the North contribute to milk supplies that go to developing countries. We export milk and other dairy products to more than 100 countries around the world, some of which are the poorest and some of whose people are most dependent on those products. The fact that developing countries are receiving milk powders based on our grass, air and water quality is something of which we should be proud. The outcome of the WTO negotiations will not be at the expense of the developing countries; the purpose is to ensure that our farmers will not be disadvantaged by other agricultural states.

I believe that full co-operation on animal health and welfare issues can help reduce and prevent animal

disease, facilitate trade and improve the sustainability of farming in the North.

The ultimate objectives of North/South trade should be to facilitate co-operation and trade through the free movement of animals on the island and to optimise animal-health status through alignment of policies to control animal disease. Therefore, the strategy is timely.

The island should be internationally recognised as a separate unit for disease-control purposes and for ensuring effective traceability of livestock in the event of a disease outbreak. During the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in August 2007, we saw at first hand how recognition of the fact that our animals were not affected meant that we could continue to trade. As a consequence, we did not feel the pain of that outbreak as much as England, Scotland and Wales did.

We are one of the very few countries in Europe that is not struggling to cope with the threat of bluetongue. It is incumbent on us to work together to do everything that we can to keep bluetongue out of Ireland for as long as is possible.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Seo í mo cheist don Aire. To date, what positive outcomes has all-Ireland co-operation on animal health and welfare produced?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Various positive outcomes have been achieved to date, including the development of a largely similar system for sheep identification; co-operation on the exchange of data to facilitate trade in bovine animals after the BSE export ban was lifted; broad alignment of border-control policies aimed at preventing the introduction of animal disease; co-operation on contingency planning for outbreaks of exotic diseases, including agreement on a common chapter in the respective epizootic contingency plans for foot-and-mouth disease and avian flu; and initiation of a draft common chapter for bluetongue, which I expect to be agreed formally very shortly.

We have also got agreement on a protocol on welfare during transport breaches, and co-operation on testing regimes for TB and brucellosis in border areas. The strategic approach will enable further positive outcomes to be achieved over the next year, all of which provide for meeting the key aim of free animal movement.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. One part of the statement, which Mr P J Bradley touched on, concerns me. What impact will increased modulation and its related implications, as well as changes in market-management mechanisms, have on the local farmer?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I was very pleased that the modulation that was introduced in our negotiations on the CAP health check meant that we could balance our

modulation against what was happening in Europe and that we did not have to increase modulation for farmers here. I was also keen to avoid Europe's insisting that we return to the rural development programme and use that modulation for what it wanted us to.

We successfully negotiated to keep the rural development programme as it is and our modulation rates as they are so that farmers do not experience an increase. We can, therefore, proceed as we had hoped. That was a very positive outcome of the CAP health-check negotiations. I am very pleased that officials and, in that instance, Minister Murphy were able to negotiate that outcome, which benefits farmers in the North very much.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her statement. Were the possibilities of EU changes to the less favourable areas discussed?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No, they were not discussed at that meeting; however, we will discuss them in future, because EU requirements for the less favoured areas will affect all of Ireland. We will want to discuss what each other is doing.

I will use this opportunity to plug our current consultation. Anyone who has an interest in the issue should read the consultation document and give us his or her views. It is very important that everyone tie into that consultation and that views be heard.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her pro-Union policies on milk quotas. *[Laughter.]*

Was there any further discussion on compensation from the Republic of Ireland for those farmers who were affected by the recent dioxin scare; and why on earth was fishing not on the agenda, too?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Fishing was not on the agenda. We were supposed to be talking about agriculture and rural development, but the Rural Development Minister was not able to attend, so we stuck to agriculture. The Member will be pleased to hear that a marine sectoral meeting will be held on Thursday in Carlingford at which fishing will be discussed. However, the North/South Ministerial Council agriculture sectoral meeting is generally not the forum for discussing fisheries issues.

Compensation was not discussed. We had talked about that and received an answer from the South, and we are carrying forward the review to see what comes out of that. At this stage, though, I think that compensation will not be forthcoming. However, we submitted an emergency support measure to the EU and hope to receive money as a result of that to help us with compensation. The Executive dealt pragmatically with the issue of compensation and did their utmost to

try to help the farmers and food processors who were affected by that incident.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. She spoke about simplifying the single farm payment process. Did she have discussions with the unions to see how that could be done, and does she have their full co-operation in moving the process on?

In her statement, the Minister also referred to the state of play with the World Trade Organization. Will she confirm that there is fairness and balance in the discussions that have taken place at the World Trade Organization? I ask that because it is important that the Minister and her Department ensure that Northern Ireland, which depends on exports for the vast majority of its business, is treated with fairness and balance in all World Trade Organization discussions. It is also important that other countries do not close their borders to Northern Ireland products.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Single farm payments were not discussed at the meeting. Although we spoke briefly about the CAP and the WTO, we did not get into that detail. Obviously, if we are considering moving to a flat rate for single farm payment, I will want to consult widely on that. However, that was not discussed in any detail at the meeting.

I breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that the WTO failed to reach agreement on a deal, because my fear was that the deal that was on the table would not be fair, balanced and objective, and that it would have disadvantaged our farmers. There were further attempts to reach agreement in December 2008. We have taken every possible opportunity to express the agriculture industry's concerns about the adverse impact of an unbalanced agreement, and emphasised that the interests of Irish or EU agriculture should not be sacrificed for the sake of achieving a deal.

I have, obviously, discussed that with my counterparts in Dublin. I have also discussed it with the Scottish and Welsh Ministers. Although we are all very much in agreement, unfortunately the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) takes a contrary view, and it is DEFRA that is at the negotiating table. At times, it is very frustrating trying to get the points of the devolved Administrations across to DEFRA, which wants to make policy without any consultation or input from us. That is not fair, and if the WTO had gone ahead with a deal, we would be facing a very difficult time for farmers. We continue to insist that a WTO agreement should not be at the expense of Irish farmers.

Mr Dallat: I add my thanks to the Minister for her statement on a day when there seems not to be an awful lot of business happening in the House. I want to return to the issue of the World Trade Organization and

the need to protect local farmers. Does the Minister agree that we need to import many agricultural products? We are not very good at growing bananas, coffee and tea. Are there opportunities, now or in the future, for a concerted and combined effort to ensure that agricultural products from the Third World are protected under fair trade? I will be most grateful to the Minister if she does not mention Peter Mandelson's name in her reply.

11.15 am

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I thank the Member for his question. I try not to think about that individual, so I do not intend to mention him in my reply.

The Member is right in saying that we need to import some of our food, because some products that we enjoy in Ireland cannot be grown here. Equally, we are very good at producing products such as beef, milk, pork and lamb, and we need to stick to what we are good at. Ultimately, we will continue to export food from the island of Ireland that we can grow well and we will continue to import food from developing countries and other countries.

I believe in fair trade, but I do not believe that that stops with imported goods: I believe in fair trade for our farmers too, and, at the moment, they are struggling. We know about the price of milk, but dairy farmers are not getting a return on the milk that they produce. Therefore, fair trade works both ways. We want to see a fair price for the produce that we export to other countries.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on her statement.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Health Provision for Older People

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

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reconfigure and enhance services for older people to ensure that these services are integrated, person-centred and well staffed; that the dignity of the individual is promoted; that information is communicated effectively to patients and relatives by health professionals; that inpatients receive a nutritional diet; and that personal care is provided free of charge to all those with medical need. — [Mr Buchanan.]

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I see that the Health Minister is not in his place. Have you been given any indication that he will be available today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Had the Member been in the Chamber earlier he would have known that the Minister indicated that he will not be available for the rest of the day. Apparently, the Minister is participating in a videoconference with the Prime Minister on the current health crisis.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sorry that I was not in the Chamber to hear that statement. Does that mean that all business relating to the Minister of Health cannot be taken today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is my understanding that the two motions that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was to sit in on will not go ahead.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, does that mean that the business is not being taken solely because of the unavailability of the Minister today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is a matter for the proposers of the motion. If they wish to move the motion, they can do so, but, if they do not wish to move it, they do not have to do so.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, does that mean that if the motion is moved, there will be no response from the Minister today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is correct. The Executive have not nominated another Minister to respond on the Minister's behalf. I call Mr Buchanan to move the motion.

Motion not moved.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Given the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's announcement that he will be unable to be present to respond to the health-related debates today, and the indication that some of those items will not now be moved, the Speaker has agreed, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting for the remainder of the morning. The sitting will resume —

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Before you move to suspend the sitting, I wish to raise a point of order regarding the ministerial statement on agriculture.

It has always been the policy and rule of the House that if Members are present for all or part of a statement and wish to ask a question, they will be called to ask a question. I was here for part of that statement, albeit a short part. I spoke to the Clerk at Table while the Minister was still on her feet, but, in spite of that, you refused to call me to speak. I want it to be recorded that you refused to call me and that you have discriminated against me in that respect. I also want the matter to be raised at the Business Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Poots, you are quite right to say that it is normal practice here that if a Member is present in the House for a statement, or part of a statement, they are called to ask a question. The part of the statement for which you were present was when the Minister was on her way to sit down again. You did not hear the statement; therefore, you could not ask a question.

Dr W McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a fact that the Minister was not sitting when Mr Poots entered the Chamber. She was reading the final paragraph of her statement when he entered, and he was refused the right to ask a question.

An hour was set aside for the statement and questions, and it was closed after 22 minutes. I feel that that is an absolute disgrace, given that we are dealing with a sufficiently weighty matter and that a further 38 minutes remained for that issue. There was no pressure of time; there was certainly no pressure of business, and you know that. Therefore, I ask that this matter be referred to the Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. A Member should be present for the substantive part of any statement —

Dr W McCrea: It does not state that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: A Member cannot ask a question if he or she does not know what has gone before. That is my ruling.

Dr W McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask you to tell me where it says that a Member must be present for a “substantive part” of a statement. I was told by the Clerk that a Member must be present for a statement or part of a statement, not a substantive part of a statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have made the ruling. If you wish to refer the matter to the Speaker, you are free to do so.

Dr W McCrea: I stated already that I wish the matter to be referred officially to the Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: And so it shall be.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Francie Molloy, a Sinn Féin Member, also requested permission to ask a question on the Minister’s statement. Although he missed the start of the statement, he was in the Chamber for part of it, and it was ruled that he would not get to ask a question. I want the Speaker to make a ruling on that matter, as Mr Molloy was in the Chamber before the Minister finished her statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. Those circumstances are exactly the same as those for Mr Poots.

Mr P Maskey: Further to that point of order. I was always of the opinion that if a Member was not in the Chamber for the start of a ministerial statement, they would not be heard. However, you made an earlier ruling to Mr Poots to the effect that if a Member is present for part of a statement, they would be allowed to ask a question. One of the Sinn Féin Members was present for part of the Minister’s statement, but was refused the opportunity to ask a question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is the ruling of the Speaker that if a Member is in the Chamber for part of a statement, the Speaker may call them to ask a question. In both of today’s instances, the Members were not in the Chamber for the substantive part of the statement; therefore, I ruled that a question could not be asked by either Member. I will not take any further points of order.

As I said, the sitting will resume at 2.00 pm, when the motion on the revised recommendations report of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will be moved. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 11.24 am.

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm*

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Local Government Boundaries

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the revised recommendations report of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. 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 the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern over the implications for strong, accountable local government and a shared future, in light of the Revised Recommendations Report of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner.

At the outset of the debate, I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

On 13 May 2008, DUP and Sinn Féin Ministers backed the 11-council model for local government in Northern Ireland. Subsequently, unamended legislation was disgracefully rushed through the House. Part of that legislation set the role and remit of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. Public consultation on the revised recommendations of the Local Government Boundaries Commission ended on 9 April, and a final decision is expected before the summer.

I fully recognise the work that has been put into that report to date by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and his team. Therefore, none of my comments should be construed as criticism of the commissioner or his professional team as they set about their task. Rather, it is a criticism of the terms of reference that they were given and the way in which the review of public administration (RPA) has been mismanaged since the return of devolution and the emergence of the Sinn Féin/DUP axis at the heart of the Executive.

The Ulster Unionist Party has placed on record many times and today restates its opposition to the 11-council model for local government in Northern Ireland. The lack of local identity provided for in the 11-council model and the resulting sectarian carve-up between the mostly unionist north and east and the mainly nationalist south and west concerns us. That does not lend itself to a shared future.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Allow me to develop some of my ideas, if I may.

The original aims of the RPA were sound and worthy. However, recent developments indicate that it is becoming less and less likely that central functions will be devolved to the proposed new councils. Reports passed to me suggest that many Departments appear to be clinging to responsibilities and the associated budgets — so much for strong, accountable local government. Many people question whether the process is worth the candle.

Ratepayers pose more basic questions about whether their rates will go up or down as a result of the review. There is little mention of the savings that were expected to be passed to those ratepayers; what we hear of is the costs involved in this process. However, strong local government requires that councils have robust finances and that supposed savings are shared by all.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

The Member has referred to the need for local government to have “robust finances”, but the motion concerns the revised recommendations of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. It must surely be outside the motion to talk about rates bases, finances and the transfer of powers. Those subjects are all very pertinent, but they do not fall within a debate on local government boundaries.

Mr Speaker: I take on board what the Member has said. The Speaker affords some latitude in debates on private Members' motions. However, I remind Members that it is important that they stay within the remit of the motion, at least in principle.

Mr Beggs: To join the dots for Mr Weir, defining local government boundaries dictates the amount of rates that can be raised by councils — the two are directly related.

As we examine where we now are, Members should recall that accelerated passage was originally used to force through the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill in record speed and that the DUP/Sinn Féin axis knocked down amendments proposed by SDLP, Alliance Party and Ulster Unionist Members, each of which would have added weight to local identity issues considered by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner in coming to his decisions. Legislation in Great Britain requires the Electoral Commission to take account of electoral equality and local community identity. To be more precise, its website states:

“When making our recommendations we also take into account community identity, convenient and effective local governance and the electoral cycle”.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled amendments, and we warned of the dangers of rejecting some of them. We

proposed that identities should be more readily identifiable in the ward structure; that the identities and interests of local communities should also be recognised; and that the commissioner should consider secure, effective and convenient local government models. However, the DUP/Sinn Féin cabal rejected even that parity proposal.

We also sought to amend the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill to increase the powers of the commissioner so that he would be able to take into account local community identities, as is the case in England. We also tabled an amendment to clause 1(2) of the Bill to remove the word “major”. Again, however, the DUP/Sinn Féin cabal rejected that amendment.

Was that an issue during the consultation on the boundary review? Clearly, local identity was an issue that cropped up time and again when the redrawing of local government boundaries and wards was discussed. However, there remains a lack of clarity about whether the commission can use local community identity as a factor in producing the new ward boundaries. That is borne out by transcripts of the oral hearings. Arguments that were made on the basis of community identity were deemed to be out of order. At the mid-Antrim hearing on 21 November 2008, the assistant commissioner, Ian McCafferty, said:

“I take your points about community identity, social cohesion and so on, however, there is no regard in legislation for boundaries to be drawn with that alone.”

In his report, Mr McCafferty stated clearly:

“there is nothing in respect of services or social ties specifically listed as criteria in legislation governing the review of Local Government boundaries.”

However, when my colleagues Danny Kennedy and Ken Robinson raised that issue during Question Time on 3 November last year, they were told that:

“If individuals, communities or their representatives wish to comment on the provisional recommendations, in relation to local identities or any other matter, they have an opportunity to make representations to the Commissioner”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 34, p244, col 1*].

The Minister of the Environment repeated that pledge to my colleague George Savage last month. The question is whether the Environment Minister was really inviting elected Members and members of the public to make representations to the Boundary Commission about local identity in the full knowledge that that was not a criterion that was listed in the legislation and that they would be engaged in a relatively futile exercise. Surely that is not the case. At best, there is confusion about whether social ties and community identity could have been used when the Commission drew its boundaries. At worst, this House was misinformed by the Minister.

What are the practical outworkings? The Ulster Unionist Party feels strongly that the boundaries of Belfast were treated badly during the review. Our party's main grievance is the bizarre transfer of the Dundonald and Ballybeen areas to the new Lisburn and Castlereagh area instead of to Belfast, which would have been the pragmatic choice. Dundonald and Ballybeen are on a main arterial route into the city, and their residents are Belfast people. I understand, to a degree, the Lisburn representatives who wish to expand their rates base, but is that the best way to provide effective local governance for the Dundonald area? I believe not. That poor decision is another outworking of the DUP/Sinn Féin axis.

The Ulster Unionist Party's response was clear in its attempt to ensure that the new Belfast boundaries reflected the city that exists in the twenty-first century. The review of the parliamentary boundaries endorsed that position, recommending that the parliamentary boundaries of the Belfast constituencies be extended to cover areas to the north, south, east and west of the existing city boundary. Unfortunately, the city of Belfast will be constrained by the outdated Victorian boundaries to the east and the north, some of which date back to 1892.

I must raise another issue that is exercising many of my constituents. Currently, there is talk of efficiency savings and cutting down bureaucracy and administration. In many instances, that is code for centralising service provision. The feeling in Carrickfergus and Larne, which already have the lowest proportion of Civil Service jobs, is that teaming up with Ballymena is likely to mean only one thing: the centralisation of many jobs and the location of services in the bigger population centre of Ballymena. The Social Security Agency has already announced the location of a new processing centre there, and back-office jobs in Larne and Carrickfergus are earmarked for transfer. A range of other services are also affected.

The plan to govern Dundonald and Ballybeen from Lisburn with Larne and Carrickfergus in danger of being governed from Ballymena does not bode well for strong, accountable local government, so I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Weir: It will come as no surprise to the proposer of the motion that the DUP opposes it. This motion is, perhaps, one of the most ludicrous to have come before the Assembly, and there has been strong competition. It is ludicrous for a number of reasons. First —

Mr Cobain: You can talk.

Mr Weir: Mr Cobain will get his chance to speak later, should he desire to put together some cogent evidence, which I would be interested to hear.

The motion is ludicrous for a range of reasons. First, the process that is being undertaken by the Local

Government Boundaries Commissioner is ongoing. Consultation may have finished, but the final proposals have not yet been put forward, so there is an issue even about the appropriateness of tabling the motion.

Secondly, the motion is ludicrous because, at the end of the day, parties across the Chamber will disagree about various aspects of the commissioner's findings, which, like those of any boundary commission, will be a bit of a curate's egg. For example, I welcome the numerous changes that have been made in the proposed North Down and Ards district council area. There was a great deal of cross-party support for those changes, and, to be fair, the commissioner took advantage of that support. On the other hand, there are aspects of what the commission has put forward with which I disagree, such as the proposals for Dunmurry and for Belfast's northern boundary. However, the reality is that if one puts work out to an independent commissioner — that is how things are done in this Chamber; we are not in the business of gerrymandering boundaries — the findings must be independent.

Furthermore, the idea that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's decision about whether to place a town or a village within one boundary or another has a significant impact on strong, accountable local government and a shared future is also ludicrous. There is a debate to be had on those issues, and had the proposer of the motion bothered to consult his colleagues on the proposals for a shared future he would know that protections for both communities are built into the governance arrangements, which have also received cross-party support. The two matters are not linked.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I see that the Member is keen to get in, so I will give way.

Mr B McCrea: I am interested in the Member's point about cross-community support. Is it not true that a minority population must comprise at least 10% of the overall population to have some of those protections, and that what we are actually seeing is an attempt to gerrymander boundaries in order to create majority communities that can ignore people in other places? As a result of that, we risk turning Belfast into a contentious city.

Mr Weir: First, if the Member knew anything about the RPA process, he would know that the 10% threshold relates to matters of an entirely different nature. With the best will in the world, however one draws boundaries, there will always be some parts of Northern Ireland, such as North Down and Ards, in which heavy unionist majorities will be created. There is no way not to create that situation. Belfast will be balanced under these proposals — as it is under the existing arrangements — so I am not sure how that will create a

“contentious city”. I notice that the Alliance Party seems very pleased at that prospect.

With respect to some of the criticisms about the process, questions were asked about the term “major part”. However, the Ulster Unionist Party acknowledged the legislation in its submissions to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, and every one of its proposals was compatible with that legislation. Indeed, had the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner been so minded, he or she could have made those changes. The Ulster Unionist Party’s submission stated:

“The major part of Castlereagh, even under our proposals, will still be going into Lisburn and Castlereagh because it is still the major part of the territory - which is exactly what the Commissioner has said.”

That acknowledges that the party had the scope within the process to propose changes, and, indeed, that fact was acknowledged by the commissioners. Some of us will be disappointed about some of the proposals, but such is the nature of an independent commissioner.

2.15 pm

One wonders why some of those changes were not made, when such a case was made by the Ulster Unionist Party. However, if one looks at the transcripts again and considers the Ulster Unionist Party’s performance with regard to its submissions to the Boundaries Commissioner, one will get a clue. Indications were given about a green wedge around Dundonald, but what evidence was provided? In fact, the Boundaries Commissioner said:

“The Commissioner could not take into account such a factor in the absence of any cogent evidence.”

If Members read the Ulster Unionists’ submissions, they will see evidence of a complete shambles. The Ulster Unionist mayor of Lisburn contradicted the Ulster Unionist submission on Lisburn and Castlereagh, and two Ulster Unionist colleagues cross-examined each other on the same issue. Furthermore, in its submission on Castlereagh, the Ulster Unionist Party stated that Castlereagh was being decimated, but then it wanted more of Castlereagh to go into Belfast. It seems that the Ulster Unionist Party was contradicting itself.

At the hearings regarding Castlereagh and Belfast, we received various bits of anecdotal evidence. We were informed that one member had spoken to people in their offices about the boundaries. Furthermore, we received the pertinent evidence that taxi drivers had even been asked whether they supported Lisburn Distillery. However, not a single petition, opinion poll or survey of the schools to which parents in the catchment area were sending their children was produced; the evidence was appalling.

Having said that, however, there was at least some evidence provided on the Castlereagh and Belfast

boundaries. The Ulster Unionist Party rightly decried the fact that the boundaries to the northern end of the Antrim and Newtownabbey district councils had not been changed. However, the Ulster Unionists did not even show up at the hearings regarding Newtownabbey and Antrim.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Weir: Not a single minute of evidence was given.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad that the Minister is in the Chamber to suffer through the debate with the rest of Members. I oppose the motion; in fact, when I read it, I wondered where the Ulster Unionists were going with it.

In our constituencies, Members hear people’s real concerns about job losses, house repossessions and many other issues. Members must grasp the public’s opinion on the Assembly, especially in light of public expenses.

After listening to the concerns of my constituents, I find myself speaking on a motion such as this and wondering whether the proposers of the motion realise what is happening around them. I do not mean to be condescending when I say that, but Members should remember that parties and individuals had ample opportunity to contribute to the process.

Members should be providing strong representation. Members who are successful in subsequent Assembly elections will be voted in to represent their constituents. I do not know whether the Members in the Ulster Unionist corner will be representatives or not, but there will be representation.

The successful and strong Newry identity campaign managed to retain the core identity of Newry city. I mention that because most of the debate so far has been about Belfast. Perhaps the issue should have been tabled as a subject for an Adjournment debate rather than a motion.

The most recent revision process, which is referred to in the motion, provided opportunities for many people to contest the boundaries. One of the key decisions on the future shape of local government, which was agreed by the Executive in March 2008, was to provide a framework for stronger, more effective and more responsive local government in the North. At the heart of any local democracy, the administrative system must address both representative and participatory democracy. Decisions should be based on the principle of services being delivered to the citizen as close to the ground as possible.

The new function of community planning will ensure that, for the first time, communities, local representatives and statutory agencies will assist in shaping the future of their local areas in a collective and combined manner. Regardless of the number of

new council units, the most important aspect must be effective and efficient delivery in the operation of the councils.

Equality, transparency and value for money for the ratepayer must be firmly embedded in the new structures. Any councillor who has ever asked for a breakdown of exactly what a ratepayer pays will, under the current system, not have received specific details. In future, we must ensure that people receive value for money.

Any new council will always have majorities and minorities. In my own area, for example, we will be in the minority, but we must work together. The rights of minorities, whether east or west of the Bann, must be protected. Strong safeguards, which will allow for the protection of minority rights and the unhindered operations of the new councils, must be built into the future governance arrangements.

To conclude, two of the most important elements in the delivery of strong local government are the requirements for genuine community participation in the new councils and the need for equality and transparency in the new structures. I remind Members that the decision on the recommendations is not final; however, we must now decide on and continue the process of transition. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I agree that the new council arrangements should provide better services for ratepayers and aim to improve the quality of life of the people who live in the areas that the councils will serve. However, one of the concerns that arises from the proposed 11-council model and, indeed, from the anticipated findings of the Boundaries Commissioner's report is that, instead of providing what I outlined, we shall see the Balkanisation of Northern Ireland. It is for that reason that I support the motion.

A key issue for the SDLP with any new council arrangements will be the governance system that will be put in place. I am sure that many Members will agree that new councils should operate in a system of governance that can build trust and promote partnerships, particularly between the nationalist and unionist traditions. The system should also ensure the inclusion of smaller groups and their fair representation in the top posts and appointments to all outside bodies. Furthermore, the arrangements should be such that all members of the new councils are duty-bound to put the interests of the people whom they are elected to serve at the forefront, rather than their own narrow party political interests. I am sure that I do not need to remind Members that, in the old councils, we witnessed far too many bad examples of party interests being put first. The reform of local government should move us away from that. Furthermore, it should develop new partnerships, build

trust and confidence and build a new, shared future for the people of Northern Ireland. That will not be realised under the 11-council model, with its proposed new boundaries.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way.

As was said earlier, what we are witnessing here is a crude carve-up of power between the DUP and Sinn Féin. In its submissions to the review, the SDLP maintained that a more appropriate model for Northern Ireland was the 15-council model. *[Interruption.]*

We are in Northern Ireland, and we can predict the make-up of the new councils. Down and Ards have been mentioned. A new council for those areas will probably consist of 82% representation from the unionist tradition, approximately 15% from the Alliance Party and independents, and 3% from the nationalist tradition. A 75% weighted majority or a 20% call-in mechanism will not protect minorities in the event of abuses of power.

Similarly, it is likely that a new council for Ballymena, Larne and Carrickfergus will consist of 80% unionists, 12% nationalists, and 8% Alliance Party and others. A new council for Newry and Mourne in the south-west will have approximately 26% nationalist representation and approximately 23% unionist representation. Once again, in that case, unionists would not be protected by a 75% weighted majority for voting or a 20% call-in mechanism —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I have made my position clear in relation to that. Sorry, Mr Weir.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Member to mislead the House with the figures that he is quoting? Different figures have been agreed at the strategic leadership board —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I ask the Member to reflect on what he is saying. Is he — *[Interruption.]*

Order. Is he directly accusing the Member of misleading the House?

Mr Weir: It may well be that the Member has been misinformed; he is giving figures that are not accurate. There has already been cross-party agreement on different thresholds as regards both call-in mechanisms —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Weir: He is giving information that is wrong.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order. Mr Gallagher, carry on.

Mr Gallagher: Mr Speaker —

Mr McClarty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has Mr Weir withdrawn his remark regarding the word “mislead”?

Mr Speaker: The Member has completely clarified his point. Mr Gallagher, please carry on.

Mr Gallagher: I believe that Mr Weir should withdraw that remark, but I want to move on. I was about to make the important point that the governance arrangements should, in the SDLP’s view, be based on an 80% weighted majority, with a 15% call-in mechanism. We know that already —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: Already in place — Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The convention in the House is clear. If the Member who is on his feet does not wish to take an intervention — it is absolutely clear that Mr Gallagher does not wish to take an intervention — the Member should not persist.

Mr Gallagher: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We all know about the work of the voluntary transition committees, which have been in place for some time. I remind Members that in Lisburn City Council, for example, the unionist block took six of the eight posts available and excluded the SDLP from the voluntary transition committee. Those committees are to be replaced by statutory transition committees, which will have extensive powers. I am calling on the Minister to ensure that this time round the appointments to the statutory committees will be based on fairness and the principle of inclusion.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Ford: I am somewhat at a loss to understand why we are debating this motion. It seems to me — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Ford: It appears to me that Ulster Unionists not only do not listen but do not read in advance either. To put forward a motion that has a general complaint about legislation passed in the House some months ago, dress it up as concerns about the behaviour of the Boundaries Commissioner and say when proposing the motion that it is not actually a complaint about the commissioner and his staff does not seem to be any way of conducting rational business.

I might well agree with many of the criticisms that have been made from the Ulster Unionist Benches of the way in which the process operated. Certainly, as one who proposed a number of amendments to the Bill at Consideration Stage, I agree with them about the mechanisms that went through. However, to suggest that we can now somehow revisit it as a private Member’s motion and undo what was passed as legislation in the House seems to be a tad naive. In fact —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I will be grateful to if I can hear any —

Mr Beggs: Does the Member recognise that, when the legislation was going through the House, others indicated that local identity was an area that the Boundaries Commissioner could deal with under the current legislation? Therefore, was it not appropriate to highlight the fact that it has not been appropriate legislation that has allowed the commissioner to deal with those areas satisfactorily?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Ford: I agree with the Member that the process was not satisfactory, but that is not what the motion says. The motion seems to be unclear as to whether it is criticising the Boundaries Commissioner or criticising the entire process or exactly what it is doing. The proposer complained about a sectarian carve-up. Anyone who has observed elections over the past few years will find that people in the west and the south are slightly more likely to vote nationalist, people in the north and the east are slightly more likely to vote unionist, and people in greater Belfast are slightly more likely to vote Alliance, regardless of whether there is one, 26, 11, 15, or 17 councils — slightly more likely than the general population. Regardless of the number of councils, that is how people will vote. It is nonsense to suggest that the new boundaries represent a sectarian carve-up.

2.30 pm

Another complaint is that Belfast will be a contentious city. Funnily enough, I thought that, back in the 1980s, there was a fair amount of contention in Belfast. It is generally accepted that Belfast is a significantly less contentious city than it was. As Mr Weir said, that is because the Alliance Party holds — and has held for a couple of terms — the balance of power in the city and is likely to continue to do so with the new boundaries. Those Ulster Unionist fears can be done away with.

In Belfast, there are issues about whether the boundaries have expanded enough to represent the capital city and its growth properly, although the boundaries, in some places, are not 1890s boundaries but 1970s boundaries, so there is good reason to examine that matter.

There are also issues about preparations for good governance. As I understand it, the transition committee in Belfast has no representation from Castlereagh Borough Council or Lisburn City Council, despite the significant number of people who will transfer to the Belfast district from those two authorities. There are issues about the better governance of Belfast, but they are not the issues that are being dressed up in the Ulster Unionist Party’s claim that,

somehow, Belfast will be contentious, because it is getting realistic, modern and up-to-date boundaries.

The other key point in Mr Beggs's speech is his concern, as stated in the motion, for a shared future. I am delighted to know that the Ulster Unionist Party — or UCUNF or whatever it is called this week; the name may have changed — is committed to a shared future, because we have not witnessed that from the party in the past. Nor does it tally with the behaviour of a number of Ulster Unionist councillors in different places.

Mr B McCrea: I am surprised to hear Mr Ford say that. The Ulster Unionist Party is non-sectarian. It is political in the sense that it wants to stand for all the people of Northern Ireland. I challenge Mr Ford personally. As my record on speaking up for a shared future shows and as my colleagues from the SDLP will, perhaps, confirm, the Ulster Unionist Party believes in a shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland. Is that clear?

Mr Ford: I am delighted to hear the Member state that so clearly and specifically. We will have to examine his record on education and the records of other Members from his party on other matters to ascertain the validity of that statement.

Instead of whingeing about what has happened in the past, we must now get on with the real issues, such as ensuring that local councils have a process of governance that instils trust. That will be done by incentivising co-operation and partnership, not by the sort of sectarian head-count in which some Members have indulged by adding up numbers. At one point, I thought that Mr Gallagher was going to demand that the single prospective SDLP member of the new council area covering north Down and Ards ought to have a veto over anything that that council might do. We have reduced that to a 20% veto, but it must be seen that, if we are truly to build a shared future, we will do so on the basis of building trust rather than dividing people and creating artificial divisions in which some people are rewarded. That is what must be done if we are to carry the changes through.

I wish to correct Mr Weir on one point. He claimed that no Ulster Unionist turned up at the local boundary hearing for the Antrim/Newtownabbey area. He is wrong: a local councillor turned up to contradict the submission that had been made by the Ulster Unionist Party centrally.

Mr Ross: I agree with many of Mr Ford's points. I do not know whether that comes as more of a shock to Members on his Benches or on mine.

Today's debate is nothing new, in the sense that the Assembly has debated the issue on a number of occasions. Today, we heard many of the same arguments about what constitutes strong, accountable

local government and other issues that we have heard previously.

The RPA is one of the most important and significant pieces of work that the Assembly will undertake. However, as I listened to Mr Beggs's opening comments, it seemed that his party had had some sort of conversion or that it wanted to stick with the 26-council model. We want to modernise local government and make it suitable for the twenty-first century and a new Northern Ireland that is more peaceful and stable, with an established Assembly at Stormont. Local government must change to reflect that.

The process has not been easy, and, indeed, any process that will reduce the number of councils from 26 to 11 will not receive 100% agreement. However, most people see the 11-council model as a reasonable balance between the need for locality and the requirement for efficiency. That is not to say that there are not differing views. As my colleague Mr Weir said, there are differing views even in the Ulster Unionist Party. Some Ulster Unionist members of Lisburn City Council argued one thing in respect of the eastern part of the Belfast City Council area; other party members took a different line. Mr Ford referred to a similar scenario in Antrim.

The process is not yet complete, and the final decisions have not been taken. There was widespread public consultation after the original recommendations and, again, after the revised recommendations. Political parties also had an opportunity to contribute to that process. It is important that we remain focused on the goal of achieving more efficient and effective local government in which councils can genuinely deliver for ratepayers.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled the motion, but it must know that the Minister cannot comment on specific arguments about boundaries because the process is not complete and the independent commissioner still has to make recommendations. Therefore, one wonders why the Ulster Unionist Party put the motion forward. Perhaps today's debate has more to do with the fact that the Assembly rejected an Ulster Unionist amendment some time ago than anything else.

In recent debates on the issue, we heard much from some Members about the lack of community or local identity and social cohesion; however, few of those Members attempted to explain what that means. Most people are not exercised about what council they belong to, and they will not protest about the name of their council; they want a council that can deliver the services that they require effectively and efficiently.

That is not to say that the local community is not important; indeed, it is imperative that councils are not remote. However, our primary driver should be the

creation of an economy of scale and effective and efficient local government. The term “local” means different things to different people — it can refer to someone’s street, village, town or townland — and the new councils will not alter that in any way.

The process has been a major piece of work. We must now get on with the job of delivering the type of local government that our constituents want, which is one that delivers services efficiently and effectively. In a few years’ time, people will not judge the RPA on boundaries or names; they will judge it on how the changes have affected the services that they receive. I oppose the motion.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak against the motion. Indeed, the motion is a bit of a nonsense, given that, as the previous Member to speak said, the process is not yet complete. The motion has more to do with the forthcoming European elections than any elections to new councils.

Sinn Féin believes that equality must be at the heart of local government. Equality has not been in the remit of local government in this place before, and we all know the history of that. For Sinn Féin, the key issue is how local councils are governed in future, and that includes the protection of minority communities. Our focus throughout the review of public administration has been to reduce bureaucracy; to have strong legal protections for minorities; for power sharing to put an end to the politics of exclusion; and to ensure genuine community involvement in decision making through community planning.

People living on, and close to, the border have suffered economically and socially as a result of partition. The fact that community planning will be allowed to take place on a cross-border basis between the new councils in the Six Counties and the county councils in the Twenty-six Counties represents common sense as well as progress. We need streamlined, efficient and effective local government that delivers for its citizens, and one that has cohesive communities and a balance that supports effective representation. The most important local government issues concern its operation, what services are delivered to ratepayers and how those services are delivered. It is critical that we get a system of local government that allows all sections of the community to participate and work together effectively.

It is regrettable that, in the initial report, the boundary commissioner refused to look at the inclusion of the Irish language in ward names and failed to take account of the views of many communities that want Irish to be recognised and promoted. We want to put it on record that that matter still needs to be addressed.

During the consultation period in my constituency of North Antrim, Sinn Féin was the only party to call

for the name of the new council in the north-east to be changed to take account of the fact that the glens wards form part of the council area. It is now recommended that the name be changed from the causeway coast district council to the causeway coast and glens district council. That is welcome because it will help tourism in our local area.

The level of agreement reached thus far represents a real advance in how local councils are governed, in particular, and in the protection of minority communities. Today, as we all know very well, unionists in some councils, such as Lisburn and Coleraine, are still operating the politics of exclusion. We now have ample opportunity to bring all of that to an end.

Cutting the number of councils will reduce bureaucracy; involve communities in decision-making through community planning; join up local and central government; provide legal protections for minorities; and end the politics of exclusion through power-sharing. At the end of the day, as other Members —

Mr B McCrea: What about Santa? Is he real too?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McKay: I cannot hear the Member anyway.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members will please address their remarks through the Speaker and not across the Chamber.

Mr McKay: At the end of the day, Sinn Féin will not take any lectures from the Tory boys in the corner. Sinn Féin will listen to the people, and what the people want is protection for all minority communities. They also want value for money. All in all, the proposals represent value for money and efficiency, and it is common sense to back them. I oppose the motion because that is the only common-sense thing to do.

Mr McClarty: I declare an interest as a member of Coleraine Borough Council. Under different circumstances, the motion might represent one of the last chances to influence the debate on the shape and meaningfulness of local government reform in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, to date, we have witnessed a charade of a process that has taken place solely to solidify a DUP/Sinn Féin carve-up that is not in the best interests of local government in Northern Ireland or of local communities.

The proposals outlined in the revised recommendations of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner’s report represent nothing more than rubber-stamping the flawed back room deal negotiated by the DUP and Sinn Féin. What we are left with today was agreed a year and a half ago. The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner ensured that the agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP remained largely intact. There is growing concern that democratic processes, media freedom and the best interests of the people of

Northern Ireland are being eroded to maintain the stability that the two major parties have deigned to give us with their smiling face-off. However, in this instance, the people of Northern Ireland and especially those of Belfast have been left with second-best in order to appease two mutually opposed partners.

The Ulster Unionist Party has long supported a 15-council model, as that largely delineates the existing electorate and real communities. It ensures proportionality of the electorate and citizens combined with a single representative structure that enhances accountability of services. A 15-council model has reduced electoral confusion, for people have now to grapple with three electoral areas; and it boosts coterminosity of services. However, due to the DUP/Sinn Féin deal, we are now past that stage.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McClarty: No. You did not listen to us when we put forward amendments, and I will not listen to you now.

Throughout the process, we have witnessed Northern Ireland being treated as a place apart, which is unfortunate. Legislation in Great Britain requires the Electoral Commission to take account of electoral equality and local community identity. However, the natural development and opinions of local communities have been largely removed from the process, which is deeply regretted. Rather than giving people influence over the shape of their new local government, the DUP and Sinn Féin have arrogantly imposed decisions from on high.

We attempted to alter the situation by trying to amend the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill to ensure that the Boundaries Commissioner had the power to make meaningful changes and to take into account local identities. However, by rejecting our amendments, the DUP and Sinn Féin ensured that that did not happen. Arlene Foster, the then Environment Minister, irresponsibly stated that the commissioner would have the power to make meaningful changes. The present Environment Minister, Mr Wilson, likewise told the Assembly that:

“The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner can make small or larger changes to boundaries.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p351, col 1*].

Both were wrong, as the Boundaries Commissioner interpreted the legislation in the way that we warned that he would have to, by concluding in his provisional recommendations report that:

“no major geographical part of any existing local government district has been transferred”.

That has left us with an absurdly constructed framework for local government in Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

The absurdities are particularly pronounced in Belfast, where the residents of Dundonald, who use the Metro bus service and who largely work and socialise in and associate themselves with Belfast, have been forced into Lisburn City Council. We are led to believe that the people of Dundonald have more in common with the people of Glenavy, Ballinderry, Moira and those who live on the shores of Lough Neagh than they do with the people of Belfast.

Although large parts of west Belfast have been moved from Lisburn City Council to Belfast City Council, the same cannot be said for significant parts of east Belfast. It appears that, in order to create a super-council in Lisburn, Peter Robinson and the DUP have sold out the people of Dundonald, and, in effect, a good deal more than that.

The proposals for local government are not good for Northern Ireland. The blatant DUP/Sinn Féin trade-offs will in no way secure any meaningful shared future or deliver us from our segregated past. That perpetual carve-up is no way to do business. However, it is now fast becoming the only way that we expect government in Northern Ireland to be done, and that is to everyone's long-term detriment. I support the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for doing so, because it raises an issue about which I feel strongly. It is an issue that has affected my constituency and my constituents, who also feel strongly about it.

A Member: No, they do not.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: Mr Speaker, was I supposed to respond to that?

We were told that the review of public administration would deliver all sorts of benefits. It was supposed to deliver significant savings to people across Northern Ireland and create an improved, efficient and effective public service. I might have got it wrong, but, from where I stand, all those intended benefits have been abandoned, marginalised and forgotten about. What I have seen delivered is largely a gerrymandering exercise that is reminiscent of the bad old days and that has been worked on by the DUP in collusion with Sinn Féin.

That is the only reason that I can arrive at to explain the bizarre and bewildering composition of the new Belfast local government boundary that the Boundaries Commissioner announced. I do not blame the Boundaries Commissioner, because, whatever promises and statements were made in the House about the Boundaries Commissioner, his hands were tied. He was told what to do, where to go and what decisions he had to take. He was allowed to make a few adjustments around the edges.

In the case of my constituency, which extends to the outer reaches of Belfast, the clear instruction was that all of Castlereagh had to go into the Lisburn area. To echo the words of Mr McClarty, that not only created a bizarrely shaped local council area that ranged from the Dromara hills to Dundonald and on to the shores of Lough Neagh but it provided little cohesion or coherence and was against the explicitly stated wishes of the people. If a person were to suggest that there is a remote sense of cohesion or common interest between the Dromara hills and Dundonald, their sanity would need to be considered.

Staff from my office carried out an extensive survey of the people living in the Newtownbreda and Cairnshill area of south Belfast, which is less than three miles from Belfast city centre. They surveyed 1,000 people who live along the Saintfield Road, which is adjacent to Belfast, and — surprise, surprise — 96% of them said that they wanted their area to be part of Belfast City Council. We presented that evidence to the Boundaries Commissioner and even backed it up with the opinions of planners and professional people who do not have a party political axe to grind. However, all that evidence was discarded and ignored. Therefore, people's opinions did not matter. The exercise simply rode roughshod over the public interest and individuals' interests to ensure that a cabal was created in Lisburn.

It is not only that overwhelming response's being ignored that concerns me. To make matters worse, some of those same residents, who come from across the political spectrum and represent all the political parties, attended the hearings in Malone House and the Ramada hotel, and again they made felt their genuine opposition. I neither stoked nor promoted their opposition. Yes, I sought answers, but I tried to do so as objectively as possible. I did not prompt people to attend the hearings; they came of their own volition. The Boundary Commission ignored every one of their suggestions and requests.

I thought that the reorganisation of local government was intended to make it work better for the people, in which case the commission should have listened to those directly affected. There will be no shared future, not even in a sectarian sense, although I am not looking at the issue from that angle. Little can be shared between people in Dundonald and the far end of Lisburn, the shores of Lough Neagh or the Dromara hills. Serious questions must be asked of the two parties that orchestrated that carve-up.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Dr McDonnell: I could talk about broader issues that arise from how some of the boundaries were

created, but I do not have a chance to do so today. I am deeply concerned that the report serves no one.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. My colleague Mr Ford asked me to inform the House that he meant to declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council and to convey his apologies for his oversight.

I have some sympathy with those who raised the problem under discussion. However, I am bewildered that the discussion should take such a format. Essentially, the motion does nothing other than to look back on what has happened. I would not be so generous as to say that it even tries to rewrite history. The motion does not call for any action but proposes that the Assembly express its concern. However, should the Assembly go down the route of expressing concern, so what? What would happen next? The motion does not call for the Minister or the Assembly to do anything.

Notwithstanding all the confusion that would have been caused, the motion could, for example, have called for the repeal of the legislation on local government boundaries. Equally, it could have called for, or demanded, a rejection by the Minister of the final recommendations when they land on his desk. The motion contains neither, so it is a waste of time and represents a wasted opportunity.

The Alliance Party was extremely unhappy with the legislation that was passed in the Chamber last spring. The delay in the parties in the Executive reaching agreement resulted in a curtailment of the normal legislative process to allow the legislation to be rushed through.

My party supported a reduction to 15 rather than 11 councils because that number struck a better balance between local representation and the need for efficient services. Some of the council pairings, such as Fermanagh with Omagh rather than with Dungannon, did not make sense.

The terms of reference for the Boundaries Commissioner were too narrow, and the Alliance Party could have anticipated many of the problems that have since emerged. However, as far as the legislation is concerned, that ship has sailed. The Assembly followed the proper process, and the DUP and Sinn Féin voted through the tabled amendments. Although I disagree with what they did, that is their prerogative, and I respect their ability to do that in the Chamber. That is democracy, and the Assembly must now move on.

The several anomalies that have emerged in the system clearly existed last spring; none of them is new. We knew that the pairing of Fermanagh and Omagh would be problematic, as would the establishment of a single council area running from Saintfield to Crossmaglen, which makes no sense. We knew what would happen in Lisburn and Castlereagh, and that

Belfast's council area would be too small to enable it to grow and punch above, rather than below, its weight as a city and as a driver of the regional economy. All the problems that were known about last spring have been confirmed, because nothing new has been brought to the table.

I could criticise the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner for the way in which he interpreted his mandate and the scale of some of his modifications to external ward boundaries or even to internal ward boundaries. However, the proposers of the motion have not gone down that route. They have not engaged in technical discussions about what happens at a local level, which is the meat and drink of what the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner should be doing.

My only conclusion is that the motion is, in effect, a retrospective whinge about legislation that was passed by the Assembly last year. I agree with the complaints being made: it is not productive to cry over spilt milk, especially if we are not proposing to do anything about the matter.

I will make two comments on the issue of a shared future. There has been a lot of talk about governance. I want to stress that, although we can design all the fancy formulas in the world, nothing will get us away from the fact that the only way to build and sustain a shared future is through building trust and co-operation between people. For example, in North Down Borough Council, we rely on a majoritarian vote; however, we very rarely go down that avenue. There is a culture of trust and of working together among the parties in that council. Establishing that culture throughout Northern Ireland is what we aspire to.

I hear what the Ulster Unionists are saying about their commitment to a shared future in Belfast. I would like it if, when winding on the motion, they would give the House a commitment that a shared future is of genuine concern to them. If the proposed new boundaries create a situation in which Belfast happens to go nationalist, I hope that we will not see a battle emerge between unionists over who lost Belfast. That is the essence of sectarianism, not the essence of a shared future.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): When I first read the motion, I, too —

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of the Environment: Give me a chance to start.

Mr Speaker: Do you want to make a point of order, or are you asking the Minister to give way?

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before making a statement, do the Minister and any other

Members who also serve as councillors not have to declare that fact?

Mr Speaker: If any Member or Minister wishes, for whatever reason, to declare an interest, it is up to the Member or Minister to do that.

The Minister of the Environment: I think that we are stooping to the depths of pettiness, something for which the Member for East Antrim is known. Anyone in the House who does not know that I am a councillor on Belfast City Council must be suffering from Alzheimer's disease, given that the Member who sits in that corner and who made the point reminds me of it every Question Time. However, if it pleases the Member, I will state it: Mr Speaker, I wish to declare an interest in so far as I am a member of Belfast City Council. I hope that the Member is satisfied; he will probably again remind me of that fact on Tuesday of next week.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of the Environment: I suppose that it will fill the time.

Mr Weir: Just in case the Member decides to report me to the Committee on Standards and Privileges or some such body, I will state that I omitted to mention that I am a member of North Down Borough Council.

The Minister of the Environment: It is confession time now, Mr Speaker.

As many other Members have mused, when I first read the motion, I, too, wondered what its purpose was. I thought that the motion was, perhaps, designed to have a go at the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, given that it states:

“this Assembly expresses its concern over the implications for strong, accountable local government and a shared future, in light of the Revised Recommendations Report of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner.”

I thought that we would hear some comments about the report and about what the commissioner had done. Yet the Member who proposed the motion had hardly risen to his feet when he said that he did not wish to criticise the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. We have to then ask why the man is even mentioned in the motion. That is an example of the usual hand wringing that we expect from the Member for East Antrim.

3.00 pm

The Member for South Belfast Dr McDonnell went even further. He said that he did not wish to criticise the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, yet he proceeded to say that that man had ignored local democracy, that he had been told where to go and what to do and that he had ridden roughshod over the views of the Member's constituents. If that is not criticism, I

would not like to be criticised by the Member for South Belfast.

The implication was that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner must have been told what to do, where to go and how to do his job by the Minister. I wrote to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner telling him of his appointment. Since that day, we have not spoken to each other; he has jealously guarded his independence, and I have respected his independence. That is the way it has to be. He was not told where to go or what to do, and what he has done and how he has interpreted the rules has been entirely his job and his responsibility.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Minister agree that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner was given very tight instructions that all or most of Castlereagh Borough Council had to be amalgamated with Lisburn City Council, whether that made sense or not?

The Minister of the Environment: I will come to the instructions for the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner in a moment. The rules that were laid down were agreed by the House, and when I come to talk about the rules, I shall demonstrate that he did have discretion.

Major changes to boundaries were not defined. However, given that the Executive and Assembly had decided that there would be 11 local councils that would cover the boundaries of a certain number of existing councils, the Boundaries Commissioner had to work inside certain parameters in order to respect the democratic wishes of the Assembly. He could not subvert the wish of the Assembly to have 11 councils to encompass, approximately, the areas that had been agreed. That was the circumscription and the democratic parameter within which he had to work.

Several Members, including Mr McClarty, said that the debate may be the last chance for change. I see nothing in the motion that recommends that any change should be made. The motion includes no instruction to the Minister, there is no demand from the Assembly, and no changes are recommended.

However, the Members who proposed the motion mistakenly think that it will be a mechanism to change what they see as the wrong decisions of the past. If those Members wanted change, perhaps they should have made some recommendations in the motion. If they are so incompetent in drawing up a motion, perhaps they have only themselves to blame for what happened in the past and for the votes that were taken in the past.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of the Environment: No; I have already given way, and I want to get on to other issues.

The Member will have a chance to speak when he makes his winding-up speech.

There seems to have been general criticism of the Boundaries Commissioner's recommendations for Belfast: he has been criticised over whether Dundonald or Rathcoole should have been part of Belfast City Council; whether Belfast will become a nationalist city; and whether local identity has been ignored. The Members of the party that mostly made that criticism have had every opportunity to make recommendations and to argue their case to the Boundaries Commissioner.

When they went to the Boundaries Commissioner, members of that party contradicted their own colleagues; as was pointed out, councillors from Castlereagh Borough Council said one thing, while the Mayor of Lisburn said the total opposite.

I shall give the House an idea of the quality of evidence that was given by members of the party that is now so concerned with Belfast's boundaries. Some of them told us that they had spoken to taxi drivers who never took anyone from Dundonald to Lisburn. I do not believe that that was the issue under discussion. Indeed, it shows the confusion that exists about the question of identity.

Although he did not use the word on that occasion, another member of that party swore that he had been "inundated" — I am sure that Members will be aware about whom I am talking when I use that term — by representations from east and west Belfast. When asked whether he had any evidence of those representations, he replied: "Oh yes, people have spoken to me." What about a petition? He said that those people wanted him to present a petition, but he told them: "It is OK, because I am going to the Assembly." His party's adviser then intervened and said that it was already organising petitions, not realising, of course, that, as the assistant boundaries commissioner had to point out, the deadline had passed.

If that party is serious about saving Belfast, one would have thought that it would organise itself a little better. I suspect that, perhaps, the motion is not about change or criticism, but about covering up the party's own incompetence and inability to make, as the commissioner said, a cogent case.

There has been criticism of the Boundaries Commissioner's ability to take local identity into consideration, but, although the Boundaries Commissioner was given instructions, problems arose. The first is what is meant by local identity. Is it something that is shared by those who gave evidence? Is local identity measured by where people shop or by what football team they support?

I noticed in the evidence that one Ulster Unionist Party member said that he could not find anyone in Dundonald who supported Lisburn Distillery Football

Club. End of story. His argument was, therefore, that Dundonald should not be included with Lisburn and Castlereagh. Is that how the Boundaries Commissioner should make a decision on local identity? There would have been much more criticism of the report had it recommended that, because no Lisburn Distillery supporter could be found there, Dundonald must remain part of Belfast. He would have made a laughing stock of himself.

That is the sort of problem that we get into when we start to talk about local identity. How is it measured? Does local identity mean different things to different people? When the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) carried out its initial report into the review of public administration (RPA), one matter that it considered was how to measure local identity. The report said that often people do not identify with their local council; sometimes they identify with their street, estate, town or townland instead. That uncertainty and difficulty in defining local identity presented the commissioner with a problem.

I noted that the Member for East Antrim remarked that the commissioner said that, in creating a possible new mid-Antrim district council, local identity could not be considered alone. There were provisions in the instructions that the commissioner was given that allowed him to have discretion where it was felt that local identity should be taken into consideration.

The commissioner could not split townlands unless he considered it unavoidable, but of course he had the opportunity to split townlands in areas where he identified possible local identities. As far as practical, he had to ensure that a district was not wholly or substantially severed by a boundary of another district. Again, there was enough discretion to allow him to make considerations about local identity.

The commissioner had to ensure that wards should, as far as was practical, have the same number of electors. However, again, the commissioner was allowed to exercise discretion if people made strong arguments to be part of a particular ward. Therefore, I reject the argument that instructions were so tightly worded that the commissioner was unable to exercise discretion or to consider the subjective idea of local identity.

Many other arguments that have been made have focused on the shape and number of local councils, and what will happen to them in future. The House has been told that no savings have been made to date. Some Members might not have noticed, but the councils have not yet been reorganised. Therefore, it is difficult to measure savings. Mr Gallagher, whose science and politics are always behind the times, said that he was concerned about the threshold.

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

The Minister of the Environment: If he had spoken to his party colleagues, he would have found out about that. We must wait until the final decisions are made, after which the Assembly will discuss the matter.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

The Minister of the Environment: In future, I want strong local government under reorganised boundaries with reorganised powers.

Mr B McCrea: I declare an interest as a councillor for Lisburn City Council. Today is a grave and sorry day. It is a sad day for democracy when two sectarian parties, aided by the fig leaf of the Alliance Party, conspire to destroy the democratic future of Northern Ireland.

One benefit of the Chamber is that everything that is said here is recorded. No amount of ridicule, fairy stories, and Members' claims of having been misunderstood will erase what is written in black and white. In the future, Members will consider this debate and will assess the reasons for the failure of our shared future. Members will decry the situation and, as Mr Farry said, will ask what happened to Belfast, to our local towns and to our local democracy. The people of Northern Ireland will point the finger at the parties opposite. You have failed, ladies and gentlemen. You have failed to protect all that is good about Northern Ireland. I was disappointed —

The Minister of the Environment: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not think that you have failed. The Member should, perhaps, learn some parliamentary decorum and not blame you for what you have not done. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr B McCrea: I was surprised and disappointed by Mr Wilson because when he wants a reasonable debate, he is normally prepared to take an intervention from me and to argue the points. Perhaps he was unable to argue the point today and, therefore, did not take an intervention. He raised certain points on which he asked me to comment. I will now respond. When he took issue with my colleague Mr Beggs for criticising — or not criticising — the commissioner, he missed the point completely.

Members to my right pointed out that when terms and conditions are tightly set, only one or two issues can be concluded. I will make the point time and again that if we are serious about building a shared future, taking sectarianism out of politics, and building the future that the Alliance Party claims to want, we must build trust. The current proposals are not the right way to go about that.

Members can make jibes, fight petty little battles and score points on these issues, but at end of the day, it will be writ large: “Who did this deed?” The answer will be the DUP and Sinn Féin, and they were warned. Frankly, I am surprised by the stance of the Alliance Party.

Mr Gallagher: The Member mentioned the Alliance Party. Does he agree with me that at a time when that party should stand up for principles such as inclusion and fairness, it appears to be prepared to set them aside in the hope of taking any crumbs that are on offer from the grand alliance?

Mr B McCrea: I could not possibly say what has just been said, but the Member makes a fair point. I was about to come to the point that was highlighted by Mr Gallagher —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: If your contribution is short.

Mr Ford: It will be shorter than yours, anyway. Does the Member accept that there is a difference between the constructive role that the Alliance Party played when engaging in debate on the Local Government (Boundaries) Bill, and simply having a rant today, which has no effect whatsoever, other than to allow certain people to let off steam?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: I normally give way to Members when they have something useful to contribute. I see that I made a mistake in the case of Mr Ford.

I have witnessed the steady, long-term decline of the Alliance Party's stance on sectarianism and a shared future. That party has sold out for the prospect of being offered the post of Minister of justice, and now all that its members want to do is to be friends with the two big boys in Parliament. That is what this is all about.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No; you have had your chance. This is about party-political posturing in order to gain political advantage. It is a disgrace, a shame and a travesty, and, frankly, I am astonished that that party would sink to that. Mr Farry even said that he agreed with many of the points that have been made, but that he would not vote for the motion.

Mr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No, I will not give way, because members of that party have had enough opportunities to speak. I will address a question that the Minister of the Environment, Mr Wilson, asked: what is the point of this debate? Mr McKay said much the same thing — I think he used the word “nonsense”. The question that I wanted to ask in an intervention to the Minister concerned whether any Minister is bound by the outcome of any debates in the Chamber. Is there anything other than — *[Interruption.]*

I am glad that Mr Weir has discovered his voice. If he wishes to make an intervention, I will allow him to do so.

Mr Weir: I will ask the Member two questions. First, what is the motion calling for? How can it bind the Minister when it does not actually call for anything? Secondly, which of his colleagues on Lisburn City Council does the Member agree with, Mr Crawford or Mr Dillon, who made contradictory submissions to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner?

Mr B McCrea: For the record, I agree with my party's position. Individuals may make individual submissions. The reason that the motion was brought to the House was to hold people to account, to put it on record that things are not going the way that we wish to see them go, and that the current proposals are not a good way to build a future.

Parties will rely on their mandates, but in five, 10, 15 or 25 years from now, they will have to look back. Mr Wilson spoke about Members who reuse phrases; I will use one of which I am fond: people will rue the day when they put the DUP and Sinn Féin in charge of our democratic process. That is the real travesty, and the truth will out.

I have said in this House before that I may be in a minority of one but that the truth is still the truth. Let us listen to common sense. It beggars belief that some Members say that Castlereagh is not part of Belfast but is part of Lisburn. That is nonsense. As a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, I have discovered that the police stations in Dromara and Whitehead are to close. Somehow, when the command structure was being drawn up, those stations were connected. That sort of fallacy will lead us nowhere; it brings places such as this into disrepute.

The Assembly must start to examine how it works genuinely with people and takes on board the views of Members. It must actively work with people and not against them for petty, party political progress reasons. This is not the way forward for Northern Ireland. I applaud my colleagues to my left and I appreciate the support of Members to my right who will stand up and shout out loud that we will not be dictated to by the massed, dictatorial voices of the DUP/Sinn Féin axis. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I conclude by saying that when it comes to the people who are prepared to tell it how it is — the people who can point things out in black and white, as Mr Gallagher has done — those issues will not be sorted out through some sort of back room deal. They will be resolved only if we can come together as fellow Members and seek to build a future and deliver services in the most effective, efficient and acceptable

way for all the people of Northern Ireland. That is the challenge that I put forward.

To the Members who say that the motion is nonsense, I say: I do not give you the liberty to tell me that what I think is important is not important. If I wish to table a motion on behalf of my party, I will do so. You will not silence us. This is a travesty; this is wrong; and you are mistaken. The future will prove us correct.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 51.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCallister and Mr McClarty.

NOES

Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Doherty, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mrs Long, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mrs McGill, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Shannon and Mr Spratt.

Question accordingly negatived.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Children Missing from Care

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 15 minutes.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly notes with concern the failure of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to monitor and maintain baseline figures relating to the number of children who go missing from care and the number of such incidents per child; demands action to address the lack of access to specialist therapeutic support services for these children across all Health and Social Care Trust areas; recognises the pressure on police resources and time in retrieving these children; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to place greater emphasis on the needs of missing children and to ensure that his Department accurately accounts for these children in its role as corporate parent; and provides a clear strategy and resources to address the reasons for these children going missing and the risks to which they are exposed during their absence. — *[Miss McIlveen.]*

Miss McIlveen: In light of the decision by the Minister of Health not to be present this afternoon, and due to the seriousness of this motion and the fact that there will be no ministerial response, unfortunately and reluctantly I am not moving the motion.

Motion not moved.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are now in the ridiculous position in which the Assembly not only has no Executive or legislative business today but two serious motions under private Members' business have had to be withdrawn, yet we have two junior Ministers who are supposed to have responsibility for children, and we are supposed to have a joined-up Executive. Will you please discuss with the Speaker and your colleagues whether it is possible to ensure that when Ministers cannot be present for good reasons, the business of the House can still take place?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is up to Members to decide whether they wish to withdraw motions. As the Member will know, the Speaker has already been made aware of the situation.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Non-acute Hospital Provision in Armagh City

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Once again, in light of the absence of the Minister of Health, and since the Adjournment debate pertains to the closure of hospitals in the Newry and Armagh constituency, I will await a date when the Minister will be present before I speak to my Adjournment topic. Therefore, it will not be happening today.

Adjourned at 3.38 pm.

