
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

North/South Ministerial Council Plenary Meeting

Monday 18 January 2010

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Resignations of Mrs Iris Robinson and Mrs Carmel Hanna

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter from Mrs Iris Robinson, dated 12 January 2010, advising me that she has resigned as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I have also received a letter from Mrs Carmel Hanna, advising me of her resignation as a Member of the Assembly from 15 January 2010. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer about both vacancies, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary meeting.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the ninth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format, which was held in Limavady on Monday 14 December 2009. Our Ministers who attended the meeting have approved this report, and we make it on their behalf.

The Executive delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson MP MLA, and me, and we both chaired the meeting. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning; Conor Murphy, Minister for Regional Development; Margaret Ritchie, Minister for Social Development; Caitríona Ruane, Minister of Education; and OFMDFM junior Ministers Gerry Kelly and Robin Newton.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD. The Irish Government delegation comprised Mary Coughlan TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Brian Lenihan TD, Minister for Finance; Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for Transport; Micheál Martin TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and Batt O'Keeffe TD, Minister of Education and Science.

During the meeting, we had a broad discussion with the Taoiseach and the Irish Government Ministers about the common economic challenges facing us. Ministers noted that the public finances in each jurisdiction were facing significant challenges. Against that background, we exchanged views on the respective measures that we are implementing to promote growth and protect employment and discussed the scope for future mutually beneficial co-operation in dealing with the economic downturn. We noted that the two Finance Ministers plan to meet in the new year.

We also discussed progress on the implementation of the north-west gateway initiative. Ministers noted the progress report submitted by the joint secretaries on the 15 NSMC meetings held since the last plenary meeting in July 2009 and welcomed the mutually

beneficial co-operation taken forward at those meetings and key developments, including continued progress on the A5 Aughnacloy to north-west gateway and the A8 Belfast to Larne road projects. Contractor/designers were appointed in early December 2009 for the A5 project. The Minister for Transport has made a €9 million payment to the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in accordance with the agreed procedure.

Ministers also welcomed the reopening of the Belfast to Dublin rail line on 16 November 2009 and promotional efforts by the rail companies to recover passenger numbers; a discussion of the options for adopting a co-ordinated approach to the introduction of new, lower blood alcohol limits; the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the UK and Ireland, which will become operational in late January 2010; co-operation on planning and preparedness for dealing with the H1N1 virus, including the establishment of a well-functioning co-ordination structure; and progress in co-operation on child protection, including the exchange of information on Internet safety and social networking sites, research and knowledge transfer and steps towards establishing a joint protocol on children in care or on the child protection register who go missing and children moving across the border where there are concerns.

Ministers welcomed the commencement of a service-level agreement between the Health and Social Care Board for Northern Ireland and Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin to support the provision of paediatric congenital cardiac services and agreement for a framework relating, in the first instance, to the removal of illegally dumped waste at two priority sites: Slattinagh, County Fermanagh, and near Trillick, County Tyrone. That will form the basis for action on the remaining 18 sites. Work on those two sites is expected to commence early this year.

Ministers also welcomed discussion on the CAP health check agreement and the challenges facing the agriculture sector, in particular greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and the dairy industry situation, and progress in the construction of new accommodation for the NSMC joint secretariat in Armagh and the decision to hold future NSMC meetings there, when practicable.

The Council welcomed the Irish Government's decision to lift the pause on capital funding for the Middletown Centre for Autism in County Armagh. It noted that the Minister of Education and Science and the Minister of Education propose to prepare an updated, phased multi-annual plan for the development of the centre, in conjunction with the board. That will take account of international best practice and the development of autism services on the island of Ireland since the centre was established. The Council looked forward to the commencement as soon as possible of

interim capital works on-site at Middletown consistent with the development plan.

The Council considered a paper on the St Andrews Agreement review and noted that the St Andrews Agreement provided for a review group to report with recommendations to the North/South Ministerial Council and that that review group intends to provide a final report to the next plenary. The Council noted the Northern Ireland Executive's ongoing review of the Civic Forum and notes paragraph 22 of the annex to the St Andrews Agreement. It noted that the Irish Government submitted their proposals to the Executive in September 2008 and that the Irish Government facilitated a consultative conference on 15 October 2009 with the participation of social partners and other civil society groups from across the island. The Council also agreed to bring to an early conclusion the discussions on the North/South consultative forum.

The Council noted that the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly respectively. Paragraph 21 of the annex to the St Andrews Agreement was noted, as was the proposal by the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly to hold a North/South parliamentary conference.

The Council considered and approved a schedule of NSMC meetings to take place in the new year and agreed that its next meeting in plenary format will be hosted by the Irish Government in June or July 2010. It noted that, where practicable, future NSMC meetings will be held in the new NSMC joint secretariat's accommodation in Armagh.

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for bringing the statement to the House. I welcome progress in co-operation on child protection, but will the deputy First Minister reassure the House that joint protocols with regard to children on the child protection register who go missing or move across the border are treated as a matter of urgency, considering the recent revelations regarding child abuse?

The deputy First Minister: Along with the Irish Government, the Executive have been proactive in recognising the real dangers that exist for children north and south of the border. We have been at the forefront of decisively pushing forward ongoing co-operation to ensure that we fulfil our duties and responsibilities in the protection of children, whether from the South or the North, who, on occasions, cross the border.

We have a responsibility to ensure that perpetrators of child abuse are consistently monitored by the Garda Síochána and the Police Service in the North. There is no doubt whatever that the work that we are engaged in is vital. There has been a huge debate around this issue in recent years. Ministers from north and south of

the border who attended the NSMC meeting in Limavady recognise that we have to continually challenge ourselves to see what more we can do to ensure the safety of children.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement.

The A5 Aughnacloy to Derry road is of strategic importance for the greater north-west, including Donegal. The campaigners who oppose the A5 road network established what was called a fighting fund and called the project a pipe dream. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that that campaign will not impact on the work that he has outlined today, which is already in place, and will he also give an assurance that that work will continue unabated?

The deputy First Minister: At the NSMC plenary meeting, we welcomed the good progress made on the A5 and A8 road projects. Development of the A5 project has been good, with the first key milestone, the completion of the preliminary route corridor assessment, achieved ahead of target. On 21 July last year, Ministers Murphy and Dempsey announced the preferred route. Progress remains good and on target to meet the next key milestone: the publication of the draft Orders later this year. Contractor designers were appointed in December 2009.

Importantly, in view of the debate on the economic situation North and South, the Irish Government have reaffirmed their commitment to the funding for both the A5 and A8 projects. A payment of €9 million, the first tranche of the Irish Government's contribution, was made in December last year.

Those are two vital road projects. The A8 runs along the eastern corridor. It is the road from Belfast to Larne, and it is critical to the road infrastructure. The road must be developed to match the quality of the roads that now exist in the South, particularly those that run from the border to Dublin.

It is imperative that the A5 road project go ahead. I understand that some landowners will have concerns, but they will have opportunities to make enquiries and raise those concerns. However, let nobody be in any doubt whatsoever that those two vital projects — the Belfast to Larne project and the Aughnacloy to the north-west gateway project — will go ahead. They are vital for us if we are to develop the economy and a road infrastructure that will allow us to attract inward investment.

12.15 pm

Mr McCallister: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Does he accept that international best practice for dealing with children who have autism is early diagnosis and an individualised, predictable, structured and consistent programme? Does he

therefore accept that creating a centre for autism in an isolated location, on which we have already spent millions of pounds and which has thus far not delivered any outcomes for children, appears to be a politically rather than practically motivated decision? Does he agree that the centre is a waste of money?

The deputy First Minister: I hate to disagree with the Member, because it is not often that we disagree on such matters. The centre is a vital project. It is more than a political decision; it is a decision to establish what, hopefully, will be a centre of excellence for the education of children with autism. North and south of the border, we all understand that no section of the community is unaffected by the difficulties that families face in educating children who have autism. International best practice clearly shows that there are many different ways of treating children who have autism. Given the varying needs of children in the education system, there is no one way to treat them.

It is vital that there be a centre of excellence that can examine all those different methods and examine how autism is being dealt with in other parts of the world, such as the US, New Zealand, Australia and Sweden. The project has been stalled, and I am as unhappy as anybody else about the slow pace of progress, particularly because the centre was given the green light when I was the Minister of Education some — who would believe it? — 10 years ago. It is important that that project move on. The centre will be good for children, because it will be able to consider international best practice and how the varying methods available can ensure that our children are treated on the basis of equality and are given every opportunity to fulfil their potential in the education system.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the progress report, the money for the A5 project and the progress that has been made on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications. However, there is something that I cannot welcome. When the deputy First Minister last reported in the Chamber on an NSMC meeting, he said that the St Andrews Agreement review was to be signed off at the December meeting. In today's report, we learn that that is not the case, despite the fact that a clear commitment was given. Will the deputy First Minister explain why that review of North/South implementation bodies and areas for co-operation was not signed off in December? Given that that report will not now be discussed until June, will he reassure the Chamber that its recommendations will be acted on quickly? By that stage, it will be three years since restoration, and, given the way in which the matter has been handled, it may be four, five or more years before the North and the South expand in the way in which so many people on the island believe that they should.

The deputy First Minister: The St Andrews Agreement review formed part of the discussions at

the most recent NSMC meeting in Limavady. The Council noted that the St Andrews Agreement provided for a review group to report with recommendations to the North/South Ministerial Council and that the review group intends to provide a final report at the next plenary meeting. Any changes to the existing arrangements would require the endorsement of the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Member mentioned the delay of the review. The review group has not yet finalised its consideration of the report of the experts and advisers on the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd or of the other elements of the terms of reference of the review. The review group intends to provide a final report at the next NSMC plenary meeting.

I am under no illusions whatsoever that, in asking the question, the Member knows fine rightly what the answer is and knows that, in the context of this situation, I am not going to give him the sort of answer that he hopes I will. We know that such things have to be agreed in the North and between the North and the South. We are endeavouring to expedite the matter, and it is unfortunate that that will have to wait until the next NSMC meeting. However, that is the way of the institutions that we are part of. I have no doubt whatsoever that, if the Member were standing in my position, he would have to give the same answer.

Mrs Long: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, in which he referred to the progress report that was submitted by the joint secretaries. I want to ask about the Belfast to Dublin railway line. Will the deputy First Minister outline what specific co-operation has been ongoing between the two Governments in respect of, for example, the issues that were raised regarding structural assessments of critical infrastructure on a cross-border basis? Will he also outline any work that is ongoing to address the decline in passenger numbers and passenger confidence following the incident on the line?

The deputy First Minister: The reports of increased passenger numbers are very encouraging, and the reports that we have received in recent weeks clearly indicate that, through enticements, people are coming back to the service. That is tremendous news. We were all mightily relieved that the collapse of the bridge at Malahide did not result in a much more serious situation, with the possible loss of life. The speed with which the authorities in the South moved to repair the bridge is absolutely commendable. All we can do is welcome the successful repair of the bridge at Malahide and the reopening of the cross-border railway line.

With a full Enterprise train service having been resumed between Belfast and Dublin and the old

timetable essentially restored, our priority has to be to restore confidence in the service. I understand that the offers of discounted fares that Iarnród Éireann and Translink made available to encourage passengers back onto the Enterprise service are proving successful, and that is very good. We need to make sure that the Enterprise service is safe, comfortable and reliable. I am aware of the plans that are being discussed by both rail companies to improve the reliability and fuel efficiency of the trains. It is important that we consider those plans, including any further costs. Essentially, those are matters for the NSMC meeting in transport sectoral format, which will take place very soon.

Mr Shannon: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement to the Chamber.

Last week, I asked Arlene Foster, in her position as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, how we could realise the tourism potential of people from the Republic of Ireland coming to Northern Ireland to do their shopping. I know that the deputy First Minister is one who would encourage those people to do as much shopping up here as they can. In her answer, the Minister said that that had tourism potential. I am very conscious of what the deputy First Minister said in his statement about the Belfast to Dublin railway line. From the point of view of tourism, will he, along with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, encourage more people to take advantage of the line and to spend more money in Northern Ireland? That would ensure an increase in the number of passengers using the service.

In relation to swine flu —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish his question.

Mr Shannon: There has been an interest in the reduction in the incidence of swine flu. Will the deputy First Minister tell me whether there has been face-to-face contact between the Health Departments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to exchange information on how best to address the swine flu epidemic?

The deputy First Minister: The Member and I are singing from the same hymn sheet when it comes to encouraging as many people as possible to visit, particularly tourists. There is no doubt that we had an interesting debate with some politicians in Dublin last year whom I described publicly as being very partitionist in their approach because they were arguing that people should not come to the North and should spend their money in Dublin.

People take their own decisions, and, last year, there were a number of examples of people deciding to travel to Newry, Enniskillen, Banbridge, Derry and many other parts of the North to do their shopping, which we

welcome. I join the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in continuing to encourage people to come to the North, not just because of the shopping experience but because the more people who travel between the North and South, the better the situation will be for building relations. That is a good thing.

Encouraging people to use public transport is of critical importance to tackling climate change, which presents massive difficulties for all of us on the planet. Moving forward, we should be encouraging people to use the Dublin to Belfast train. The Minister for Regional Development, with the relevant Minister in the South, has further plans that will enable us to continue to ensure that we provide an excellent service for passengers.

We are pleased to note the degree of close co-operation between the two jurisdictions and the similarity of their approaches in response to the recent swine flu outbreak. There has been considerable contact between health officials and Ministers since the outbreak began. It is vital that we maintain that close co-operation. Measures to counteract the effects of the virus in one part of the island will be less effective if there are not equally effective measures in place in the other part.

I take the opportunity to sympathise with the 16 families who have lost loved ones due to swine flu-related deaths. I am satisfied that our Health Minister and the Minister for Health and Children in Dublin, along with their respective Departments, are in constant contact. We recognise that we are joined in a common cause to ensure that the disease does not take further lives.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don LeasChéad Aire. Given the real impact that the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) will have on the economy of the North, will the deputy First Minister provide an update on discussions that have been held on the matter with Minister Brian Lenihan? I take the opportunity to wish Minister Lenihan well in overcoming his illness.

With regard to shoppers coming North, perhaps the deputy First Minister could highlight at the next NSMC meeting that Omagh, the county town of Tyrone, is very euro-friendly.

The deputy First Minister: The Member never fails to represent West Tyrone, which is highly commendable. I think that the entire House will join him in wishing Brian Lenihan well in his health battle. Minister Lenihan and his family are experiencing very difficult circumstances, and no doubt the good wishes of everybody in the House go to them.

Our Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, met Brian Lenihan in September and mid-November to discuss NAMA and related banking issues. At the first

meeting, Minister Lenihan indicated that the value of locally based loans likely to be transferred to NAMA would total €4.8 billion, which was much lower than earlier estimates of around €20 billion. However, even €4.8 billion of local asset exposure has considerable implications for our economy. Minister Lenihan again provided an assurance that it was in nobody's interest to undertake a fire sale of assets in the North and that the loans exposed would have to be carefully managed.

Minister Lenihan indicated that it would not be possible to expand NAMA's seven-person board to include a representative from the North. However, he indicated that the Department of Finance and Personnel could communicate to NAMA through an advisory committee, which would report directly to the board. Minister Lenihan agreed that the advisory committee working to the NAMA board should have some form of direct line of communication to DFP on the management of the assets from the North. DFP officials are liaising with their Dublin counterparts to finalise those arrangements.

12.30 pm

Minister Wilson had hoped to meet Minister Lenihan at the end of January to discuss the latest position on NAMA. Unfortunately, that meeting has been postponed, and Minister Wilson has sought a rescheduled meeting for mid-February. However, that has not yet been confirmed; we all know the reasons why. At that meeting, the two Ministers will review progress on the establishment of NAMA and the state of stability in the participating banks. Ministers will also discuss formalising Northern representation and the latest estimates of local exposure to loans or debts that will transfer to NAMA. In the interim, officials from both Departments will continue to engage.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, and I welcome the fact that it referenced several road safety issues. Over the Christmas period, the two police services engaged in a road safety campaign to reduce the number of deaths caused by drink-driving. I welcome the fact that there have been discussions on an approach to introduce lower blood:alcohol limits. Will the deputy First Minister explain what adopting a co-ordinated approach actually means? Furthermore, the issue of driving disqualifications has been a problem for decades. Given that the scheme of mutual recognition will become operational in late January, will the deputy First Minister outline the implications? Will it require the Dáil and the Assembly to pass legislation?

The deputy First Minister: Road safety is always a major item on the agenda of NSMC meetings. There has undoubtedly been a downward trend in road casualties over the past 30 years. As recently as 2000, 171 people were killed on our roads. However, that

figure steadily declined to 107 deaths in 2008, which is the lowest here since records began in 1931. Regrettably, as experience has shown, road deaths may increase in some years. For example, 115 people lost their lives last year, compared with 107 in 2008. That represents a 7% increase. Last year, four children died; that is a reduction from seven deaths in 2008.

In the next few months, the Minister of the Environment will consult on the development of a new road safety strategy for the North. It will be introduced before the end of 2010, two years before the expiry of the existing strategy, and the consultation will include challenging new casualty-reduction targets, which will provide the necessary focus to achieve further significant reductions in road deaths and serious injuries over the coming years. A number of road safety research projects are nearing completion and will help to inform the development of the new strategy.

The agreement on mutual recognition of driving disqualifications has now been reached, and declarations have been made to the European Commission for the implementation of a bilateral agreement between Britain and Ireland, which will come into operation on 28 January. It will be necessary to take account of the lessons that were learned through the implementation of the mutual recognition of disqualifications when planning for the mutual recognition of penalty points. I understand that a project plan will be developed to pursue the mutual recognition of penalty points, which will be a complex and longer-term process because it affects many more motorists and the penalty point systems differ in each jurisdiction.

The issue of blood:alcohol limits was discussed at the NMSC meeting in transport sectoral format that was held in Dublin on 4 November 2009. I understand that Ministers noted the background and the current position on new lower drink-driving limits in both jurisdictions and agreed that efforts to deliver a co-ordinated approach to the introduction of new limits should continue.

Therefore, all those issues are being taken seriously. The increase in road deaths and other deaths is absolutely unacceptable. There is a tremendous recognition that we and the Government in Dublin must continue to work together to ensure that we are doing everything possible to preserve life on the roads.

Mr McFarland: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He said that delegates discussed the scope for future mutually beneficial co-operation to deal with the economic downturn. Does he agree that the decision in the recent Budget in the Republic to reduce VAT and excise duties on alcohol will have a negative effect on cross-border shopping and the Northern Ireland economy? What conclusions has he

drawn from that new approach by the Republic's Government?

The deputy First Minister: Without being too political, I suppose that people in government in Dublin have come under pressure from the business community. It was quite clear in the run-up to that recent Budget that a lot of pressure was being applied and that there was concern about the number of people who were travelling to the North. Whatever decision the Dublin Government take on VAT and lower alcohol prices is a matter for that Government. The question for us is whether people are still coming to shop, and all the evidence shows that they are continuing to do so consistently.

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

Our approach should not depend on what happens south of the border on the lowering of alcohol prices or the reduction in VAT. We must try to present shoppers all over the island with the opportunity to come and spend money here and, in doing so, to save on their household budgets. It is clear that the recent Budget and the issues that the Member raises do not seem to have put people off.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I want to ask him about the North/South parliamentary forum. Paragraph 13 of his statement says a good deal about noting and discussing but says nothing at all about outcomes. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister confirm that they support, in principle, the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum? Furthermore, will the deputy First Minister confirm that there is no reason why the Oireachtas and the Assembly should not move quickly to create the forum and put it in place?

The deputy First Minister: In Limavady, the Council noted that the establishment of such a forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Assembly respectively. It also noted paragraph 21 of the annex to the St Andrews Agreement and the proposal by the Speaker of the Assembly to hold a North/South parliamentary conference. Two working groups have been established to develop proposals for the forum, one in the Oireachtas and one in the Assembly.

The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Assembly Commission held a joint meeting on 18 November 2009 to discuss issues of mutual interest to both Commissions. During the discussions, our Speaker, William Hay, proposed the holding of a North/South parliamentary conference. That proposal was welcomed by the Ceann Comhairle, and it was agreed to progress the matter through the two working groups that were established by both institutions. I understand that a meeting of officials from the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly has been scheduled for 5

February 2010 to discuss the arrangements for a North/South parliamentary conference.

The Member knows where we are coming from on this issue. We want further progress. Officials have been charged with taking forward important work. It is a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas, and I hope that we will make important progress on that matter before the next plenary meeting of the NSMC.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I want to follow up on Mr Spratt's question about recognition of driving disqualifications. There seems to have been a high number of deaths in the border areas as a result of road accidents, many of which have been caused by drink-driving.

Will the deputy First Minister tell us how much closer we are to having an all-Ireland recognition of the blood:alcohol limit? How much closer are we to achieving a common all-island structure on signage in the border areas? Some signs show kilometres an hour and others show miles an hour.

The deputy First Minister: Those issues were discussed at the NSMC meeting in transport sectoral format in Dublin on 4 November 2009. Ministers Edwin Poots and Conor Murphy, as well as Noel Dempsey TD, attended that meeting. I understand that both member states recently made a declaration to the EU on the bilateral application of the 1998 EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications. That means that mutual recognition of driving disqualifications will be operational in late January.

I understand that Ministers noted the background to and current position on new lower drink-driving limits in both jurisdictions and agreed that efforts to deliver a co-ordinated approach to the introduction of new blood:alcohol limits should continue. That is important work.

The issue of signage is much more complicated. I have no doubt that, if it is decided that signage creates a problem in people's attitude to speed, Ministers will come forward with a solution. However, I do not wish to pre-empt discussions between Ministers who have a responsibility to take that work forward. As I speak, I do not know what impact signage has on speed. I would like to hear the views of both Ministers as to whether they believe that speed contributes to the increase in road traffic accidents.

Mr G Robinson: I hope that those who attended the meeting enjoyed their visit to Limavady, which is in my constituency. Will the deputy First Minister outline whether there are any plans to introduce multi-night rail-return offers to enhance passenger numbers for the benefit of Northern Ireland's tourist industry?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have any information about that offhand, but I will speak to the

relevant Ministers and endeavour to answer the Member. I confirm that all Ministers from Dublin and from here who attended the meeting at Limavady thought that the facilities were first class. Limavady is a beautiful part of the north-west of the island, and everybody enjoyed being there that day.

Mr B McCrea: The deputy First Minister is in a relaxed, perhaps even benign, mood today. Will he indulge me with an answer to a question on the St Andrews Agreement review? He will be aware that not every party in this place is entirely happy with the way that the Executive are working. Will he outline who sits on the review group and whether the paper that they are working on will be brought to the Assembly for discussion? As far as I am aware, at least two of the parties feel that they are being excluded, and that is part of the issue.

The deputy First Minister: There is no intention whatsoever to exclude anybody. We are all aware, particularly where the St Andrews Agreement review is concerned, that all matters that relate to how we conduct our business go back to the Oireachtas and to the Assembly.

A group of senior officials and an advisory panel of four experts and advisers is taking the review forward. They have met separately with each of the six North/South implementation bodies and with Tourism Ireland Ltd, the sponsor Departments, the bodies' key stakeholders and the social partners. The expert advisers have completed their task of examining the value for money and effectiveness of the existing bodies, and they have submitted their report to the review group.

Given the day and the week that are in it, we all recognise that we have come to a fundamental point in the work of these institutions. Great efforts are being made on all sides to try to reach agreements that will see us move forward in a different mode from that which has existed since the institutions that we are a part of were established two-and-a-half years ago.

12.45 pm

However, everyone has to be fair. There is not much point in the Member standing up at this meeting of the Assembly and talking about parties being excluded. I do not say this to score political points, but, since the establishment of the institutions, some parties that are members of the Executive have tried to adopt the approach of being both in government and very critical of government. Co-operation is a two-way street, and there is responsibility on all of us. I have met Sir Reg Empey on a number of occasions over the last couple of weeks. I have met Mark Durkan, and the Acting First Minister, Arlene Foster, has also been involved in meetings.

We have to strive to do things better. I hope that, as a result of our ongoing deliberations, we will reach agreements that will see us move forward in a spirit of inclusiveness and on the basis of equality and partnership. At the end of the day, the process is about delivering for our community. Members will note that I am not talking about both sections of the community, or the people who vote for the Ulster Unionists, or the people who vote for the SDLP, or the people who vote for the DUP or the people who vote for Sinn Féin. It is about delivering for our community and all our people. There is a real opportunity to move forward in a way that will address some of the concerns that the Member expressed in his question.

Mr Dallat: I, too, welcome the statement. I am particularly pleased to hear that the deputy First Minister had a really good time in Limavady, because that did not come across particularly well at the press conference after the meeting.

I welcome the emphasis that was placed on road and rail transport. Will the deputy First Minister assure us that the discussion about the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service was not entirely about promotional efforts to restore confidence and that it dealt with the need for an integrated rail transport network across the island? If, as I suspect, the discussion did not go that far, will he assure us that that will be a subject of future meetings? I have a particular interest in the Belfast to Derry service, on which there has been an astonishing increase in passenger numbers as a result of capital investment.

The deputy First Minister: We all understand that, as we move forward, we will be challenged by the environmental circumstances that affect people in the North and South. We all know how the processes work. There must be agreement among the parties here in the North on how we intend to take the matter forward. Some people might have differing views, but there is no doubt that all the political parties in the Assembly recognise that we need to do whatever we can to get people out of private cars and onto public transport. I very much concur with that sentiment. It is vital to our environment and to the free movement of traffic that we get as many cars off the roads as possible and encourage people to use trains and buses.

There was an important debate in the north-west about the poor service that runs between Belfast and Derry or, as Gregory Campbell might call it, Londonderry. However, the Government here in the North moved decisively to bring about positive changes in recent times, which, as the Member articulated, have led to an increase in the number of people who use that service. That proves that much can be done to get cars off the roads and to encourage people to use trains and buses. It represents a challenge for us on the island of Ireland, but, primarily, it is the

responsibility of our Government in the North and the Government in the South to agree on ways to take the work forward.

I look forward to engaging with the relevant Departments on what is, undoubtedly, vital work.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement.

I think that Professor Snaith told the Committee for Regional Development that we needed to spend £108 million on our rural roads. We now know that only £85 million will be spent. That means that less will be spent on rural roads, on which 70% of our accidents happen. Did the Minister raise that at the meeting?

As the Environment Committee has noted, the one area in which we are not going to achieve the 2025 emissions target is vehicles. Did the Minister raise that subject at the meeting?

The deputy First Minister: Obviously, the environmental situation forms a major part of the responsibility of Ministers North and South. The undoubted challenges that the emissions levels present for us all shows that there is still a considerable amount of work to do.

The funding of rural roads did not form part of the discussions at the NSMC. The work of the NSMC is principally to deal with issues on an all-island basis. The amount of money that is spent on rural roads is a matter primarily for the Executive and the Minister for Regional Development. I will endeavour to get that Minister to correspond with the Member on that matter.

North/South Ministerial Council

Education Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Le do chhead, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a thabhairt maidir le oideachais. Tionóladh an cruinniú seo i mBaile Átha Cliath ar 25 Samhain 2009.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format. The meeting was held in Dublin on 25 November 2009. I represented the Executive, as Minister of Education, along with the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey. The Irish Government were represented by Batt O’Keefe, Minister for Education and Science. This statement has been agreed with Sir Reg Empey and is made on behalf of us both. I will summarise the main points from the meeting, which ranged across all the agreed areas of education co-operation.

Thug an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas dá h-aire an dul chun cinn a rinneadh ar roinnt réimsí maidir le tearcghnóthachtáil oideachasúil, lena n-áirítear obair ar chomhfhoilseachán ar dhea-chleachtas i dteagasc na litearthachta agus na huimhearthachta i scoileanna i limistéir faoi mhíbhuntáiste, socruithe le haghaidh comhdhála comhpháirtí ar uimhearthacht a thionólfar i mí Feabhra 2010 agus obair laistigh den Tascfhórsa ar Oideachas don Lucht Siúil.

The North/South Ministerial Council noted the progress that has been made in a number of areas in relation to educational underachievement, including work on a joint publication on best practice in the teaching of literacy and numeracy in schools in disadvantaged areas, arrangements for a joint conference on numeracy to be held in February 2010 and work in the task force on Traveller education. We agreed that the focus of an all-island children’s book week, which is to be held in 2010, should be primarily on children who have little or no tradition of reading at home, those who have little access to reading materials and those who are at risk of falling behind.

Chuir an Chomhairle fáilte roimh an idirchaidreamh níos fearr idir na seirbhísí forbartha gairmiúla do mhúinteoirí sa dá dhlínse a bhaineann le hoideachas inseirbhíse do mhúinteoirí Gaelscolaíochta agus tá an Chomhairle ag tnúth le tuarascáil a fháil ag an gcéad chruinniú eile ar an dul chun cinn. Chuir muid fáilte roimh an dul chun cinn atá déanta ar athbhunú ghrúpa

oibre le hiniúchadh a dhéanamh ar chomhoibriú ar cheisteanna a bhaineann le hoideachas múinteoirí i gcoitinne.

The Council welcomed the closer liaison among the professional development services for teachers in both jurisdictions relating to in-service education for teachers in Irish-medium education. It looks forward to receiving a report on progress at the next meeting. We also welcomed the progress on reconstituting a working group to examine co-operation on teacher education issues in general.

We noted that further exchanges aimed at supporting the continuing development of inspection practice in both parts of the island are planned for the 2009-2010 school year between the inspectorates of both Departments of Education.

The Council welcomed a presentation by the co-chairs of the Standing Committee on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) outlining its teacher education work, and noted the report of the recent 2009 annual conference.

We noted that measures are being taken to provide information on pension issues for teachers who wish to transfer to work in the other jurisdiction.

In relation to special education needs, chuir an Chomhairle fáilte roimh an dul chun cinn leanúnach ar na seirbhísí atá ar fáil ag Ionad Uathachais Choillidh Chanannáin. Thug muid dár n-aire agus thacaigh muid leis an athbhreithniú leanúnach atá á dhéanamh ag an dá Roinn, agus an chumarsáid eatarthu, maidir leis an staid reatha ag Ionad Choillidh Chanannáin.

The Council welcomed the continuing progress of services available at the Middletown Centre for Autism. We noted and supported the ongoing active review by, and communication between, the Departments on the current situation at the centre. We also noted and welcomed the success of the autistic spectrum disorders conference on “Enabling Communication” that was held on 13 November 2009.

On the issue of school youth and teacher exchanges, thug an Chomhairle dá h-aire an dul chun cinn atá déanta go dtí seo maidir le creatlach a fhorbairt i gcomhair comhchláir do bhainistiú agus chistiú malairtí oideachais Thuaidh/Theas san am atá le teacht.

The Council noted the progress made to date in developing a framework for a proposed joint programme for the future management and funding of North/South educational exchanges. We welcomed and thanked the European Studies project for its presentation on its activities, achievements and future plans. The project’s aim is to encourage co-operation between participating students and staff, and to contribute to educational development in the wider European Union dimension through informing students

about current national and European social, economic and political issues and structures.

Ar deireadh, shocraigh muid gur chóir an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh Theas i bhformáid na hearnála oideachais a thionól in earrach nab liana 2010.

We agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should be in spring 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I note the Minister's reference to the North/South progress about educational underachievement, particularly on the issue of numeracy. However, it is three years since work started on the revised literacy and numeracy strategy for Northern Ireland. Will the Minister inform the House why there is a delay in producing that important, long-awaited strategy? Precisely when will it be brought to the Education Committee to be made available to the House? Is it not a sad reflection on the Minister that the best that she could bring to the House in relation to a meeting with her counterparts in the Irish Republic is a conference and a book? More must be done.

I also note the Minister's reference in the statement to:

“progress of services available at the Middletown Centre for Autism.”

I remind the House that the Minister's press release on 14 December 2009 stated:

“an updated plan for future development of the Middletown Autism Centre will go ahead as soon as possible.”

Bearing in mind that a considerable sum from the Northern Ireland purse has been expended on the project since 2002, will the Minister today inform the House precisely when the assessment centre in Middletown will be fully operational? It is typical of the Minister of Education to come to the House with a paper that is of little substance or style and that contains nothing other than “we hope”, “we wish”, and “we long for”.

I conclude with a question: given that the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland is so keen on equality of treatment, did she ask the Minister of Education and Science in the Irish Republic about the discrimination in which his Department is engaged in respect of Protestant schools there?

1.00 pm

The Minister of Education: The Member asked a couple of questions, and I will answer them. First, I welcome the Member's interest in literacy, numeracy and underachievement. He will know that I have brought forward a wide range of interconnected policies to make sure that the education system in the North of Ireland deals with the high levels of underachievement due to its selective nature and due to the focus in the

past on how resources were allocated. Thankfully, we are in a new era; we have the transfer 2010 policy, and there is an enormous focus on literacy and numeracy. The Member will be delighted to hear that literacy and numeracy are among the key issues on the agenda at every North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

Since becoming the Minister of Education, I have made it a priority to tackle underachievement and to promote the raising of standards and equality in all schools for all children, not just for some. As I said, my work through the North/South Ministerial Council supports those efforts. The challenges that our disadvantaged communities face are considerable, and, when there is intergenerational educational disadvantage, research shows the powerful impact that parental involvement has on children's education. I hope that the Member is not belittling very important moves such as the reading initiative, because anybody who knows anything about education understands the absolute importance of parental involvement in children learning to read from a very early age.

[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I pay tribute to people across the island who have been working on various initiatives. I attended a very good conference in County Cavan on teaching numeracy and mathematics by making it interesting and stimulating. The conference focused on primary schools. Last week, I had a very good meeting with the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force, and I put on record my thanks for the work that it has done.

I welcome the Member's belated interest in the Middletown Centre for Autism. To update the House, I can confirm that the Southern Government have lifted the pause in additional funding for the centre. I warmly welcome that move, because I made representations on that. The Middletown Centre for Autism is a groundbreaking initiative that has the potential to greatly improve the lives of children with autism — north, south, east and west of the island. In addition, my officials are looking at a new development programme for the centre, and, to make that project work — it is a very good one — they will continue to work closely with their counterparts in the Department of Education and Science in Dublin.

I am not from the school of thought that believes that everything needs to be situated in Belfast or Dublin. I believe that it is important to spread institutions of excellence across the island. Earlier, we heard about rural roads, but it is also important that we support rural communities and communities outside Belfast and Dublin.

As for the Member's question about Protestant schools, I asked the Minister of Education and Science in the South for an update. I raised the matter with him in person, and I wrote to him. At the appropriate time, I will forward details of his response to the Cathaoirleach.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is good to hear a DUP Member suggesting that we need more all-Ireland co-operation and more substance to all-Ireland meetings. I welcome that new approach from the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Turning to the Minister's statement, how will the all-Ireland book week, including the project to encourage children to read at home and their parents and guardians to read to them, be advanced? Does the Minister agree that it is vital for educational advancement that children be encouraged to move away from television and to read books at home?

The Minister of Education: Aontaim leat. I absolutely agree. The reading of books needs to start from a very early age, with toddlers and their parents looking at pictures, so that they understand that reading is very important and they get into the habit of reading.

Recently, Andy McMorran, who is a member of the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force, was talking about the importance that his post-primary school places on making the issue of literacy a whole-school project, not just for the key subjects of English or Irish but as part and parcel of the entire school; every teacher has a responsibility for it. We also talked about the importance of mathematics and ensuring that it is seen as fun and innovative. It is important that all our young people get those opportunities.

Our officials are working with officials in the South of Ireland to organise a very good children's book week. I will forward information on the book week to all Members as soon as it is available.

Mr B McCrea: I rise reluctantly, because I have been bored to tears by the last intervention. Does the Minister believe that educational underachievement is a cross-cutting matter that involves many Departments? Will she give an undertaking to bring these matters to the Assembly having run the issues past her Executive colleagues? I would like a firm undertaking that she will do that.

Since we are talking about reading, what is the most recent book that the Minister bought?

The Minister of Education: I note the damning statement that the Ulster Unionist Party's education spokesperson was bored when I was talking about literacy and numeracy. The Member has questions to ask himself about that.

In relation to educational underachievement being a cross-cutting matter, I respectfully suggest that the Member go to his party leader and ask him about the number of times that we have worked very well together on the promotion of STEM subjects and on careers. Perhaps the Ulster Unionist Party's education spokesperson should take a leaf out of his party leader's book.

Talking of books. I recently was given a present of the 'The Secret Scripture' by Sebastian Barry. It is a wonderful book, and I urge the Member to read it. I am an avid reader and, over Christmas, I bought five or six books with me to Achill Island and had a lovely couple of days reading them.

With regard to STEM subjects, on Friday, I visited the BT Young Scientists and Technology Exhibition in Dublin to see the wide range of fascinating subjects on show. I will take this opportunity to congratulate our schools from the North of Ireland. A total of 1,586 projects were submitted from across Ireland, and 520 have qualified to compete in the finals. In the North, we have seen a 66% rise in entries, with 42 projects from 23 schools making it through to the final. I congratulate all who took part in it. I attended the awards ceremony on Friday night, and many of our schools across the sectors achieved awards: Wallace High School; St Mary's High School, Newry; Oakgrove Integrated College; St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel; and RBAI in Belfast. Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar in Newry and Loreto College in Coleraine won two of the top four prizes, which is phenomenal. The North of Ireland can be very proud of the young people who travelled to Dublin and won all sorts of awards.

Mr Dallat: The Minister referred to a book week. I congratulate her on that initiative. Does she agree that it is wrong that the Library Service is threatening to close many libraries in working-class areas, where people cannot afford to buy books? Will she use her influence to ensure that that systematic culling of libraries is put to an end?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, that question did not relate to your statement. If you wish to answer the question, you may. If not, we will move on.

The Minister of Education: I would rather answer it, albeit in a generic way. As Members will know, the Library Service is not under my authority. However, I believe that libraries play an important role in society, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to the progress that is being made to tackle educational underachievement in the North and in the South and to the work of the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force. Have any of the bodies that are involved managed to come up with a clear definition

of educational underachievement? Is that one of the objectives of North/South discussions?

The Minister of Education: I will forward to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education the interim report that has been produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force. I will also ensure that all Members receive copies at the appropriate time. I will also bring to the task force's attention the question that the Member has asked about a definition of educational underachievement.

At present, I operate towards the objective that all young people leave school with adequate qualifications, because that is particularly important. I accept that qualifications are not the only means by which literacy and numeracy are measured, because different children and young people have different needs and aspirations. However, by and large, I want the vast majority of young people to leave school with GCSEs, particularly in English or Irish, and mathematics. GCSEs in those subjects are key to literacy and numeracy.

Mr Ross: The Minister will know that educational underachievement manifests itself during the earliest years of a child's life. Will she provide more detail on initiatives to tackle underachievement that she may have discussed with her counterpart at the North/South meeting? Will she tell the House whether she will identify areas in Northern Ireland where educational underachievement is a particular difficulty and whether she will target resources and pilot initiatives in those areas?

The Minister of Education: As I stated earlier, during the past number of years, there has been a great deal of North/South focus on literacy and numeracy. One good example is the major international conference that was held when Mary Hanafin was the Minister of Education and Science in the South. International experts came from all the OECD countries. As part of the conference, workshops were held to look at literacy and numeracy, how to share best practice and how to assess children and young people — not just the high achievers, on whom, in many cases, the system focused in the past. The conference focused on how to place young people at the centre of the education system, rather than institutions.

All the discussions that have taken place at every North/South meeting have, as I have said, focused on literacy and numeracy. In one case, young people from some of the highest-achieving schools were brought to address the North/South Ministerial Council. That was one of the most innovative meetings that we have held.

We have also focused on specific groups, such as newcomer children. We looked at schools in various parts of the South and the North that are doing well to integrate those children while respecting diversity. We have also looked specifically at Traveller children,

who are some of the most disadvantaged throughout the island of Ireland. We held conferences to focus specifically on them.

1.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to special educational needs and stated that that issue is always on the agenda of NSMC meetings in education sectoral format. The 31 January deadline for the SEN and inclusion review is fast approaching. Does the Minister agree that we need to do all that we can to ensure that people respond to that consultation and make sure that their voices are heard so that we can achieve the best outcome for those with special educational needs?

The Minister of Education: Aontaím leat, a Michelle. Ceapaim go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach go dtugaimid tacaíocht do na páistí sin a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta acu.

I agree with Michelle O'Neill. That is a very important consultation, and it is possible that it will bring significant changes to our education system. It is about putting the child at the centre and providing an individual education plan, rather than fitting his or her needs around institutional needs. I urge parents, teachers, classroom assistants and educationalists to make the most of the extension to the consultation period. We have received a large number of responses, and I look forward to receiving more. I urge Members to use their good offices to encourage people to respond to that consultation.

Mr Craig: I noted with interest the Minister's comments about the Middletown Centre for Autism and her support for the ongoing review. Will the Minister outline the guidelines for that review? More importantly, will she inform us when the review will be completed? There is a growing concern in autism groups that the centre is delivering little or nothing for the needs of those who suffer from autism.

The Minister of Education: The Middletown Centre for Autism is a valuable asset. It is carrying out world-class work and looking at international best practice. It is important that we on the island of Ireland work together to look at the important issue of autism. My officials are working closely with officials in the South of Ireland in developing the programme for the centre and will continue to do so. At the appropriate moment, I will update the House and the Education Committee on that.

Mr McCallister: Do teachers from Northern Ireland continue to be discriminated against when seeking employment in the Republic? When does the Minister hope to rectify that?

The Minister of Education: Teachers from the North of Ireland are not being discriminated against in the South of Ireland. Further to discussion between the General Teaching Council here and the Teaching Council in the South, arrangements are in place whereby the General Teaching Council, as part of its annual presentations to all postgraduate certificate of education and final year Bachelor of Education students, includes information about the role of the Teaching Council and what students here are required to do if they wish to teach in the primary or post-primary sectors in the South of Ireland.

Teachers from here who wish to teach in the primary sector in the South but do not hold the requisite Irish language qualification — an scrúdú le haghaidh cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge — are granted provisional recognition as a teacher by the Department of Education and Science and are allowed five years to acquire the qualification. On attainment of the qualification, such teachers are recognised as fully qualified in the South of Ireland. Provisionally recognised teachers are placed on the appropriate point of the salary scale and are entitled to qualification allowances. In the case of post-primary schools, the Irish language requirement applies only to teachers employed in Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools and to those who teach any subject through the medium of Irish.

I am sure that the Member would not expect teachers in the North to teach in a language unless they spoke that language. That requirement is important in primary schools, because Irish is the first language of Ireland, and it is important that teachers have a working knowledge of the language and are able to speak it before teaching it as part of the curriculum.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister detail some of the services that are available in the Middletown Centre for Autism? When will children with autism be able to avail themselves of those services?

The Minister of Education: I will provide an update on the Middletown centre. Funding for the purchase and running costs of the centre have been provided on a 50:50 basis by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science in the South. The Department of Education spent £1.5 million to purchase the property. The purchase cost was based on an evaluation by the then Valuation and Lands Agency. The annual running costs of the centre have been estimated at approximately £3.5 million per annum, which will be shared equally between the two Departments. The Department of Education's expenditure on the project currently stands at approximately £1.88 million revenue, £1.737 million capital and £374,000 project costs from 2001 to date.

Already, the centre provides a training and advisory service for parents, teachers and other professionals

and a research and information service. It is planned that the centre will provide two further services: an education assessment service and a learning support service. We are delighted to say that the Southern Government have lifted the pause in additional funding for the centre, which, as Members will know, happened at the meeting in Limavady.

British-Irish Council: Ministerial Meeting

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice from the Minister for Social Development that she wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) ministerial meeting.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the inaugural meeting of the British-Irish Council housing work stream, which was held in Newcastle, County Down, on 4 December 2009. The report has been agreed by and is being made on behalf of Edwin Poots MLA, Minister of the Environment, who accompanied me at the meeting.

The British-Irish Council identified housing as a new work sector at its summit in Cardiff in February last year. Because of the good work that we are doing in Northern Ireland in housing and the fact that we are pioneers in financial innovation, I was asked to lead this important new work sector. All eight member jurisdictions were represented at the meeting on 4 December. The UK Government were represented by Lord McKenzie of Luton, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government; the Irish Government were represented by Michael Finneran TD, Minister with responsibility for housing and local services; the Scottish Government were represented by Alex Neil MSP, Minister for Housing and Communities; the Welsh Assembly was represented by Kath Palmer, a senior housing official; the Jersey Government were represented by Deputy Sean Power, Assistant Minister for Housing; the Guernsey Government were represented by Deputy Dave Jones, Minister for Housing; and the Isle of Man Government were represented by John Shimmin MHK, Minister for Local Government and the Environment.

The meeting was the first to gather the Housing Ministers from all the member jurisdictions together to discuss the pressing issues that are impacting on housing across the jurisdictions. It also provided an unprecedented opportunity for the assembled Housing Ministers to exchange views and disseminate best practice in the housing sector. The meeting had a challenging and tightly packed agenda. It considered papers in relation to four specific areas of work and received short supporting presentations from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the European Investment Bank and the Housing Finance Corporation.

The first paper looked at sustainable and more energy-efficient housing, including the use of renewable technologies. Ministers agreed that that was an important issue that had the potential to boost the economy and to help reduce the impacts of climate change, and we agreed that work should be taken

forward to identify effective measures that could be introduced in new and existing homes.

Minister Finneran provided a comprehensive overview of the South of Ireland's experience in greening its housing stock through the introduction of mandatory standards for the use of renewable technologies through building control and summarised the outworkings of that initiative with regard to reduced energy consumption and carbon emissions.

Other examples of good practice, such as the Welsh Assembly's pilot scheme to deliver 22 housing units to level 4 and 5 of the 'Code for Sustainable Homes', were also discussed.

The Scottish Minister for Housing and Communities advised that Scotland has established a best practice unit to consider renewable technologies across the world and that the unit will be happy to share its work with us. The topic generated debate on the merits of retrofitting as opposed to newbuild and the success of financial incentives to drive change versus regulation. It became clear from the meeting that a lot of good work is going on in each of the jurisdictions, which, when sufficiently advanced, can be shared to the benefit of all members.

The second paper sought to identify new opportunities for increasing private investment to fund more social housing. It was accompanied by two short presentations from Tom Hackett of the European Investment Bank and Piers Williamson of the Housing Finance Corporation. Several innovative initiatives are under way in many of the jurisdictions to increase the use of private finance to provide social and affordable housing, and officials have been asked to produce a paper pulling together the full spectrum of products for further discussion.

The meeting heard that, since the inception of the Housing Finance Corporation in 1987, it has made over £2.5 billion available to social landlords across Britain and Northern Ireland. The meeting welcomed the news that the European Investment Bank is to invest a record £345 million in social housing across Britain and Northern Ireland in 2010, which will bring its total investment to £810 million. All those who were present agreed that that was a significant vote of confidence for our efforts to deliver social housing, and we agreed to work closely with the Housing Finance Corporation and the European Investment Bank to make the case for continuing support, particularly when the bank is facing pressure to invest elsewhere across Europe in other areas.

I am particularly delighted to announce that the £30 million secured from the European Investment Bank for Northern Ireland will assist the five successful housing associations in delivering 820 units of social housing across the length and breadth of the North.

That financial injection will complement the funding that I have already made available and will support the delivery of 1,750 new homes during this financial year, which will be the largest number of new homes for over a decade.

The third paper considered the changing demographics of the population across the jurisdictions and the impacts that that will have on future housing need. It was accompanied by a short presentation from Joe Frey, the head of research at the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The meeting heard that there will be an extra 2.4 million older households in Britain by 2026, which will have an impact on the range and type of housing that is required to meet the growing need in the years ahead. It became evident that the demographic challenges that lie ahead exercise all jurisdictions and that the BIC housing work stream provides a useful forum to share statistics and to report on best practices that will inform how we provide for the tenants of the future. All jurisdictions agreed to work closely on that issue as new data and statistics emerge.

The final paper considered the need to provide more affordable housing products, and, although there is vast variation in house prices across the BIC jurisdictions, the meeting reflected how challenging it was for all member jurisdictions to deliver affordable housing during a period of reduced financial products in the financial sector. Lord McKenzie, representing the Department of Communities and Local Government, provided a useful overview of the numerous affordable housing products that are available in England, and other Housing Ministers took the opportunity to outline their approach to tackling the issue. It was agreed that the housing work stream should examine more innovative solutions with financial institutions and developers to produce more holistic developer-led affordable housing opportunities that the financial sector could support. That work will be further developed in the months ahead.

1.30 pm

The session concluded on a positive note, in that the meeting highlighted that a lot of good work is already under way across the jurisdictions. However, much remains to be done. All Ministers agreed that the issues at hand presented both challenges and opportunities for their respective jurisdictions, particularly in the current economic climate. I remain firmly of the view that the challenges ahead in housing will be better addressed in a joined-up manner, with all jurisdictions pooling their research and learning from one another's experiences. The BIC identified areas where further targeted work by officials can add value to the process under way in each of the member jurisdictions. That work will be taken forward in the coming months, and I have agreed to update my BIC housing colleagues on progress in the summer.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I thank the Minister for her statement. Looking at the matter more from a constituency point of view, I note that she referred to the 820 units and 1,750 units that are in the pipeline. In my constituency, another three parcels of land have recently been sold off to the private sector. How can all that good news transfer to our communities and instil some confidence that the good work that the Minister referred to is actually good news for local communities?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development for his question. He, quite rightly, asked how the BIC housing work stream can be translated into constituencies, particularly Strangford. He will know that we will be building more houses this year than have been built in each year over the last decade. I am sure that in this year, and probably the next three years, Strangford will get its fair share of those houses.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. She spoke about all jurisdictions pooling their research and about what has been done about the knowledge of different schemes that have been initiated. Will the Minister tell us whether the effectiveness of schemes, such as warm homes schemes, in other jurisdictions has been addressed, and whether information from other jurisdictions that may improve the delivery and effectiveness of schemes here will be shared?

The Minister for Social Development: The Member is probably already aware that, at the moment, there is a scheme in Britain that is equivalent to the warm homes scheme. Ministers, through the housing work stream, and officials, through the various jurisdictions, exchange experiences of various schemes to reduce and minimise the impact of fuel poverty on an ongoing basis, whether with my counterpart in the South of Ireland or with other counterparts in Scotland, England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the Minister's announcement of £30 million for social housing, equating to 820 units this year. Will the Minister inform the House how much of the Programme for Government target for 2011 — £925 million of investment in social housing — her Department will achieve?

The Minister for Social Development: The £30 million, which came from the European Investment Bank, will help to deliver 26 schemes across Northern Ireland in this financial year and will also operate in the next financial year. Fold Housing Association will run three schemes, Helm Housing will run three schemes, North and West Voluntary Housing Group will run two schemes, Oaklee Housing Association

will run four schemes and Trinity Housing will run 14 schemes. That will go some considerable distance towards delivering the social housing development programme this year and next year. I will be making an announcement within the next couple of months about the social housing development programme for next year and the following two years.

The significant point is that we are building more houses this year than we have ever built in each year over the past decade. That means that we are working an economic miracle at a time of constrained financial resources.

Mr Burns: I congratulate the Minister for attracting a record level of investment in housing in Northern Ireland. Can she give us some insight into how that funding was secured?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Burns for his question. When I launched the new housing agenda in February 2008, I made a commitment to deliver more innovative and imaginative solutions than ever before so that the housing crisis would be addressed. That was especially the case in that many more social homes were built with existing resources. I met the chief executive of The Housing Finance Corporation last year, when we announced details of its first ever investment in social housing in the North, which was for Clanmil Housing in Belfast.

I have continued to work closely with The Housing Finance Corporation to make the case for further and increased investment in social housing in Northern Ireland so that a greater number of homes will be delivered for people who are in housing need. I am delighted that that work has paid off, culminating in European Investment Bank funding of £30 million, which I announced in December 2009 in Newcastle. That is a major vote of confidence, not only for the five successful housing associations but for people who are in housing need and on the waiting list and who will be allocated property. It is also a vote of confidence for the much wider work that I am doing to deliver the new housing agenda.

Mr Craig: I note with interest, Minister, that you referred to the private finance initiatives that will be considered, especially innovative schemes in other jurisdictions that have led to the delivery of social housing. Minister, can you assure the House that you and your Department will investigate innovative schemes for Northern Ireland to further deliver social housing in future years? As we all know, due to the new constraints that whatever party forms the Government in the near future will put on public expenditure, private finance will probably be key to that delivery.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will Members refer their questions through the Chair?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Craig for his question. We were asked to take the lead on that avenue of financial innovation because we were already doing that and because other institutions and Administrations were following us. At the British-Irish Council meeting in December 2009, I took the opportunity to make the case directly to the European Investment Bank and The Housing Finance Corporation for ongoing investment in social housing. Naturally, the rest is up to the housing associations to deliver.

The Member asked what further work we will be doing. We have been doing significant amounts of work in the area of financial innovation. We have introduced the concept of bond financing to housing associations. I am pleased to say that the Fold Housing Association and North and West Housing have recently secured their first ever bond from The Housing Finance Corporation. That would not have happened unless I had encouraged and exhorted housing associations and the housing movement to go down the road of financial innovation to release as many houses as possible so that we can cater for housing need.

The Department has already been building more houses on land that it owns, proving that we are making the best use of the money that we have available. In addition, we got a good financial deal in Mr Craig's constituency of Lagan Valley for 112 houses, which are ex-military housing, at Pond Park. Naturally, I want to do more of that, and I hope that the Committee for Social Development will be able to support me in all those initiatives and will make a strong case in supporting me and in urging others to support the need for financial innovation in housing.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for her statement and commend her on acquiring £30 million from the European Investment Bank. Are the 820 units in addition to the 1,750 that were promised under the Programme for Government, or have they become part of the overall target of 1,750 units? The Minister spoke about sustainability. We all look for sustainable communities across our constituencies. Is mixed tenure still a key part of the housing strategy that the Minister is striving to implement?

The Minister for Social Development: The record £30 million investment in five housing associations this year will complement the funding that I already made available and will support the delivery of 1,750 new homes this year, which is our largest total for a decade. We are building more houses this year than for more than a decade because of my commitment to tackle housing need. Mr McCann rightly mentioned mixed tenure. I fully support mixed tenure, which was a cornerstone of the new housing agenda.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, —

Mr Deputy Speaker: No points of order will be taken during questions.

Mrs M Bradley: The Minister said that a key issue was to deliver eco-friendly and environmentally sound housing. How will that be done in Northern Ireland? Again, I welcome the work that the Minister is doing.

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the new housing agenda in February 2008, I made it clear that I did not want to build just homes, but to build better homes. I firmly believe that more sustainable homes lead to more sustainable communities. That is why the houses that we are now building are 25% more energy efficient than ever. However, if we are to alleviate fuel poverty, which blights so many families in Northern Ireland, we need to be more creative in building energy efficient houses that are also cost-effective. That is why I plan to announce in the coming months details of the largest housing development in Britain and Ireland of the most energy efficient and environmentally friendly housing possible, and it will be delivered first in Northern Ireland. So, Members can watch this space.

Mr Easton: I also welcome the extra £30 million that is being invested in Northern Ireland by the European Investment Bank. Did the British-Irish Council hold discussions about getting extra money for maintenance schemes? The Minister is well aware that there is a huge shortage of money for such schemes, especially in my constituency. With that extra money coming in, will the Minister now be able to release any extra money for maintenance schemes, especially in the pensioners' bungalows in the Bloomfield estate, Bangor?

The Minister for Social Development: Much as it may surprise Members, the position of maintenance contracts was not a topic for discussion at the housing work stream, nor was the issue of Egan contracts, but I will provide an update. Egan contractors started this year with a £16 million budget. The Executive decided that the Department for Social Development, as a condition of extra money for grants, should allocate a further £20 million for Egan contractors. A further £8 million was allocated, followed by the recent announcement of £6 million more. That brings to £30 million the total this year for Egan, which undertakes planned maintenance schemes on the revenue side. I am confident that we will have more good news on that issue before the month is out.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I congratulate the Minister on securing the first meeting of the BIC's housing work stream and for having it in Northern Ireland.

I ask that Minister clear up some of the confusion stemming from the very welcome announcement that

Northern Ireland has secured £30 million from the European Investment Bank. Can she assure the House that that money will not serve as a substitute for existing public finance but will supply the finance that the housing associations would have had to find from other sources? Perhaps she can clarify that.

1.45 pm

Looking ahead to the delivery of further investment for new social housing, I ask the Minister to tell the House whether the finance for the social housing development programme for 2010-11 is secure, or will there have to be, as there were for 2009-2010, serious cutbacks on maintenance and refurbishment programmes?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development for his question and for his kind remarks about the British-Irish Council meeting on the housing work stream, the first ever to be held in these islands. For Members' information, further work will be done in the North/South Ministerial Council. I have not sat still on the issue.

The Member rightly asks whether the money is additional or whether it will supplant other funds. It is clearly additional money, which will assist housing associations — five housing associations especially — in delivering the social housing development programme.

This year, we will deliver 1,750 new homes at a cost of £155 million, which equates to a grant rate of approximately £88,000 a unit. However, the costs of schemes vary widely. For example, supported housing schemes are fully funded, such are the costs involved, whereas schemes on land that the Housing Executive owns can cost half as much as those in which land-acquisition costs are involved. That is the difference between those and transfer schemes.

Delivering three-bedroom homes in Fermanagh is cheaper than delivering them in Belfast, as land costs vary considerably. Therefore, I am unable to give the Chairperson a figure for every home that we build in every year. However, I can assure Members that the calculations that we use to determine value for money are flexible enough to recognise all the different elements that contribute to the final cost of delivering homes.

The 820 homes that the European funding will support will be delivered over 18 months, with some starting this financial year and others in the next, as I said in response to Mr Armstrong's question.

Mr Hamilton asked about the housing budget for next year. As Members are aware, no decisions have yet been made on next year's Budget. The Executive have still to agree the various departmental spending

plans. However, there is no doubt that the housing budget will continue to come under pressure, given the loss of £200 million in capital receipts between this year and last. Just as I have done this year, I will do all that I can to protect the vulnerable and those in greatest need. We must build more homes if we are to have any hope of helping those in housing stress. It goes without saying that I welcome any help or support that the Committee for Social Development can give to ensure that the budget that is allocated to me for next year reflects the challenges that I will be expected to meet.

I remind the Chairperson, members of the Committee and all Members of the House that, despite the huge financial shortfall that we face, we will this year achieve the highest number of social housing starts for any year for over a decade. The Chairperson, as will all Members, will agree that that is a significant achievement, notwithstanding the financial challenges that we face.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is very beneficial for the relevant institutions to share learning regularly.

The Minister mentioned affordable housing. In England, the practice of raising developers' contributions has been ongoing for some time. Has the Minister gleaned any examples of best practice or initiatives from there?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Ms Lo for her question. Naturally, the other institutions and Administrations have various innovative solutions to developer contributions. I had discussions with the Dublin Administration some two and a half years ago and saw, as I did in London, in Hammersmith and Tower Hamlets, clear examples of where developer contributions were used and good examples of mixed-tenure and mixed-income housing. For want of better information, there will be further ongoing discussions with Lord McKenzie. In fact, my officials will shortly be going to London to be briefed on all those areas, as a consequence of the discussions that were held in Newcastle. I look forward to updating the House on all those issues later this year. I am in ongoing discussions with the Minister of the Environment about local developer contributions. That issue was also part of the new housing agenda.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Regional Development: I beg to introduce the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 6/09], which is a Bill to provide for permit schemes to control the carrying out of works in roads; for prohibiting or restricting the use of roads in connection with special events; for inquiries in connection with the exercise of certain functions relating to roads; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments that are tabled to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Bill's Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Compulsory Voting

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.

Mr Kinahan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in the Commonwealth of Australia; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to consider introducing similar rules for elections in the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you are letting me indulge in a matter that has been a passion of mine since I entered politics, and I hope that we will encourage much debate. Today, we have a rare chance to stand outside the bubble of normal Stormont business and to examine and debate the possibility of adopting the Australian style of compulsory voting. This is a chance for all of us to drop party policy lines and have an open debate. It is also a chance to explore how we can make politics and political institutions work better for the public and for politicians, and I am extremely grateful to be able to raise the issue. We should be having such debates on how we can make a positive difference to society much more often. We cannot implement such an improvement, but we can lead the way and send the right signal to Westminster.

We are at a turning point in the Government of Northern Ireland and a turning point, albeit a painfully slow one, in the Assembly. We are still exploring how to make devolved government work with the rather stuttering DUP/Sinn Féin coalition. Now is a great time to explore introducing compulsory voting.

Usually, there are respectable turnouts for the Westminster and Assembly elections. However, last summer, the turnout plummeted to new depths during the European election, and, last week, during the Lurgan by-election. That was not helped by the Westminster expenses scandal and other similar events. Voting has gone down from 62% and 63% to just under 43% and, last week, to 26%. However, we must remember that turnout in the European elections is traditionally low and that turnout in a January election for a single council seat would also be low.

Sadly, we have had our own crisis recently, which will have seen the opinion of us, as politicians, plummet to new depths. We know that the youth of today, and an ever-increasing number of the population, have lost interest in politics, if, indeed, they ever had that interest. People have lost faith and see not voting as acceptable.

As we conduct our surgeries in our constituency offices, we have all seen that it is often the marginalised members of our community, those who we are so often helping, who form a large section of the non-voters. We are excluding such people by not having compulsory voting.

The present system allows too many people — between one third and one half of the voting population; in other words, around 500,000 people — to not bother to vote. That phrase, “not bother” should shock Members. It is similar to many of the excuses given: “I do not know anything about politics”; “I am not political”; “I think politics in Northern Ireland is a waste of time”; and, of course, there are some people who feel that they are above politics.

It is a total and utter disgrace that we have allowed such a situation to arise. Consider the suffragettes, just over a century ago, having their jaws wired open to be force-fed as they fought for the right for women to vote; or the dead of two world wars fighting for the freedom of government and the freedom to vote. If one thinks of all the other conflicts, even our own, it really all comes down to the right to vote. People should be voting. Voting is a chance for people to choose their government, to vote out those in government, and to ensure that their idea of society, fairness and rights is represented in the Chamber or in other Chambers. Not voting throws all that to the wind.

In Australia, people have to take part by going to a polling booth or by postal vote. People can deliberately spoil their ballot or make a mess of it, but they have to take part. Anyone who does not take part is fined \$AU20, which is equivalent to £11. The fine can rise if someone is brought to court, and, indeed, people can end up in prison.

In its first election with a system of compulsory voting, Australian voting statistics moved from 59% to 91%. Australia now has consistently higher figures, and that is something that should make all of us jealous. In Australia, voting is on a Saturday and not a working day, and that day is made a national holiday. In Australia, it is easier to use postal votes: people can vote while on holiday and they can vote without going to a polling booth much easier than people here can. We need to review our voting system. How many people do we disenfranchise during each election because the electorate is given only a week or two to sort out the postal votes?

I congratulate the Electoral Commission on its recent efforts to raise registration. However, if everybody aged 18 and above was automatically and compulsorily registered we would not have such a problem. If politicians knew that they did not have to

be so concerned with trying to get voters to the polls, they could concentrate on their message.

Two years ago, I attended some vox pop question and answer sessions in north Down, and, in almost every grouping of voters — 10 DUP, 10 UUP and 10 others — there was only ever one person who had a slight interest in politics. That is quite shocking. If every voter had to vote, he or she would have to take some interest; even, sadly, if it were just to remember a name.

In Australia, every school teaches every student about the political system and its parties.

What hope do we have when our Education Minister cannot run the schools?

2.00 pm

In Australia, voting is not seen as onerous, a loss of freedom, or not being the Australian way. Remember, the decision to make voting compulsory was made in 1925, at a time when Australia was under much more British influence than it is now. Australia is proud of its compulsory voting system, and we want to be proud of our voting system.

However, it is not just the voting system that needs to change; we must also change. We need to make this institution more effective, inclusive and dynamic, and we need to build a joint vision for all groups in our society. Each one of us needs to be squeaky clean, honest and show the highest standards of life, although the public and the press need to allow for us all being human. We must, as the school report might say, do better.

We also need to remove the blocks that exist in society to allow the public to take more of an interest in politics. In the past five years, I have had civil servants, police, soldiers and people in numerous private companies all say that they cannot get involved in politics. That is, of course, an excuse. Considering the number of people who work in the government sector and the private sector, we have to change the attitudes of an enormous number of people. There are too many blocks in our society: people are encouraged to be apolitical, and too many are now apathetic.

Everyone should be encouraged to discuss politics openly and should not be ashamed of having a good argument or a good discussion. No one should, within reason, be ashamed of his or her views. One council does not allow political groups to rent or use its rooms. That sort of attitude is endemic in Northern Ireland, and we need to change it. Business needs to get more involved and support, lobby and work with politicians. Business and commerce should not be put off by the present investigations.

Recently, we have seen a constant assault on the integrity of politicians by 'The Daily Telegraph', on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' and in many other forms of

media. Much of that criticism has been justified. However, I wonder how many of those who call in and grumble actually vote. It is a journalist's duty not just to criticise and to investigate but also to be good and to praise. Some do that, but many do not.

I have offered a glimpse of the Australian compulsory voting system, which we could easily adopt or tweak. If we did not use the stick, we could use the carrot by, for example, offering money off rates. Voting could take place over two days, or we could start to use electronic voting. We could, and I will use the term again, do better.

If all that I have mentioned was implemented and, most importantly, compulsory voting was put in place, it would start the change that we need to galvanise our country into being the envy of the world. That is an easy, painless and unifying step that could really quicken our move from a sectarian society to one that is at ease with itself.

Mr Ross: Since the beginning of the debate, turnout in the Chamber has improved, for which we should be grateful.

The Member for South Antrim Mr Kinahan has tabled an interesting motion. It is not one that I can agree with, but it highlights a number of issues that are important to us. In Northern Ireland, it is generally said that there is a higher turnout for elections than there is in GB. However, there was only 42.81% turnout for the European Election last year. In my constituency of East Antrim, turnout was 34.5%. In a number of recent elections, East Antrim has had one of the lowest turnouts in Northern Ireland. That is very frustrating for politicians in the area, but it is something that politicians from every political party and every part of the United Kingdom would agree is frustrating, because so many people appear to be turned off from the democratic process and be disengaged and uninterested in politics.

Mr Kinahan said that it would be great if politicians did not have to worry about people coming out to vote at election time. I disagree with that, because everyone in the House — every political party and every Member — has a responsibility to try to make sure that he or she engages with people to try to ensure that the platform on which they stand entices people to come out and vote for them. All individual Members and political parties have that responsibility. It is a challenge.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Speaker initiated a number of roadshows, the idea behind which was to engage the public and to create a greater interest in politics in a number of areas. Some roadshows were successful. I participated in one in Carrickfergus, but it was unsuccessful because only a small number of people attended. People were not

interested; I hope that was not because I was there. That is the crux of the issue: people are not interested in politics. Compulsory voting will not fix that problem but will mask it and hide it away. However, people's lack of interest in politics will remain, because it is their right to be uninterested in politics. We may not like that situation, but people have the freedom to choose.

Mr Kinahan mentioned freedom in his opening remarks. Each individual in the United Kingdom should have the freedom to choose whether to vote. They should have the freedom to choose whether to be interested in politics and to decide whether to leave their house to cast a ballot on election day. As Mr Kinahan said, there have been struggles throughout history, and people have died for their right to vote. It is disappointing that people do not use their right to vote. However, people are not under a duty or obligation to vote. That is the crux of the argument. In a real democracy, citizens are able to choose whether to exercise that right. As long as nothing stops them voting for whomever they want, we should not tell them how to vote or insist that they vote.

Compulsory voting is not the norm in Australia only. The Member will know that other countries such as Brazil, Singapore and Peru use compulsory voting. The legislation states that an individual who does not vote could be fined. I have examined some research on that issue, and it is fairly clear that although legislation in many of those countries allows states to fine an individual for not voting, they do not do so in many cases because it is massively expensive to enforce such legislation. The bureaucracy that is involved in enforcement is huge, and most states use that system to try to scare people into voting.

Another issue that we must consider is whether the state should use the big-stick approach to make people vote. It is expensive, oppressive and difficult to enforce, and there is a chance that millions of people would choose not to co-operate anyway. Although I disagree, many religious groups believe that they should not participate in political democracy. That is another issue that Mr Kinahan did not highlight. Is ill-informed participation better than no participation? Is somebody who has no interest in politics, does not know who is standing, does not know the political parties and does not follow current affairs in a position to vote?

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

Mr Ross: I will.

In conclusion, it is important to note that higher turnout does not necessarily increase the legitimacy of government. I am aware of the possibility of the use of "none of the above" boxes. However, the Member

should perhaps have considered ways to increase turnout —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Ross: We should examine other electoral systems before we use the draconian method of compulsory voting.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I welcome the motion as part of a debate on democratic participation, I feel that it is, in many ways, premature. The motion states:

"That this Assembly notes the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in ... Australia".

I am not aware that any Committee, individual or party in the House has created a position paper that outlines the pros and cons of the Australian model or of any other model that is in favour of compulsory voting. Nevertheless, I have examined the Australian model, and there are some positive effects, notably the proactive outreach steps that have been taken whereby mobile polling stations go to certain quarters and residential homes to make it easier for people to participate. However, there is a negative side. There are penalties for people who decide not to vote, and compelling people to vote would have an adverse effect on those who feel that they have the right to abstain.

One could argue that the electoral register, which is compiled by the Electoral Office here, is accurate, but it is certainly not complete. There are still too many bureaucratic obstructions to getting on the register. Those issues must be dealt with more thoroughly and on an ongoing basis in order to encourage participation in elections.

Although the motion has merits, there are too many unanswered questions, and the debate has not been thorough enough. Today's debate is not the beginning, the middle and the end; it should be seen as the start of an engagement. The motion calls for a vote to be taken that would conclude one way or another, and, therefore, my party has decided to abstain. However, we encourage further participation in the debate to see whether we can advance the issue as it is expressed in the motion.

Mr Dallat: I do not support the motion, but I respect the Member who proposed it. I believe that the Members of the Assembly must first relate to the people who elected us. I am asked frequently what it was that attracted me to politics, and — this is not a plug for the SDLP — it was about the ability to relate to ordinary people and to serve them. It certainly was not about donning Armani suits and Barker shoes, or appointing spin doctors, all the things that trendy modern politics seems to concentrate on. It most certainly was not about self-preservation. The public are knowledgeable

enough to know that there has been far too much of the self-preservation syndrome in the Assembly.

Although we should not look back too often, the last really big turnout was in 1998 for the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement and the first election to the Assembly. The people of Northern Ireland were united in the belief that the Assembly was going to address the issues that were important to them. Members will know that savage cuts are coming, for example, in the Health Service, over the next few weeks. People question what has been done collectively to determine those cuts.

There have also been serious job losses. Day and daily, right across the North, the self-esteem and dignity of breadwinners is taken away from them. In my constituency last Friday, 20 more jobs were lost. Someone said, "But it is only 20." It is 20 families who do not know what the future holds, but who placed their trust in the Assembly to produce a Budget that would focus on the need to create jobs.

There is no point in saying simply that the cuts send shivers down the spine. Of course they do, but what is being done about it? What was the subject of the heavy discussions that have taken place in the past two or three weeks? Was it anything to do with education, health or job losses? Not at all.

I hope that there will be a change of mood now that the last snowflake has disappeared, that there will be a thaw, and that the Assembly will become an inclusive place where, collectively, we all will be included in whatever happens. If we begin to accept that ordinary people need to have confidence in what happens here, that will be a good way to encourage them to come out and vote.

2.15 pm

Mr Weir: I take on board what the Member has said, and I appreciate the proposer of the motion's argument that we should encourage people to be more involved in politics and have a greater sense of civic responsibility. However, not voting is one way that people can express disillusionment with politics and the political system. That may be merited or, on some occasions, it may not, but it is one way that a message can be sent to politicians collectively that they need to refocus. If there were compulsory voting, which would more or less guarantee a 95% turnout, that could mask the legitimate right of people to wish a plague on all politicians' houses because they are not happy with what has happened.

Mr Dallat: I thought that my only semblance of democracy was about to be robbed before I remembered that I have an extra minute in which to speak.

I accept that bad politicians are elected by good people who do not vote. That worries me. We need to

get that message across. The Electoral Commission has a responsibility to get across to people the need to participate in democracy. Our schools are increasingly involved — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish that Lord Morrow would give me my say. I know that he and his party exclude me from everything else, but for the precious couple of minutes that I am speaking, I ask him in the friendliest of terms to please let me get on with my speech.

Youth clubs across Northern Ireland are involved in democracy weeks. As Members will know from personal experience, it is a challenge for politicians to relate to young people. Many of those who do not vote are young people, and that worries me. There is always the challenge to persuade people that democracy works. There is a need to ensure that young people are not attracted to terror groups or to people who think that there is a different way to achieve the peace and prosperity that the public voted for in 1998. I thank the Member for proposing the motion.

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

Mr Dallat: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I still have five seconds left.

It is an opportunity to put a focus on democracy in a voluntary way. *[Interruption.]*

I am glad that so many Members wanted to intervene. That tells me that democracy might begin to work here.

Dr Farry: Speaking to a packed Chamber, I was going to make a comment about the importance of compulsory attendance of MLAs in debates.

I understand that the Danish Parliament requires compulsory voting from their equivalent of MPs, although I am not sure that that would be a good system for us, given the problems that some Members have with voting in the Chamber, including Mr Kinahan's predecessor from South Antrim.

The proposed motion is the wrong way through which to explore a very important subject. We can all agree that lower and falling electoral turnout is a serious problem. Representative democracy depends on popular participation, which is falling. As a consequence, the authority of our institutions suffers. However, the difference between the approach proposed in the motion and what is coming across in the debate is that the motion identifies the problem and blames the electorate for it. The motion is akin to saying to the electorate, "You are not taking part in democracy; therefore, look what you are getting". It proposes that we regulate their behaviour by compelling them to turn out and vote.

In contrast, the responsibility has to fall back on us as elected representatives, and on political parties. It is our duty to motivate people to come out and vote. That is the essence of a healthy democracy. It is no good having a notionally high turnout if that turnout is neither well intended nor voluntary, or if people vote as a result of some form of duress, such as a fine or even imprisonment. That would mean that people are not freely expressing their opinion, which is what lies at the heart of democracy.

There are flaws in the concept of compulsory voting. Alastair Ross referred to people who have religious objections to voting. We must respect freedom of religion in society. Some people may regard all the options presented on the ballot paper as equally objectionable and, therefore, not wish to participate.

Mr Ross: I agree with the Member totally. Some people would argue that a “none of the above” box would settle that problem. However, does he agree that, far from doing that, such an option highlights the nonsensical position of compulsory voting? Voting for “none of the above” defeats the purpose, and there would be problems if “none of the above” received more votes than any of the actual parties.

Dr Farry: There is a famous 1980s comedy film in which “none of the above” won the election. My colleague Mr Weir is a 1980s film buff and will probably remember its name.

Mr Weir: ‘Brewster’s Millions’.

Dr Farry: ‘Brewster’s Millions’ — very good.

Why go to the trouble of compelling people to go along to a polling station if they are simply going to spoil their vote? Why not just let them stay at home if that is their decision? We must respect the fact that we live in a free and liberal society and that people have the freedom to choose what, and what not, to do.

In British democracy especially, there is a long-standing tradition that every man and every woman is a castle and that it is possible for adults to live their lives in isolation from the state as long as they are doing no harm to others. Over the years, that principle has been compromised through measures such as the requirements to pay taxes and send children to school and, in more recent times, the introduction of conscription. It has been judged that it is in the interests of society to compromise freedoms in those areas, but the introduction of compulsory voting would take that to a different level.

Members have cited a host of examples of compulsory voting systems — the information was provided by Research Services — but those are largely historical legacies. There are very few examples of systems of compulsory voting that have been introduced in the past 30, 40 or 50 years. Most compulsory voting

systems are anachronisms that have not been taken off countries’ statute books and are simply not enforced. I imagine that it would be a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights to introduce a system of compulsory voting.

Instead, we need to focus on two issues. First, we must explain to people how participation and voting for candidates can make a difference to outcomes and affect the lives of individuals, their families and friends and society as a whole. We must explain the relevance of our Assembly, our Parliament and, even, the European Parliament. We discuss many issues that affect people deeply, and it is important that those people can make a difference by choosing their representatives.

The second issue is the integrity of the political process, which has faced a major challenge, particularly in recent months. We must consider how to clean up politics in this country and elsewhere and give people confidence that politicians are in it for the good of society rather than for themselves. People can make a difference through the choices that they make. Although I recognise that the motion is well intended, it misses the fundamental point that we must reflect on ourselves and what we do.

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

Dr Farry: Rather than placing the emphasis on voters and blaming them for their lack of motivation, let us motivate them.

Mr Shannon: I do not support the motion, although I believe that the Member has put it forward for the best reasons. The concept of compulsory voting is not new. Geoff Hoon brought the idea to the fore after a low turnout of just 61% in the 2005 general election. Typically, people in Northern Ireland have always been more motivated to vote. That is because of our unique history and what is at stake for people here when they vote. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) ‘Election Guide’ states that 62·8% of registered voters turned out in the 2007 Assembly election.

Thaire isnae onie doot at thon isnae the figure we wud laike tae see an’ when we tak’ a leuk aa Belgium, wha hed a 91·08% turnout wi’ onie a 5·75% spoiled vote, we micht ax fer wie we shudnae hae a compulsory votin’ system laike they hae. Votin’ hes bein compulsory i Belgium sine 1892. Ye hae tae gae intae a pollin’ booth bit ye dinnae hae tae maik a ballot.

There is no doubt that, when compared with Belgium, where there was a 91·08% turnout and only 5·75% of votes were spoiled, our turnout is not at the level at which we would like it to be. We may question why we should not implement a similar compulsory voting system. Compulsory voting has existed in Belgium since 1892. It is mandatory to enter a polling booth,

but to mark the ballot paper is not. After the election, a list of non-attendees is sent to the Office of the Public Prosecutor. Perhaps the mover of the motion will detail in his winding-up speech how penalties would apply to people who do not vote.

In Belgium, prosecutions are carried out in the absence of a decent excuse or explanation. A medically certified illness, being abroad or an act of God — there is no answer to that — are usually good enough reasons to escape punishment. The punishments are on an upward scale that starts with a small fine and rises for repeat offenders. People can be barred from the electoral list for 10 years. Perhaps those who do not want to vote simply do not vote so that they will be removed from the list. That also makes them ineligible for nomination, distinction or promotion by a public authority.

In Australia, 95.17% of people vote and only 2.55% of votes are spoiled. Australia has had a compulsory voting system since 1924, and, as in Belgium, a good excuse circumnavigates any punishment. The set fine is 20 Australian dollars, which equates to £10. Of the non-voters, 5% pay the fine straight away, and almost all the others provide a valid reason for not voting. A non-voter who decides to take his or her case to court only to lose will be fined 50 Australian dollars and could end up doing community service or spending a couple of days in jail as a result.

Mr Weir: The Member mentioned several of the compulsory voting's potential drawbacks. I appreciate that there may be a few other political anoraks in the Chamber. The Member mentioned Belgium and Australia, which use either an alternative vote system or a list system. I cannot think of many countries that apply compulsory voting to the system of a single transferable vote. It may be that compulsory voting adapts particularly poorly to that system. To make the point that they simply do not care about voting, a proportion of people who feel compelled to enter a polling booth may simply work their way down the ballot paper writing one to 10 in the order in which the names appear. Compulsory voting may, therefore, be particularly skewed against the system of a single transferable vote. Those of us whose surname begins with the letter W may have a particular reason to fear it. It is interesting that I can think of no other country in which compulsory voting applies that uses the single transferable vote system.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not wish to be offensive, but some people refer to the example that he cited as “donkey voting”, whereby people start at the top of the list of candidates and work their way down to the bottom. If that were to happen in a compulsory voting system, the difference in the effect on those named Adams as opposed to Weir would be clear.

A nation that employs a better, if not ideal, system is the United States of America. It ran a ‘No Vote, No Voice’ campaign, and the only compulsion to vote was a moral one. The percentage of voter turnout there is high and, over the past three elections, has risen steadily as the message has been made increasingly clear. That kind of method should be re-examined, and perhaps the mover of the motion will do so in his winding-up speech.

On a website dedicated to compulsory voting, I read a point that I believe to be true:

“A higher voter turnout cannot be said to heighten the legitimacy of a government when the voters have been forced into giving their support.”

That is the key issue, as Mr Dallat and other Members mentioned. It is better to encourage people to vote than compel them to turn up. The Latin term “*ceteris paribus*” means “to stay at home”, and that right should be reflected. If we are not careful, we will be heading towards a nanny state.

Dr Farry: Was that Ulster Scots?

Mr Shannon: The Member will be glad to hear that it was not Ulster Scots, although I said it with an Ulster-Scots accent. We do not want legislation that mirrors the term “gym attendance compulsory” that is used in schools. That means that pupils must attend PE lessons. The introduction of compulsory voting would be similar, and I am sure that the mover of the motion does not want that. As Members, we want to change lives and make people feel that they are part of that process.

In 2003, the UK Electoral Commission took a quick look at the issue of compulsory voting and concluded:

“compulsory voting would not in itself address the underlying causes of low turnout, and in particular the apparent lack of engagement between potential voters and politics.”

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

Mr Shannon: School curriculums should press upon children the reasons to vote, but I do not support the nanny state or this proposal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease for a few moments. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member called to speak will be Simon Hamilton.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Executive Office, Brussels

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans for the future use of the Executive office in Brussels.

(AQO 574/10)

The Acting First Minister (Mrs Foster): The Executive office in Brussels has recently moved to new premises. The new office is located close to all of the European institutions. Invest Northern Ireland continues to be co-located with the Executive office, and the premises incorporates an office for visitors, meeting rooms, a conference facility, hot desks for visiting Ministers and officials, and videoconferencing facilities.

The office in Brussels has provided an important link between Northern Ireland Ministers and their Departments and the institutions in Brussels. In my role as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I have personally used the services of the office on two recent occasions. Northern Ireland Departments, local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other local organisations all continue to make use of the facilities and staff resources that are available.

It is our wish that the office should continue to serve as a broad a range of uses as possible. The new premises provide the opportunity not only to serve the traditional visiting groups but has space to showcase our culture, education and other sectors, and to help develop business links with our European partners. Over the coming weeks, staff in the office will be preparing a programme of events to make maximum use of the new facility.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am aware that the report from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on European affairs will be debated in the Assembly in the near future. In fact, the Assembly and Business Trust is sending a delegation to Brussels at the start of next month. Does the Minister agree that rather than simply being an office of the Executive in

Brussels, it should be an office of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Brussels?

The Acting First Minister: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, it should not only be an office for the Northern Ireland Assembly; it should be an office for the entirety of the Northern Ireland institutions. I know that, for example, Belfast City Council hopes to hold an event in the office at the end of this month, which it is doing in conjunction with some of the MEPs. I very much welcome that. We need to be making ourselves more amenable in Europe. We very much need to have, and do have, a presence there. Now there is an opportunity for all of us to go out.

I think that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development visited the European office recently. That is very important because we all know about the influence that Europe has on our lives here in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I very much agree with the Member: we should be making maximum use of that office in Brussels.

Mr Shannon: I know that the Minister is aware that the OFMDFM Committee is currently holding a European inquiry. There is a very clear need to have greater engagement between the Assembly and other regions in the United Kingdom. As the Minister also stated, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development went over some weeks ago, and members were suitably impressed with what they saw. That is very important.

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister tell us how she sees the engagement with Europe for the Northern Ireland region in the United Kingdom directly with Brussels?

The Acting First Minister: Since devolution, we have seen very much an increased presence from Northern Ireland out in Europe. I recall one of the MEPs, before devolution, saying very clearly that we were not spending enough of our time in Europe. However, regardless of what personal and party views may be about the European Union, and there are quite a few in this House, as, indeed, there are in many other houses, we, in the Executive, have made a firm commitment to work in Europe to maximise the benefit for the people here in Northern Ireland. That is very important. It is a way of developing alliances. Certainly, I have witnessed the way in which Scotland, for example, uses its office in Europe.

We can learn from the experience of that devolved Administration in making their presence felt in Europe; it is an approach that we should follow very closely.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the First Minister for her answer. However, given that the

Barroso task force has identified the unique contribution that the North could make by sharing our experience of conflict resolution, and given that the Executive are already committed to the development of a centre for conflict resolution and peace building, will the Minister clarify whether such a centre would receive funding from Europe?

The Acting First Minister: The Member knows that, in an initial task force report in early 2008, the then First Minister, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, and the deputy First Minister said that they envisaged that an international centre could be created here to support peace building in the European Union and beyond. Such a centre would enable people to come together and to benefit from sharing our experiences. That remains the situation.

There are very clear linkages with the work of the peace building and conflict resolution centre project under international exchange, and the work of the EU Peace programme, which is mentioned in the fifth theme of the EU task force action plan for 2009-10. We are talking about the sharing of experiences, and that is still very much on the cards. Although there is not yet clarity on issues including the location of the conflict centre, it remains on the agenda.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that Europe is more important than ever after the approval of the Lisbon Treaty? As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have visited our European office in Brussels. Does the Minister agree that we should increase the number of staff in that office to a level that enables it to compete with other regions' offices?

The Acting First Minister: Europe has always been very important. In my former role as Minister of the Environment, I realised just how important the EU was because of the number of regulations and directives it issued that affected Northern Ireland.

I have listened carefully to Members' past complaints about the size of OFMDFM and the need to reduce staffing numbers. That also applies to the Brussels office, because those staff are employees of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Members must square their calls for more resources and more staff in Europe with asking for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to reduce its staff. They need to take that on board.

At present, there are four Northern Ireland civil servants in the Brussels office. Any time that I have visited that office, I have found them to be professional and very much engaged with civil servants in the rest of Europe. Therefore, they do a very good job. If more money were made available to OFMDFM, it could certainly consider resourcing more staff. If and until that happens, OFMDFM is content with staffing there.

Policing and Justice Powers

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings they have held with party political leaders to discuss the devolution of policing and justice. (AQO 575/10)

The Acting First Minister: Over the past few months, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have held a series of meetings with key stakeholders on the devolution of policing and justice, including the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. As part of that process, the Ministers met the leadership of the main political parties on a number of occasions. As recently as last week, I met, separately, delegations from the Ulster Unionist Party, led by Sir Reg Empey; the Alliance Party, led by David Ford; and a team from the SDLP, which included Alban Maginness and Alex Attwood. I am aware that the deputy First Minister also met the leaders of the UUP, the SDLP and the Alliance Party. Those discussions are ongoing, and the deputy First Minister and I intend that further meetings will take place in the coming days.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Acting First Minister for her reply. She could at least have congratulated me on the prescience of my question. Any progress towards the devolution of policing and justice is to be welcomed. I put on record, once again, our party's full commitment to support that. However, it is important to include parties other than Sinn Féin and the DUP in that process. I emphasise that point to the Acting First Minister, and I ask her to give the House an assurance that all other parties will be involved in the process.

The Acting First Minister: I could give a very short answer to that question. I give the Member the assurance that other Members will be involved. Indeed, I said in answer to the first question that he asked that we plan to have meetings again in the coming days on this issue. Why would I say that if it were not the case? Therefore, we will meet the parties in the coming days to take forward these issues.

Mr Weir: Could I be the first today to congratulate the Acting First Minister on her position, albeit temporary? Does she believe that the devolution of policing and justice is a unionist objective?

The Acting First Minister: When this state was founded, the control of security was a key issue for the founding fathers, and, as most Members in the House will know, the former Northern Ireland Parliament fell in 1972 when policing and justice powers were removed to London in the face of what was, at that time, very much unionist opposition.

We, as a political party, have the return of policing and justice powers as a key manifesto commitment, when community confidence is in place. That remains the position, and I have to say that everybody who was

in the party at that time signed up to that key manifesto commitment.

That is the case right across the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government have full control of policing and justice, without any implications for the union, and the Welsh Assembly is moving towards primary legislative powers. People need to be cognisant of those issues. So, when the outstanding issues are dealt with, policing and justice will be good for all the people of Northern Ireland and should not be viewed in a sectoral way.

Mr Kinahan: Given that the two largest parties cannot make up two thirds plus one, which is needed for constitutional change, will the Acting First Minister ensure that all the main political parties are not just included in the process but are properly included in it, and that you listen to, consider and take on board their views and allow them to come back?

The Acting First Minister: I have already said in response to Alban Maginness that I very much believe that all the parties want to be involved. I welcome the fact that all the parties are showing good political maturity this afternoon in saying that they very much want to be involved in this project. There are some that would rather stand outside and score political points in relation to what is a very serious issue for moving forward. Therefore, I welcome the fact that all parties in the House want to be involved in the process, and we will continue to meet those parties in the coming days.

Mr Ford: I thank the Acting First Minister for her answers earlier about the willingness to meet other parties. Can she give an assurance that she and the deputy First Minister will ensure that those discussions are meaningful and will aim to achieve the widest possible agreement on the policies that might be implemented by a justice Department?

In that vein, will she also agree that action to deal with the logjam of other issues that are currently holding up Executive business alongside the justice issues will be one of the best ways to demonstrate confidence in the operation of the Assembly and the Executive?

The Acting First Minister: I hope that the other parties will be able to add to that community confidence in relation to the devolution of policing and justice, and, again, I welcome the fact that they very much want to help in building that confidence. As for the other issues that the Member mentioned, we certainly stand ready to have a discussion. Indeed, I have already had discussions with him about business in the Assembly and the Executive, and those discussions will continue with all the parties.

Ms Purvis: Will the Acting First Minister outline to all the parties in the Chamber how they could support

her and her colleagues in advancing the devolution of policing and justice?

2.45 pm

The Acting First Minister: I can certainly tell Members how they will deter that confidence growing, and we have seen some good examples of that over the past number of weeks. Nevertheless, I think it is about working in a collegiate way to get the best outcome for all the people of Northern Ireland. That is what our party is about, and I hope that it is also what every Member in this House is about.

Programme for Government Unit

3. **Mr McFarland** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the current work programme of the Programme for Government unit within their Department. (AQO 576/10)

The Acting First Minister: The Department's Programme for Government unit has a complement of three posts, and its primary purpose is to monitor and report on progress on implementing the Programme for Government. Working with colleagues from the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) and the Department of Finance and Personnel, the unit draws together delivery reports, which are presented to the Executive.

The first formal delivery report was published and brought to the attention of the Assembly in June 2009. All Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments evaluate and report performance against the Programme for Government goals and targets for which they have lead responsibility. The Programme for Government unit, along with PEDU colleagues, analyses that information to compile the review of progress published in the delivery reports.

Where a delivery report recommends a ministerial or official review of performance against specific goals or targets, the Programme for Government unit has responsibility for arranging that. Those reviews seek explanation where targets are in danger of not being hit and where remedial action might be taken to recover the position. The unit is presently working on the delivery report setting out the half-year position as at the end of September 2009. It will be brought to the Executive and the Assembly in the near future.

Looking ahead, the Programme for Government unit's work programme will be heavily committed to preparations for the next Programme for Government for 2011-14.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Acting First Minister for her reply. Given the £380 million in cuts announced by the Finance Minister last week, will she undertake to begin an Assembly-based process to fully rewrite the

Programme for Government? Surely a narrow departmental priority-based savings process cannot be allowed to damage programmes, particularly in the Health Department, which are of a high overall priority to the people of Northern Ireland.

The Acting First Minister: That question is premised on the belief that public service agreement targets sit very specifically within individual Departments, and that is simply not the case, because many public service agreements straddle a lot of Departments. Therefore, it is not a case of being in departmental silos. I could give the Member a very short answer in relation to the review of the Programme for Government, but I will not. Since we first published our Programme for Government in January 2009, there is no doubt that the economic and financial landscape has changed dramatically, but that does not mean that we should throw the baby out with the bath water. We review the targets on an ongoing basis, and we keep a very tight eye on them. When we feel that we are dropping behind on those targets, we have ministerial and official review meetings. I think that we have got the balance right; we are dealing with the issues before us, but we are not throwing everything out.

Mr Ross: Will the Acting First Minister advise the House how we can ensure that there is full departmental accountability on the public service agreement targets and in the aims of the Programme for Government?

The Acting First Minister: The last delivery report, which was presented to the Assembly in June 2009, identified five areas for review, because they appeared to be off trajectory, and there was going to be difficulty in delivering on those targets. Those areas, which the Member may be aware of, related to the promotion of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects; controlling greenhouse gas emissions; delivering sustainable development; regeneration; and productivity and tourism. Four review meetings have taken place, and those will be reported on in the second delivery report, which we expect to be with the Assembly in February.

Mrs Long: I thank the Acting First Minister for her update on progress. In some of the policy areas, such as sustainability and, particularly, cohesion, sharing and integration, there have been significant delays over what was envisaged in the Programme for Government. Is there any sense that we are moving closer to a point where we will be able to fulfil the commitments that were made in the Programme for Government around those issues?

The Acting First Minister: We continue to review the areas where we are not on trajectory to meet those Programme for Government targets.

I know that, in the past, some Members have indicated that they believe that those delivery reports are quite high level and that it is not possible to drill down into the reasons behind delays. However, to use my substantive Department as an example, the reports on the two public service agreements with which the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment (DETI) is involved, to review productivity and tourism, can be found on the Department's website. With those reports, it is possible to drill right down to the reasons why those public service agreements have not been fulfilled.

It is an exercise in being as open and transparent as possible about targets that we are not presently on trajectory to meet and in looking at how we can deal with those issues and find ways to improve on them. That is what we are engaged in doing.

Mr Attwood: At last week's meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we had a presentation from departmental officials who are responsible for disability issues, which are included in the Programme for Government. During that presentation, the officials confirmed that an interdepartmental working group to take forward disability issues that involve children is currently drafting its implementation plan for the period 2008-2011.

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr Attwood: Is the Acting First Minister, in the short time that she has been in office, alarmed that her officials told an Assembly Committee that an implementation plan is only now being drafted for a period that began two years ago?

The Acting First Minister: As the Member will know, I am not entirely familiar with every single matter going on in the Department. However, I am happy to take that matter back to the Department and to try to find the reason why that implementation plan has been delayed. I will respond to the Member in writing.

OFMDFM: Administrative Costs

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they intend to meet efficiency targets in relation to the administrative costs of their Department. (AQO 577/10)

The Acting First Minister: As part of the Budget 2008-2011 process, the Executive agreed that Departments would deliver 5% per annum administration efficiency savings over the years 2008-09 until 2010-11. It is planned that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will deliver around £3.5 million of administration savings by 2010-11.

Efficiency savings in OFMDFM are being delivered through improvement in, and refocusing of, the

delivery of programmes and functions. Structures and staffing levels in the Department are reviewed regularly to ensure that its work is delivered in the most efficient and effective way. I understand that the OFMDFM Committee will receive further information on the outcome of that work soon. Those measures resulted in a reduction in OFMDFM's administration cost out-turn in 2008-09 of £1.2 million less than the final out-turn position for 2007-08.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response, in which she referred to savings. She also said that service would be delivered. That is good news. Will the Minister give some outline of how departmental restructuring will take place and how it will affect service delivery?

The Acting First Minister: The Member may be aware that there is already a moratorium on filling vacant posts. There is tight control on discretionary administration cost spend. That has resulted in an annualised administration cost saving of £750,000 in 2008-09 and 2009-2010. Administration cost savings in 2008-09, compared with those of 2007-08, comprised £834,000 of savings in staff costs and £343,000 of savings in other administration costs.

As I said in response to question 1, the size of the Department has always been an issue. However, I believe that some people do not realise how many OFMDFM staff are not based in Northern Ireland. For example, Norman Houston, who is an OFMDFM employee, does a great job in the US office — I know that from work with my substantive Department, DETI. I have already mentioned the Brussels office. Staff of the Planning Appeals Commission and other such bodies also fall under OFMDFM. Therefore, when people talk about the size of OFMDFM, they need to reflect on the fact that its staff may be based in places that they did not realise.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for the full and comprehensive answers that she has given. In fact, there may be an overlap in some of the figures that she has mentioned previously.

What proportion of the £11.1 million saving target for her Department, which was set in 2008 for the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, has been realised? Relative to the work of her Department in that, is there any implication for the staffing or the development of the Brussels office?

The Acting First Minister: The number of staff working in OFMDFM, which, as I said, are not all in Stormont Castle, has been reduced from 408 staff who were in post in September 2007 to 394 in December 2009. Recently, the Department concluded a strategic review of structures across OFMDFM and identified the potential to reduce staffing levels further. I understand that the Committee is being briefed on

those figures, so I do not want to get ahead of myself and give those numbers to the Assembly at this time. There is a substantial commitment to reduce staff, and, in conjunction with colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel, obviously, work is under way to effect changes as swiftly as possible.

I will write to the Member with a response to the specific question that he asked.

Mr O'Loan: The Acting First Minister referred to the size of her Department, which has been criticised. I agree that not all of that criticism is justified, though some may be. Considering the great size of that Department, does the Acting First Minister see that the efficiency savings mechanism has led to a better and greater quality of output from her Department? Has the mechanism of the exercise for producing those efficiencies, in particular, produced a significant culture change in the Department towards a more can-do attitude?

The Acting First Minister: Since devolution, it has been a challenge for all Departments to accept that change in culture. We have had to become used to local Ministers being in charge of Departments, rather than permanent secretaries and the part-time direct rule Ministers that we had for a number of years. I do not think that that is a challenge for OFMDFM solely; it is a challenge across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I have found civil servants who are very much up to that challenge and who want to be a part of the new dispensation here in Northern Ireland and to be a part of delivering good government for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Commissioner for Older People

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the progress on an older people's commissioner. (AQO 578/10)

The Acting First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Robin Newton will answer that question.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question. We are committed to establishing a commissioner for older people. The Executive's Programme for Government made a commitment to provide a strong independent voice for older people. On 18 December 2007, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced their intention to appoint an older people's commissioner. However, before a commissioner can be appointed, we need to bring forward legislation to the Assembly. As part of that process, I, along with junior Minister Kelly, launched the public consultation into the proposals to establish a commissioner for older people at an event

in the Everglades Hotel to celebrate the United Nations International Day of Older Persons. The consultation period ran from 1 October 2009 and concluded a few days ago on 7 January. The consultation included the policy proposals and the draft Bill, as well as commentary on the Bill clauses.

In November 2009, as part of the consultation, our Department conducted nine public consultation events across Northern Ireland. More than 400 people attended that series of events, and the level of engagement and participation by those who attended was extremely encouraging. I attended two of the events, and put on record my gratitude to the staff who took part in the consultations and to Dame Joan Harbison who chaired the events.

The consultation concluded on 7 January, and more than 70 written responses to the consultation have been received. Following a thorough analysis of the responses, the Department will publish a response to the consultation in due course. It is our intention to bring forward to the Executive, before the summer, a Bill for introduction to the Assembly.

The OFMDFM Committee will also have an opportunity to comment on the draft Bill prior to its introduction. The draft Bill will then progress through the Assembly. I affirm our commitment to delivering for older people and to ensuring that they are given a rightful place in our society.

Miss McIlveen has played a useful role in her engagement with Engage with Age, which held an event in the Long Gallery. She has, on a number of occasions, highlighted throughout the UK poverty issues that apply to older persons.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what approach her Department has taken to the reform of the common agricultural policy. (AQO 589/10)

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, and when, she will initiate a public consultation process with relevant stakeholders regarding the future of the common agricultural policy post-2013, similar to that in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 590/10)

12. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had

with her counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK regarding the future of the common agricultural policy post 2013. (AQO 600/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 2 and 12 together.

The future debate on the CAP is just beginning, with many issues of crucial importance to our industry up for discussion, particularly the size of the CAP budget and the future basis for the single farm payment. My officials held a meeting with stakeholders on 30 September 2009, at which the main issues likely to emerge from the next round of CAP reform were discussed. All those attending were asked to submit their views on further CAP reform to my Department.

I am keen to get the views of the industry, and I urge those who have not already responded to do so. Although there is a long way to go, the debate is getting under way. The Commission is expected to publish in mid-2010 a paper outlining its thinking. Legislative proposals are expected to follow in 2011, with the aim of reaching agreement in 2012. I will seek to hold formal consultations with stakeholders when the Commission's paper becomes available later this year and again in 2011, when the legislative proposals are made known. There will be plenty of opportunity for views to be made known to the Department.

The North/South Ministerial Council is proving to be a useful forum for discussing future CAP reform. We discussed the emerging issues at the last meeting on 18 November, when it was agreed that both Departments will continue to keep in close contact on those matters, which will certainly feature at future NSMC meetings.

There will be a meeting of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and devolved Ministers in the near future, and I assure Members that CAP reform will be on the agenda. DEFRA is well aware that I do not share its vision for future CAP reform, and I am considering making my own submission to the Commission when the proposals for CAP reform emerge.

We achieved a good outcome from the previous negotiation on the CAP health check, and I am committed to getting the best deal possible for farmers and the wider rural community across the North in the forthcoming CAP negotiations.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her answer. She well knows that my view is that ensuring support for agriculture in Northern Ireland should not compromise efforts at international development. Bearing that in mind, it is important that any consultation is not focused purely on the industry but takes in other sections of society.

In light of the question marks over the sustainability of the CAP, particularly following European enlargement, can the Minister assure me that, as well as arguing the case for farmers, she is preparing the ground to ensure that we rebalance our agriculture sector in the event that changes in the CAP are forced on us?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will do all that I can to resist the changes that the Member suggests might occur. Although DEFRA has a strong view on areas such as phasing out the single farm payment, it is neither my view nor the view of my colleagues in Scotland and Wales that that should happen, and it is certainly not the view of colleagues in the South of Ireland.

With regard to developing countries, it is important to remember that the CAP has been reformed over the years to make it less trade-distorting, which has been a key demand of developing countries. The introduction of the single farm payment, which is not linked to production, is an example of that. However, any WTO deal must be fair and reasonable for the agriculture sector, and the Member knows my views on that as well as I know his.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's response. What discussions, if any, has she had with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to address the post-2013 issues, given that we are on one island and that, in the past, we have had irregularities North and South about the way forward?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The CAP affects all farmers across the island of Ireland. Therefore, it makes sense for both Departments to co-operate closely on the issue. Given that farmers North and South have common interests, I am of the view that we should have frequent discussions on our policy approach.

On issues where there is agreement, there are opportunities to collaborate in attempting to influence the Commission's position, and I intend to use any avenue that is open to me in trying to get the best deal for farmers in the North. However, in every discussion that I have with the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, CAP reform is on the agenda, and we have frequently talked about how that affects farmers across the island of Ireland.

Mr P J Bradley: Is there any indication so far that the UK Government are willing to show sympathy for farmers in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Along with colleagues in Scotland and Wales, I will do my best to influence Westminster. At times, I feel sorry for English farmers because DEFRA's position is not very sympathetic to them. My Department, along with its counterparts in Scotland

and Wales, has a divergent view from that of DEFRA, and that is to the benefit of farmers.

A reform of the CAP is not widely supported across Europe, and the South, for example, is discussing its position on the CAP with other member states. DEFRA seems to be out of kilter with many of the other member states on the issue.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister think that it would be a mistake for the single farm payment to become a flat-rate system across the European Union?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Given that our average payment per hectare is slightly higher than the overall European average, the Department would need to carefully consider how that would be worked out. An analysis of the period from 2000 to 2002 forms the historic basis for the single farm payment, and the further we move away from that period, the less that analysis reflects our modern agriculture industry.

As the withdrawal of the single farm payment would have a negative impact on the industry here, my Department will argue against the DEFRA proposal and will seek to extend the single farm payment well into the future. Indeed, were it not for that payment, our farmers would not make any money; it makes the industry sustainable. Therefore, the Department will argue for the retention of the single farm payment, but it will examine a simpler and better way of paying it to farmers that will not necessarily be based on the historic rate. However, there is a long way to go, and much consultation must be had, and I want to hear the views of the industry during that process.

Cold Weather: Farmers

3. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support she will provide to farmers who are struggling with their crops and livestock due to the freezing weather conditions. (AQO 591/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The extremely bad weather, including the recent flooding in Fermanagh and the more recent freezing weather conditions across the North, has caused great inconvenience to people here. My thoughts are with everyone affected, and my heart goes out to farmers and those who live in rural communities who have suffered disruption. I could not get out of my driveway for a few days recently, and it really was a difficult period in which to be a rural dweller.

There are currently no Executive hardship payments or compensation schemes available to cover farmers' losses or the additional costs of feeding animals during severe weather. My Department is facing significant

financial resource pressures across the board. I have considered all avenues of financial support from Europe, including state aid and the European Solidarity Fund; however, those are not feasible in the circumstances. I will be making representations to Executive colleagues, and, if agreement can be reached and money found, I will direct officials to assess the damage that has been incurred.

My Department, through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise's development advisers, is available to provide technical support to farmers who are dealing with problems that have arisen because of the freezing weather conditions.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. Everyone will concur with her comments about the problems that are faced by the farming community in particular. However, will she confirm that the message that she is sending out to those who have suffered the extremes of weather over the past weeks and months is that no hardship payments are available from her Department's funds? Furthermore, some of the extreme weather was experienced several weeks ago, so why has the Minister not yet put in a bid to DFP to extract moneys to help those who have suffered? Why has the Minister delayed, given that those matters arose a number of weeks ago?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member is aware, my Department is facing significant financial resource pressures. Given that, I have no plans to consider making further hardship payments from the DARD budget. Following the exceptional flooding in August 2008, DARD assessed the damage to cereals, vegetable and potato crops. The cost of that damage was estimated at £1 million. I reported the findings to the Executive, and I secured one-off funding of £500,000 for flooding hardship in agriculture. The subsequent scheme provided hardship payments to those who were worst affected. When I announced those hardship payments, I made it clear that the measure was a one-off and that in future the industry would have to look to other means of addressing loss, such as insurance provision.

I know that the Member is looking for a cheap headline, but I am trying to benefit farmers. I know what the fiscal situation is across the board, and I have said that I will bring the matter to the Executive. However, there is a need to balance and manage expectations.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister agree that it is crucial that she does not delay getting the assessment made on farms, particularly when dealing with potato growers? Will she give an undertaking in the House that her officials will be sent to farms to make that assessment immediately, so that she can be helped to

build a stronger case to her Executive colleagues? Will she also raise with her Executive colleagues the wider issues that may arise, particularly, for example, in processing potato crisps and in getting supply here in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I appreciate the Member's question. As I said to the Member who spoke previously, there is a need to manage expectations. If I send officials to do the assessment, the expectation will be that the Department can make money available. If the Executive tell me that they can make a hardship payment available, we will do that. I do not want to raise people's hopes and say that such money will be available.

It is estimated that around 6% of the seed potato crop has not been harvested and that it may now be adversely affected by the recent weather conditions. Estimates indicated that around 10% to 15% of ware crops remain to be harvested. Harvesting of root crops — for example, carrots — has proved difficult, and crops may now be adversely affected. There may be some knock-on effect on processors. I visited Tayto a couple of years ago. If that company has problems getting raw materials, its representatives should speak to me. However, at this stage I am not hearing that from the company. At this stage, we know that there are the losses in those areas.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Although she answered a number of questions that I wanted to raise, one question has not been asked. What impact will the cold weather have on the prices that consumers pay for the crops that have been so severely affected over the winter period?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Although we are all consumers, in my role as Agriculture Minister I have to think about the prices that farmers get. There have been times when food prices have not reflected input costs. Therefore, although it is not in my gift to influence food prices, I keep a close eye on those prices and costs to ensure that there are no disparities between the two. There may be a slight increase in the price of some crops that have been affected by the weather. I am not saying that there will necessarily be such an increase, but my first priority is to ensure that farmers get a return on the crop that they have invested money into growing and producing.

Mr Shannon: There are great concerns about the amount of crops that will be lost to farmers. We all know the issues concerning cost, and the Minister knows those as well as anyone else, but I understand that the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have discussed making provision to help the farmers, regardless of whether they are involved with crops or

with stock. Can the Minister give the Assembly some indication of discussions she has had with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly to see how she can help in the way that they have?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have not held discussions with the Scottish or Welsh Ministers on that issue. Conditions were an awful lot worse in those areas, and I know that Members were watching the news reports over Christmas and hearing that temperatures in the Scottish Highlands were equivalent to those in the North Pole and that it was colder in Scotland than Siberia. Conditions were extremely bad in Scotland, and I expect that the Minister there will take that into consideration. Our conditions were bad, but, thankfully, we got off lightly compared with Scotland and other parts of Ireland.

EU Temporary Community Framework

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what representations she has made to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regarding the European Commission providing funds to farmers under the temporary crisis framework until the end of August 2010. (AQO 592/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: You entered the Chamber just in time to ask your question, Thomas. My Department has been in contact with DEFRA to confirm that no European Commission funding is available to farmers under the temporary community framework. The framework was adopted by the Commission on 17 December 2008 as a temporary measure to provide member states with additional possibilities within European state aid rules to tackle the effects of the current financial and economic crisis with their own resources.

Originally, the framework did not apply to farming, but it was modified on 28 October 2009 to allow member states to make one-off payments of up to €15,000 to farmers to address problems arising from the credit crunch. Any payments must be financed from the member states' own resources and can be made until 31 December 2010. Member states are required to notify their intention to avail themselves of the modification to the temporary community framework and obtain approval from the Commission. The notification must contain agriculture-specific data to demonstrate that the agriculture sector has been adversely affected by the current economic difficulties, and DEFRA is working on a notification on behalf of Britain and the North of Ireland.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister explain why the French and the Dutch

received approval to support their farmers by the end of 2009 but our farmers have had to wait? Is there any specific reason for that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, DEFRA is working on a notification, and, obviously, that has not yet been submitted to the Commission. We must understand that there are differences, and, although the euro exchange rate gain had a positive impact on the DEFRA figures, that will not have been the case for other member states.

DEFRA is having difficulty with the data and is trying to make a strong case. The notification is about asking for permission; no decision has yet been made on whether anything will come of that. If a decision were made in favour of granting that permission, the money would have to come out of our budgets. As I said earlier, this budgetary situation is extremely poor, and we have not been able to meet some pressures. The notification will be submitted, and, if permission is granted, we will take it from there.

Mr Kinahan: Given that DEFRA is working on an application on behalf of the UK, what assistance, whether in the form of guidance or expertise, is the Minister offering to her colleagues in London?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The most important information that I can provide them with is our figures. My officials are working with them on that.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can aid under the temporary framework be targeted at one particular sector? For example, could it be targeted at the beef sector?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No. The temporary framework requires member states to demonstrate that the measure is necessary, appropriate and proportionate to remedy a serious disturbance in the economy of the respective member state. The Commission considers that measures that are targeted at one subsector only are not likely to fulfil that condition.

Mr Speaker: The Member who was to ask question 5 is not in his place.

Better Regulation and Simplification Review

6. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will publish her action plan following the 'Better Regulation and Simplification Review'. (AQO 594/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Previously, I outlined that a review would take place of the 86 recommendations that apply to all areas of the Department's work with the agrifood

sector, including areas in which we apply European legislation.

Informal consultation ended on 30 September 2009, and it had been expected that the DARD response to that report could have been published in the autumn. That was delayed, however, because a substantial proportion of the recommendations require further investigation before they can be implemented and some present significant legal obstacles or involve disproportionate costs. Better regulation is still a clear priority for my Department, and I would expect the response to the review to be available by the end of March.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response. Those of us who live in towns fully appreciate the important role that farmers play in caring for the environment. However, will the Minister assure the House that there will be full co-ordination between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment to ensure a better deal for farmers and the environment?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We will be co-operating fully with each other. The majority of the recommendations were for DARD rather than DOE, but we will, obviously, work with DOE with a view to protecting farmers' livelihood and the environment. Farmers are keenly conscious about ensuring that what they do is not detrimental to land or water quality.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. Given that farmers have to abide by requirements for quite a number of inspections throughout the year and some are hit with three or four inspections, will the Minister assure the House that she will look seriously at the prospect of a single inspection regime as an outcome of the process?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member is aware, since the introduction of the single farm payment in 2005, my Department has worked to streamline its inspections process. At present, DARD inspectors undertake land eligibility and cross-compliance good agricultural and environmental condition requirements (GAEC) inspections in one visit. The inspections that are undertaken by the quality assurance branch on food and feed law go towards meeting Food Standards Agency targets. The cross-compliance inspections that are undertaken by vets help to meet other legislative targets set for cattle and sheep inspections. Those veterinary service visits cover a range of animal-related issues such as identification, registration, disease control and welfare.

I appreciate that that approach increases the number of individual visits. However, the way in which those inspections are divided means that it is unlikely that any farmer is being inspected for all land eligibility

and cross-compliance requirements. That reduces the amount of time that any farmer has to spend at inspections. My Department continues to monitor its approach and will consider further refinements where possible. Like the Member, however, I am keen that we keep inspections to a minimum and allow farmers to get on with what they do best.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In her update, the Minister mentioned certain legal elements. Will she assure the House that progress will continue unabated through to her target date, given that her previous answer suggested that there were some legal implications?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A total of 52 recommendations fall specifically to DARD, of which 35 are already identified and can be implemented. Indeed, many are already being implemented as ongoing developments within various work areas. Some 41 of the 85 recommendations require further investigation to identify the possibility for their introduction by DARD and/or other Departments. So far, nine recommendations are likely to be rejected for various reasons, including legal obstacles and disproportionate costs.

The informal consultation on the panel's review ended on 30 September 2009. My Department received three responses, which will be taken into consideration in the formal response to the review, which will be published in the coming months. We have done our best in the meantime to ensure that other areas of work — for example, the process for applying to the countryside management scheme or the farm modernisation programme — have been kept simple and effective to ensure that we are not introducing extra administrative or bureaucratic burdens on farmers but starting as we mean to go on.

Mrs D Kelly: There were two recommendations in the review on which I wish to focus. One was that there should be a charter of farmers' rights. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department intends to publish such a charter? The other was to reduce the administrative burden from £15 million to £10 million by 2013. Will the Minister be taking forward that recommendation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I prefer not to pre-empt the outcome of the review. We are looking at all the recommendations to see how we can bring them forward, but, if the Member asks me that question again after the review has been published, I will be happy to answer.

Dog Control Legislation

7. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress made

in bringing forward new legislation to deal with the problem of dangerous dogs and to improve wider dog control. (AQO 595/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I launched a public consultation on my proposals for changes to dog control legislation on 23 November last year, and on the same day in the Assembly I set out the background to those proposals and the issues that they seek to address.

The new dog control Bill will provide new control measures that will promote and support responsible dog ownership and will provide local councils with new tools to deal with irresponsible owners and problem dogs. Consultation on the proposals ends on 1 February 2010. The relevant documents, and information on how to respond, may be found on the Department's website.

As part of the consultation exercise, my officials are holding a series of public meetings this month to explain the proposals and to encourage stakeholders to respond. Last week, we hosted meetings in Armagh and Derry, and two further meetings will take place: the first tonight in the Killyhevlin Hotel in Enniskillen, and the second on Wednesday in the Ramada Hotel at Shaw's Bridge in Belfast. Further details of those events are on the DARD website. I got a wee plug in there for those events.

I encourage as many people as possible to submit their views on my proposals, and, following the completion of the public consultation, I will take into account all the responses before finalising my proposals and seeking agreement from the Executive to draft a new dog control Bill.

Ms J McCann: Will the Minister please outline the key elements of her proposals for change in the dog control legislation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is quite a bit to it. Among the proposals are the following: domestic dogs should be microchipped; the dog licence fee should rise to £12.50, with some concessionary rates, so that councils can recover more of the cost of providing dog warden services; certain fines and penalties should be increased; and councils should be allowed to retain the proceeds from fixed penalties to support the dog warden service, rather than handing the proceeds back to central government. Details of those proposals are set out in the consultation paper published on the Department's website.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister spoke of consultation with the public, but will she enlighten me as to what consultation she has had with the 26 councils?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I suppose that that is where we started.

One of the first things that I did in proceeding on the dog control legislation was to hold a very informative meeting to which the chief executives and dog wardens of all 26 councils were invited, so that we could get a good sense of what was important to them. They helped us to put together the framework. We then did further work with some of the chief executives. They were very much to the fore in developing this policy, and I thank them for the help that they have given me. They are the key people, working at the coalface, from whom we need to hear. We are very grateful for the help and support that they have given us.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for what she has said so far; it has been encouraging to hear it. I ask two specific questions. Will the consultation include the issue of problem behaviour versus banned breeds? Will the legislation focus on that?

I have previously identified a loophole in the legislation regarding dog-on-dog attacks as opposed to dog-on-livestock attacks, for which there is a more robust approach. Will that also be considered as part of the review and consultation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Dog-on-dog attacks are included in the consultation. We recognise that they are a problem. There is also a specific reference to dog attacks on guide dogs, and I had a bad experience when dealing with that issue in my constituency a number of years ago.

The Member also asked about banned breeds. I would retain the ban on dogs bred for fighting, as I firmly believe that it provides an important protection for the public, particularly children. Some have criticised the ban, but I agree with the stakeholders who claim that pit bull terriers are genetically equipped to be an instrument of torture and are bred to kill or be killed. They have, for example, a very high pain threshold and a powerful jaw structure developed specifically for fighting. The risks posed by the banned breeds are qualitatively much higher than for other dogs. Therefore, I believe that the ban must remain in place, as was proven by the two most recent attacks which led to the deaths of Ellie Lawrenson and John Paul Massey in Merseyside.

3.30 pm

Existing legislation provides an exemption from destruction for individual dogs of banned types if they are not considered to be a danger and if certain strict conditions are met. During the review, I heard concerns about the prolonged nature of the court proceedings required before an exemption can be granted and about how that can result in a dog spending a lengthy period in a dog pound, which may harm the dog concerned and place a sizeable cost on ratepayers. The new legislation, therefore, proposes to address those welfare and enforcement issues by streamlining the

current arrangements through a change in the law to permit councils to exempt dogs of a banned type if they are satisfied that the dog's behaviour gives no cause for concern, while using the licensing system to impose strict conditions on the dog and its owner.

Mrs M Bradley: If the proposals are implemented, how will the Minister ensure that responsible dog owners, especially those on a low income and older people, will not incur extra costs?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My proposals will put measures in place that ensure that that does not happen. First, there will be concessionary rates for dog licences. Secondly, compulsory microchipping of domestic dogs will mean that dogs can be traced back to their owners and kin. Responsible dog ownership is a common thread throughout all the proposals, and that is where we are trying to get to. We recognise that responsible dog owners should not be adversely affected. The legislation should, therefore, encourage more people who are not being responsible — for example, those who have dogs that are used to intimidate or harm other people — to become responsible.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Compulsory Voting

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in the Commonwealth of Australia; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to consider introducing similar rules for elections in the United Kingdom. — [*Mr Kinahan.*]

Mr Hamilton: Even though I take a contrary position to the motion, I value Mr Kinahan's contribution in proposing it. He took a thoughtful approach not only to the subject of compulsory voting but to participation in democracy in general. His opening remarks are worth reflecting on in that broader context, if not on the specifics of compulsory voting.

Although Mr Kinahan talked about compulsory voting for the electorate, he did not refer to compulsory voting for Members of the Assembly. I welcome today's motion from the Ulster Unionist Benches if that heralds a change in attitude by its Members to voting in the Chamber. Everybody who has considered the figures knows that the Ulster Unionist Party's record of voting in Divisions in the Lobbies of the House is pretty shameful in comparison with the record of other parties. There is a rich irony in the Ulster Unionist Party calling for the electorate to vote on a compulsory basis to elect Members to the Assembly, when its Members do not actually go through the Lobbies and represent their electorate during frequent Divisions on various issues in the House.

I am as forlorn as other Members about the habitual low turnout in elections right across the Western World. Constituencies east of the Bann such as mine regularly have, if not the worst turnout, the second or third worst turnout in Northern Ireland. I think of the sacrifice that people have made in the past, particularly during two world wars, when people fought to preserve and establish democracy or of people who put their lives on the line and made the ultimate sacrifice in Northern Ireland to ensure that, no matter what went on, we were able to express our democratic rights. When I see images of people in Iraq and Afghanistan, no matter about the circumstances of those conflicts, who, for the first time ever, have a free democratic right to vote and who put their life and limb at risk to do so, I get annoyed and irritated about the very low turnout in elections in Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: Since the Member had a jibe at the UUP, which I will deal with in my speech, will he offer any explanation about why the people of his constituency do not turn out to vote rather than just lamenting that? Does it have to do with the quality of candidates?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: I would have thought that the Member would have waited until Mr McNarry was here to have a go about the quality of candidates. That is an issue that he may want to take up with his colleague. I accept the point that there is an onus.

This is the crux of the matter: is it a right or is it a duty to vote? I err on the side of voting being a right. Although we all might get annoyed and irritated by very low turnouts, people have the right not to vote. That is their freedom, and clearly a large percentage of people choose to exercise that freedom. As Dr Farry said, I would much rather have a very serious and thoughtful engagement with an electorate who, having considered who they want to vote for, come out and actively participate, rather than force people to vote and them perhaps not using their vote in a sensible way.

There is an issue around whether we, as individual politicians, parties or the party political system itself, do enough to attract people to vote. That is something that we should all ponder. There is an obligation on us all, individually and collectively, to do more to engage the public in the democratic process.

The motion notes the "positive effect" that compulsory voting has had in Australia. However, I do not see Australia regularly being held up as a paragon of democratic virtue. Are we to believe that Australia is a better, brighter democracy than, for example, its neighbour New Zealand or, indeed, anywhere else in the world? The proposer said that everybody needed to be squeaky clean and whiter than white. However, I do not think that Australia is free from political scandal. Looking at every general election that there has been in Australia, even with compulsory voting, one can see that there are 5% of people who regularly do not vote.

As has been said by other Members, there are, perhaps, reasons to consider enforcing compulsory voting. However, there are people who say that, for religious reasons, they will not vote. Although I disagree with that point of view, in a society that has freedom of religion, are we to force those people to vote? I think that the 5% to 10% of people who do not vote will include a large percentage of vulnerable people. Are we to punish vulnerable people in society simply because they have not voted? The regular figure for non-participation in Australia is 5%, which equates to approximately 75,000 people in Northern Ireland. Who will pursue and who will pay for the pursuit of the 75,000 people who have not voted? That is why, in the very few countries that had or still have compulsory voting, a great many of them do not enforce it and a number have retreated from the position.

By all means, we should look at the ease of voting, the duration of voting, the method of voting, whether we use more modern technology and whether we change, alter or add to the locations in which people vote.

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

Mr Hamilton: However, I think that compulsory voting is an infringement of people's right not to vote as much as it has anything to do with encouraging people to vote.

Mr B McCrea: Questions have arisen as to why people do not vote and around the benefits of getting 100% of people to vote. I am really disappointed by the contribution from the Member who spoke previously, because it is cheap shots such as that which disillusion the electorate. On the one hand, some Members are saying that the motion is good and that they thank Mr Kinahan; on the other hand, others take cheap shots that are of no particular benefit. I expect more from Members, and I think that the electorate expect more.

When it comes to the issue of compulsory voting being fundamentally anti-democratic, some Members argued that people should not be forced to vote. However, there is an issue, which has not been brought up yet, around jury service. Jury service is compulsory because it is in our interests to make sure that it happens. In dealing with the issue of democracy, perhaps we need a fundamental review of what we mean by democracy. There was a time when we talked about first past the post being the best voting method; then we had STV, which does not necessarily bring forward the results that people expect and which many people do not understand. As we deal with the RPA, we even get into the issue of gerrymandering constituencies to get a particular result. All those issues bear discussion and proper, intelligent debate, and I thank Mr Kinahan for proposing a motion that allows us to do that.

Mrs Long: Does the Member concede that, although all those issues bear scrutiny, discussion and debate, compulsory voting does not address any of them?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I cannot concede that at the moment, but I am prepared to have the debate. It is right that we, as the body politic, should discuss all the options.

The rational argument for people not voting is that they think that one vote does make any difference, while going to a polling station to vote will have a cost. Therefore, the rational thought is not to vote. What I am saying is pure logic, so I am surprised that Mrs Long is shaking her head. If we do not get people responsibly involved in society, we all lose. That is the real issue.

How can the problem be addressed if we are not going to make voting compulsory? Obama was responsible for a huge surge in the uptake of the franchise. He did that by providing inspiration and enthusiasm, impressing the electorate, firing the

imagination and offering leadership, freshness and change. I challenge all the Members present: are we offering those things? Is Mr Hamilton offering those things? Are those the qualities that people see when they look in the Chamber and see Members reading party-prepared briefs with their head down, churning out the same old stuff? Does that really inspire people to change and to vote? Do people look at the Chamber and say, "Thank goodness those 108 people are up there looking after our interests"? The disdain in which people hold this institution does not bear thinking about.

At least Mr Kinahan had the courage to offer a possible solution. If implemented, I suspect that his proposal would provoke a response. People might say that they would not vote for any —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Sorry, I have already taken an intervention.

Mr Kinahan's proposal would provoke a response and engage people in the democratic process, and that would be a good thing.

All the research shows that one important driver in making people vote is whether their neighbours know whether they voted. Many Members will have had sight of the marked register. That causes alarm to many people who ask, "You know whether I vote or not?" We do not know how people have voted, but we could consider publishing the list. Why hide it? We all have it. We could publish the register. Voting would be entirely up to the individual, but people would know whether he or she did so.

I listened to Members saying that they agree with the idea of increasing the franchise and getting people out to vote but that they are not sure that compulsory voting is the right way to do that. I think that that was the point that Naomi Long put to me. She said that compulsory voting would not address the points that I raised. Maybe we need to have a proper debate on the issue. Maybe other Members will table motions asking how we can improve the reputation of this place and how we can repair the damage that has been done by the expenses scandal and other issues. If Members table such motions, there will be something to talk about.

So that Mr Kinahan does not walk into the Aye Lobby on his own and because he has brought a really important issue to the House for debate, I will vote with him. I ask other Members to vote with him to show that they have brains and will support an innovative stance.

3.45 pm

Mr Attwood: As John Dallat outlined, the SDLP opposes the motion, although it has sympathy with its sentiment. One thing that we should discuss is lowering the voting age to 16 years. That acute issue is worthy

of conversation and of our trying to convince other parties of in order to move forward. As I said, my party has sympathy with the motion and with the sentiment expressed by Mr Kinahan. As he said in his opening remarks, there are more than enough reasons, including those of current vintage, why people may be alienated from politics, especially in the North.

Mr Kinahan, rightly, referred to the suffragette movement's struggle for the female franchise. However, this issue is much closer to home. Our community in the North has engaged for many decades in a proud struggle to deal with issues of democracy: the campaign for "one person, one vote"; the campaign to stop vote stealing; and the campaign to stop double and triple registration. However, more than anything else, hundreds of thousands of people from all sides of this island have waged a campaign to resist the anti-national and anti-democratic efforts of people in government and in illegal organisations to use threats and terror. This island, especially this part of it, has a proud history of asserting the requirements of democracy, including the opportunity to vote.

Although the debate has narrowed in on compulsory voting, we must acknowledge that all our communities have — it may be more acute in the nationalist community — a deep culture of democratic participation. Regardless of the levels of participation in elections, there is a proud tradition and culture of wider participation. Although we may be upset that people do not exercise their right to vote, we should be proud that many people participate in their communities.

The credit union movement originated in the nationalist community as a result of the initial efforts of John Hume and others. That has spread, and credit unions are now being run or assisted by the marching Orders. That movement provides good examples of people's involvement in community life in a way that deepens participation and democracy. That is apparent in the various sporting organisations to which many Members belong, particularly the GAA. Such organisations are an essential element of people's participation in their communities and are an outworking of democracy in its fullest sense. Therefore, we should be careful to balance our disappointment at the numbers who vote against the numbers who participate in many other ways to maintain stability and to develop our society.

I agree that it might be more productive to have a conversation about ways to increase voting. Sinn Féin suggested the use of mobile polling stations, and Simon Hamilton suggested the use of new technology. Other Members suggested voting on Friday or Saturday, as is the case in the South. However, we should not ignore the elephant in the room: what will really motivate people to be involved in our political parties and in politics? The principles that underpin

how we conduct our political affairs must be right, and our systems of government must be ethical and must have an ethical way of dealing with the past. Moreover, when the people of Ireland vote in a democratic way for political inclusion, we must not go down the road of exclusion from government. When we have devolution, we must make it work properly. Those are the real standards and tests against which we should be judged.

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

Mr Attwood: The community will judge us on whether those standards and tests deepen our democracy.

Lord Browne: I oppose the motion that we consider compulsory voting in the United Kingdom. Before I explain my reasons for opposing it, I want to make it clear that I am no less concerned than the proposer of the motion and his supporter Mr McCrea about the continuing decline in participation in the democratic process in the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland, over the past 20 years.

It has been suggested that the disappearance of a clear distinction between left and right in politics is part of the explanation, but that is not an important factor here. Voting fatigue because of the numerous elections that we have here is a much more important factor. Be that as it may, I am convinced that compelling the electorate to vote is not an appropriate remedy.

Over the past 20 years, and particularly since the Labour Government took office in 1997, the freedoms of the ordinary British citizen have been continuously circumscribed and eroded. In some circumstances, those restrictions on freedom may be unavoidable: obviously, the activity of violent and fanatical terrorist organisations cannot be tolerated. However, I believe that unnecessary restriction on the freedom of speech in the name of political correctness represents a very dangerous authoritarian tendency.

Another example of the growing intrusion of the state into the private lives of individual British citizens can be found in health and safety legislation. I know that many of us have read about the health and safety officers who, in order to prevent the over-consumption of salt, confiscated salt cellars from fish-and-chip shops and replaced them with appropriate salt shakers that had fewer holes in them, at the considerable cost to the taxpayer of some £2,000. Presumably, customers simply shook the new shakers for a longer time.

Does anyone in the Chamber really believe that placing further restrictions on individual liberties will encourage the people of Northern Ireland to realise that the right to vote is, indeed, a privilege to be cherished and utilised? I fear that, instead, non-participating voters would resent the Government's

authoritarian attempt to dictate how they should use any free time that they have on an election day to play golf, for example, or go to a restaurant. It is a sad fact that people only appreciate their right to participate in elections when that right is taken away from them.

I can accept many of the points that were made by the proposer and his supporter about attracting people to vote. They made useful suggestions, for instance, about how young people might be persuaded to vote. We should re-examine postal voting and consider the siting of polling stations in more accessible locations such as supermarkets.

The debate has been useful, because it has opened up discussions —

Mr Weir: I have some sympathy for people who say, for example, that we should try to make polling stations more accessible, but I am not convinced that that is at the root of the problem. All parties have had experience of taking elderly people to the polling stations — people who are very determined to exercise their democratic right but have physical difficulty in getting in — only to see people who live next door to the polling station but do not bother to vote. There may be ways to increase the availability of voting methods, but I wonder whether the key problem is the willingness of people to vote rather than the availability of polling.

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

Lord Browne: We must examine all the ways in which we can encourage people to play a more active part in the democratic process. As politicians, we must accept some of the blame for the apathy of a sizeable proportion of the electorate. We all have a duty to encourage active involvement by all sections of the electorate. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that compulsion is the right approach. We should encourage people to vote, not coerce them.

Ms Purvis: I thank Mr Kinahan for proposing the motion. The debate is worth having, particularly as we consider the political situation in Northern Ireland and our struggles to make this relatively new democratic system one that encourages the participation of everyone who lives here.

The motion asks us to note:

“the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in ... Australia”.

I know that there are those who think that Australia offers a positive model for democratic participation, but there are many who do not agree. There are those who view compulsory voting as anti-democratic because it inhibits the right of voters to vote with their feet. I do not agree. I think that the contribution of all people in Northern Ireland is vital, and it is worth looking at all options that would support that.

There has been much discussion recently about community confidence and its influence on whether and how the Assembly will fully function. If confidence is to be a determining factor, that raises the question of whether we have confidence that the electoral mandates currently at play in this Chamber truly represent the wishes of the entire adult population of Northern Ireland. Can we really assume that a political party truly carries a mandate when only a fraction of the population shows up at an election? At least one of the successful candidates in the recent European election was very confident about the mandate that they carried, even with a voter turnout of less than 43%. That is worse than any American election.

When voter participation declines, it is typically those whom the Government need to hear from most who walk away from voting first. Voter turnout is already unequal among socio-economic groups. People who are more affluent, older and have more access to education are more likely to vote. That is great news for those who are already participating in the electoral process; their participation is to be encouraged and supported. However, the other side of the equation — those who do not participate in the democratic process — is a cause for concern. It is not possible to look at the Assembly and say that the needs and opinions of young people are well represented here.

The diversity situation is equally bad. Women make up the majority of the population in Northern Ireland but are not represented in the Chamber. The answer to these questions lies predominantly with the parties, although the electorate may have their own thoughts. A compulsory system of voting might create the opportunity for the electorate to make clearer demands on what they want the Assembly to do and who they want in it.

We are all complicit in an environment where electoral turnout is steadily declining. We know that, when politics gets ugly, it affects the voters. Voters who respond to fear, anger or discord are motivated to turn out and vote. The same environment has the opposite effect on more moderate voters, who look at dysfunctional politics, think that it has nothing to do with them and stay at home. It is easy to end up with a voting result that more heavily reflects the motivation of angrier voters than that of more moderate voters.

There are a few options that could address that. The first is for political parties to stop using fear as a communication and voter-mobilisation tactic. However, old habits die hard, and I am not holding my breath. Another option is to find new motivators and a system that is supportive of all voters, so that those who think that politics is not for them know that it is and that their voices need to be heard. A system of compulsory voting may be the way to do that.

As regards the right not to vote, I have always thought that the best way to send a “none of the above” message to the politicians and candidates is to show up and make one’s feelings clear on the ballot paper. Some of the most insightful political statements that I have ever read have been scrawled across ballot papers. An official record of dissent or disillusion is worthwhile. I thank Mr Kinahan for raising the issue. I support the motion.

Mrs Long: I had not originally intended to participate in the debate, but, having listened to the tone of it, I decided that I would. I am slightly concerned that the motion talks about the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in the Commonwealth of Australia. I am not aware of any facts or figures that would suggest that to be the case. I am not aware that there is less political cynicism in Australia, that levels of corruption are lower or that transparency in the process is any greater. Nor am I convinced that interest and engagement in the political system is any greater. It is true that the number of people who come out to put a mark on a ballot paper is greater, but one does not equal the other. I am concerned about the comparison that was drawn between two slightly different things.

4.00 pm

There was discussion about whether voting is a duty or a right, which was something of a false debate. Voting is both a duty and a right. First and foremost, voting is a right. It is important that we ensure that people have an opportunity to cast a vote and influence the system to the degree that one vote can. No one can expect to turn the tide of an election by going out to vote when thousands of other people are doing the same, so a degree of realism is required. However, as one of a number of other people who vote, an individual can certainly have an impact on the system. We need to encourage people to recognise that the public can change the debate during an election campaign. They can move an issue on according to how they vote, and the opportunity to vote thereby enables people to exert influence.

Voting is not only a right. Like every other right, it comes with a responsibility. The right to vote comes with the duty that it is exercised responsibly. In a number of elections, I have seen marks made on the paper that are nothing to do with voting for individuals and have more to do with lampooning the candidates. A system that compels people to turn up at a polling station and perhaps do something frivolous is not particularly helpful, nor does it encourage a culture of responsible exercise of franchise. I would prefer people to be engaged with the system. People should be able to vote, and it is an important right.

I agree with Mr Attwood that the right to vote should be extended to anyone who is eligible to pay

tax or join the Army. Once people reach the age of 16, they should have the right to exercise their vote, whether or not they choose to do so. However, that belief is a long way from thinking that people should be compelled to turn up to vote. There are practical things that we could do to improve the situation. For example, registration could be made simpler. The registration process in Northern Ireland seems to be in constant flux. People do not know whether they need to register more or less frequently because the system keeps changing, and that is unhelpful.

We also need to make it easier for people to have the right ID. There have been instances of people who are qualified to vote in an election turning up at a polling station but being refused on the grounds that their passport from another Commonwealth country was not a valid piece of identification. Despite the fact that the Electoral Office held their names on the register and had accepted their right to vote as a citizen of that country, their ID from that Commonwealth country was not regarded as valid proof of their identity. Polling stations could be made more accessible, and absentee voting could be made easier to give people who cannot get to a polling station a better opportunity to vote.

Those are all valid measures that could be taken to make the voting process easier. However, I am not sure that people getting to the polling station and marking the paper is the biggest barrier. The biggest barrier is lack of interest. Some Members have characterised that lack of interest as a sign of people's disillusionment with politics, but there is more to it than that. One could say that the people whom we, as elected representatives, hear from most are those who are most disillusioned with the system. People are far more likely to come out to complain than to affirm the position of someone with whom they agree.

It is hard to know what does and does not motivate people to come out to vote. However, I have no doubt that the perception that politicians do not respond to the issues that are raised, that they do not listen and that they do not engage with people honestly and openly is likely to be a turn-off to the political system. It is not only how we engage with our constituents that makes a difference; how we engage with one another is also important. Fundamental to that is the politicking, which people either see or hear on the airwaves, when watching proceedings in the Chamber or when we are out and about in our constituencies.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs Long: I suspect that the biggest disincentive comes when we are petty with one another and when we are seen to be immature in our engagement with one another.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Long: Simply making people mark a piece of paper will not help to change that.

Mr Kinahan: I want to start by congratulating all the people who vote; they get involved and listen. I enjoyed listening to the debate, even though most Members expressed opposition to the main principle of the motion. Many Members focused too much on the word "compulsory". Encouraging a debate was part of what I wanted to do today, and a debate is exactly what has taken place. There are many things that we could do much better.

I would love there to be a vote on the motion. Some Members are watching and, I hope, listening to the debate through the screens in their rooms. I appeal to those who support me to get down here so that we can make a lot of noise at the appropriate time, which will be at the end of the debate.

Mr Shannon: The same goes for those who intend to vote against the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I thought that you might say that. I am really focusing on the fact that I think that there is an awful lot of lack of interest — that is appalling English from me. There is too much happening in society that allows people to switch off and not become involved. For all of us, the world is getting busier and busier and busier, and we do not have enough time. On voting day, some may be deterred by a fear of getting stuck in the snow or because they have to pick up their child. It has been made too easy not to vote, and that is what motivated my use of the word "compulsory".

One or two Members asked what punishment I would like to apply to non-voters. I do not wish there to be any punishment. I want some kind of carrot to be used to encourage people to vote. Members should concentrate on all the other matters that I raised, and many Members also raised them. The nature of voting is one of many matters that must change. As politicians, we must do better. The Electoral Commission must consider different ways of voting and get the debate up and running. That would allow us to decide how to persuade people to vote. Perhaps voting could run over two days or mobile and electronic voting could be introduced. There are so many different ways in which we could improve the system.

I return to an earlier point on which no Member picked up. Everywhere in Northern Ireland, including in companies and businesses, there is a culture of not being political. Politics has changed enormously to be where it is now, and I congratulate everyone involved in getting us this far, but we need people to discuss their views and become involved. I view compulsory voting as one of the necessary cogs in achieving that.

As I said earlier, I have met many people who simply say that they do not vote or are not interested in voting. Even some of the students at a marine lecture that I attended asked me how they could get their points across. Other than me, not one politician was there. I told the students that to get their points across they had to become involved. I told them to choose a party and join it. They looked at me in absolute horror. We must be better politicians and make it more attractive for people to become involved.

I also reiterate the point that we need all schools to become involved. They should not teach politics only to the politics students. They should teach all children about how politics works. Perhaps people would not then view it as onerous to be told that it was compulsory to go to the voting booth.

Some 500,000 people did not vote in the last Assembly election. The number of non-voters was more than two and a half times higher than the number who voted for the party that came first and more than 22.5 times higher than the number of voters for another party. I ask Members to think about that: an awful lot of people simply do not get to the polling booth for various reasons. That is why I said that we should go for compulsory voting. Let us open up the debate and keep it going.

Members raised various points. Mr Ross said that people should have the right to be uninterested in politics. I agree, but I want people to vote even if it is for "None of the above". It is too easy not to vote. In Northern Ireland, where voting is so important to making this place work and getting people involved, I would like to see people going to the polling stations. Once there, they can show their lack of interest, but at least they will have got there.

A debate was held in Europe on whether compulsory voting could be legal. It was decided that it would be legal as long as people were compelled only to go to the polling booth. People would not be forced to vote because they could spoil their voting slips.

Although Mr Doherty said that the introduction of compulsory voting would be premature, much of what he said was in support of debate as the way forward. I felt that same support in everything that all Members said. Every Member wants more people to vote and become involved.

Mr Dallat gave something of a political broadcast on certain matters, but I knew where he was coming from. I take his point that we must ensure that young people become involved so that they do not go down the terrorist route. I also take the Member's point that we must relate to people. It is the knocking on doors, meeting people on the ground, talking to them and being open that really creates an interest.

I like the idea of compulsory attendance in the Chamber. However, even in my new role here, I have realised that there are so many other things that we try to do. As long as we have it on television in our rooms, we are taking part. I did not like the slightly cheap shot that Mr Hamilton took in relation to our party not voting. We have hardly been included in the Executive; why should we vote if we are not included? I want things here to work much better. Every party should work together. If all of us have smiles on our faces and work together, the people watching and listening will start taking an interest and getting involved.

Mr Long: The Member questioned why his party should vote when it has not been included fully in the Executive. Is that not contradictory to an argument that people outside who, equally, feel that politics is not responsive, should be compelled to vote?

Mr Kinahan: I did not quite follow the question. There are very much two sides to the issue. I want to see people being forced to vote. Forcing them may be the wrong thing to do, but we are focusing on the wrong issue. There is nothing wrong with encouraging people to do something that is slightly onerous — and it is just slightly onerous. We have to encourage them, engage with them and make the process interesting.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I will lose my way completely, but by all means.

Mr Weir: A lot of us want to see people being encouraged, but compelling people to vote is where the problem lies. Mention was made earlier of how some people have disdain for this place. Simply having disdainful voters being compelled to vote would not remove the disdain. That is where we should target our attention.

Mr Kinahan: I agree. It is about how people are compelled. I want to go for the carrot system, but I go back to my point: we all have to work together on this issue.

Dr W McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that his colleagues did not vote because they are not participating fully in the Executive. However, the Members who are also Members at Westminster are not participants in the executive there, but they go to vote. They vote on the issues.

Mr Kinahan: I did not really want to get sucked into a petty argument about who votes and who does not. I see where the Member is coming from, but I will not get into the issue any more. I could go down other routes and talk of double-jobbing and other matters, but we could get into lots of things —

Dr W McCrea: Did Basil help you?

Mr Kinahan: Of course he helped me. He is a very good colleague.

I do not want to get buried in other matters. I wanted to get everybody debating the issue and thinking about new ways of moving forward. We have concentrated completely on the compulsion side of the argument, which is the wrong issue. As my colleague suggested, one has to do jury service. People have to wear seatbelts and smoke outside buildings. There are lots of things that many of us do not like, but that does not stop us from being forced to do them. I want to see us all making an effort to get this institution working much better. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and negatived.

Crisis in the Executive

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

4.15 pm

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the large number of critical issues that the Executive have failed to resolve; expresses deep concern about the consequences for good governance, the economy and public services; and calls on the Executive to meet their responsibilities and to act in a collective manner for the good of Northern Ireland.

“Crisis in the Executive” is now a very well worn phrase that hardly raises an eyebrow any more. Even so, by any yardstick, the events of the past few days have raised that crisis to new heights. However, I do not intend to mention any aspect of those events, except to say that one of the critical issues to which the motion refers is the proposed transfer of policing and justice powers. That is an ongoing topic that is causing high drama in and around this place.

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

Speaking of this place, I am sure that when I and many others were elected for the first time in 2007, I was not the only one to arrive here, in the wake of the St Andrews Agreement, with hopes raised and the expectation that we were here to do business. We expected to be involved, either as part of the coalition Government or as a constructive opposition, in moving forward legislation to deal with necessary minor matters and to tackle the major issues that have plagued and divided this country for years, such as education, the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) shared future strategy, or the issues that have arisen more recently, such as the Maze stadium, the review of public administration (RPA) and policing and justice.

I do not intend to be too negative. Let us acknowledge that the Executive have managed to progress some legislation. Indeed, I recall recently that one of our Ministers, I believe that it was Peter Robinson, pointed out that the Executive had agreed more decisions in its first two years than the previous Ulster Unionist and SDLP coalition. Frankly, so what? We in Northern Ireland are fond of polls. I wonder what the population would come up with if it were asked to name the major achievement of the Assembly. The answer may be the fact that we are still here.

Outside of Budget decisions and entirely non-contentious matters, what has been achieved? I recently submitted a question for written answer requesting that OFMDFM provide an example of a

major issue on which the Executive had made progress. The answer came back:

“It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.”

I thought that the frost was on the ground for the past month.

My colleague Mr McCarthy has brought it to my notice that no Minister will respond to the debate. A junior Minister was here, but he has disappeared. I am disappointed with that, because I had hoped that a Minister would loosen up a wee bit and come up with something fresh that we do not know or tell us that some progress is being made.

I will look at the major issues that have been mentioned, starting with policing and justice. That power was removed from an Ulster Unionist-dominated government back in the 1970s and is now available to the Executive. The transfer of policing and justice is now being resisted by unionism and supported by nationalists, who, at the time, were delighted by its removal. Republicans who fought a war against the RUC now sit on the Policing Board. Things have moved on.

Unionist resistance is now founded on the dubious premise that there is not sufficient community confidence. That is another well worn phrase; perhaps somebody could define it. I challenge any unionist to do so in the debate and to identify how they decide how community confidence is not sufficient or when it will be.

As far as we are concerned, the same confidence that put the Assembly and the Executive together should be sufficient to sustain the transfer of those important powers. It is time to do the deal and for the Executive to take a collective decision. If that means a few defections to the extreme, so be it. We will never have mature democracy here without local control over justice and policing, irrespective of who is appointed the Minister responsible.

I will move on to the matter of the Maze stadium. At least Executive paralysis did not prevent a decision, even a patently wrong one. Instead of realising the dream of having a multi-sports, shared stadium as the anchor of the most significant development in Northern Ireland's history, we got a craven decision to dribble taxpayers' money into clapped-out separate stadiums and to investigate other, totally vague ways to utilise 350 acres of land gifted to the Executive.

We are told that cost was the reason for that, but I do not believe it. That decision was due, plainly and simply, to the Executive's failure to agree on the proposal for a conflict transformation centre. There is not much unionist confidence there.

What about the review of public administration? The future of that costly but necessary reform hangs by a thread. Will the Executive make a collective decision before time runs out? The clock is ticking. The Executive can move forward boldly, or they can procrastinate again and log in another costly failure.

I shall move on to education. “It's all about the children”, but, plainly, it is not all about the children. It is about entrenched views, political dogma, elitism, socialism, inequality, 50,000 empty desks, four different systems, political control and a load of other factors, but the needs of children are way down the list.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that what has happened in education is an indictment of the Assembly's performance? I remember, as will other Members, that during the Assembly's first meeting, the former First Minister Ian Paisley said that our children are our best asset and that we must work to provide better things for them. What has happened since then completely contradicts those words.

Mr Lunn: I think that that was before my time, Mr Speaker. However, at some time, every party has parroted the phrase “It's all about the children”, which, although she is fond of using it, is not under the exclusive control of the Minister of Education.

Is it really true that the Executive have not discussed education for two years? We do not get minutes or notes; indeed, the press gets more information than we do. The impression is that there has been a stand-off for two years due to the transfer impasse and due to concerns about the establishment of the education and skills authority. Is there a way that I am not aware of to end an impasse, or will the Executive collectively step up to the mark and meet their responsibilities?

I have tried not to shine a light on any particular party. The Executive are a collective body, and the failures that I have mentioned are the result of their corporate inability to make progress. As I said, we do not get minutes or notes from Thursday meetings, if, indeed, they actually take place. Sometimes, they appear not to happen. It would be easy to be more explicit, to rely on rumour and gossip or to make accusations about who is responsible. Therefore, the motion asks the Executive:

“to meet their responsibilities ... for the good of Northern Ireland.”

Two and a half years is long enough to establish confidence and trust among Executive colleagues. We are being left behind by the electorate and, instead of refusing to talk, it is time for the Executive to lead. If they do not talk about the major issues at those meetings, what on earth do they talk about? I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Members should note the motion's reference to:

"the large number of critical issues that the Executive have failed to resolve".

That wording is unfortunate, because any objective and honest assessment must acknowledge that, on a day-to-day basis, the Executive are functioning and, on an ongoing basis, Ministers and Departments are addressing issues and delivering effective governance. There are issues that have defied resolution, but the motion is presented in such a way that, in effect, it plays to the agenda of those in the media who undermine public confidence in politics. "The fools on the hill" is a constant refrain, and we have all the pejorative rhetoric that we read in the press.

We know about the attitude of dissident elements — unionist and republican — in our society and about their ambitions for this place. I do not include the Alliance Party as one of those elements, but there are some Members with a similar attitude; they do not accept the Assembly's basic principles and they do not want it to work.

Although it is self-evident, given the agenda that I have described, it appears that it is necessary for Members to say more often than we do that the vast majority of issues that present themselves to the Executive are addressed and delivered on. There are issues — more than I am comfortable with — that, so far, have defied us.

However, we need to acknowledge that many problems have been solved, considering that we have come from a society that was riven with conflict, division, murder and mayhem right across the region. Some of those problems were described by others as intractable, and some claimed that it was impossible to find a resolution to them. We have not solved all our problems, but I recognise, indeed wholeheartedly acknowledge, that the Alliance Party wants the system to work.

The motion is deficient for the reasons that I have described, and I am disappointed that it was presented in such a way. I would have had no difficulty if it had focused on the issues that remain and how the Assembly can deal with them. I am convinced that those issues, with an acceptance of the principles of power sharing and equality, will provide solutions to all those problems. However, some issues will take longer than others to resolve, and some have been built up into problems. Indeed, we must reflect on some of the issues that we have addressed in the process that brought us here over the past decade and a half and ask why we made it so difficult for ourselves. We should unlearn the tendency to build barricades and then have to climb over them. It is something that all shades of political opinion have

become good at. A tendency to look for solutions rather than problems would be a big help.

People talk about the mandatory four-party coalition when it is no such thing; it is entirely a voluntary decision for a party to offer itself for an Executive position. A party can refuse to accept such a position. However, it cannot accept an Executive position and then argue that it is in some way semi-detached; or accept a position while rejecting power sharing and maintaining that it had no option under law but to accept an Executive position. That is wrong; it did have an option.

The message from the mandates that parties received when they came here is that the public wants this place to work in a more cohesive fashion than we have achieved up to now. However, despite the obvious problems and crisis, which is a good word, when dealing with the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we should reflect on the problems that have been solved to enable us to reach this point. That would reinforce the view that even those problems that are challenging us today can and will be resolved.

I ask the movers of the motion to consider carefully whether they want to divide the House at this time.

Mr B McCrea: My speech is critical of the Alliance Party. I intend to keep it on the table while I engage in politics and have a discussion. There are a number of points that I wish to raise. Mr Lunn outlined many issues, such as not getting information from the Executive and not getting any participation, but those are the points that our party has been making for some time. I want to say in non-confrontational terms that the position that the Alliance Party has adopted is strange on a number of areas.

It is not for me to tell the Alliance Party what its policy is, but, as a colleague, I had certain expectations about how the party of what used to be called "the centre ground" might try to work together and play a stabilising role. A good question was asked about what we have achieved in this place; the answer was that very little had been achieved. In fact, the answer came back from Mr Maginness, *sotto voce*, that we are still here. However, if you asked the people of Northern Ireland, I am not sure whether they would consider that an achievement. It may be that the relative absence of violence is an achievement and that we have an opportunity to move forward. I am not sure that people believe that the Assembly's contribution aids that.

4.30 pm

I listened with interest to Mr McLaughlin from Sinn Féin. Although this is difficult to say, I have said it before. I cannot say it behind closed doors, because no one talks to us, and, therefore, I must say it in the open. When people look for reciprocation, when they talk about respect or when they misunderstand a

position, it is incumbent on other people to try to explain where there is an issue and where problems lie. Therefore, I acknowledge Mr McLaughlin's point. In fact, I have made the same argument: if the Assembly does not stand up collectively to slay the lies about fools on the hill and does not speak up for itself, who will speak up for it? The Assembly has achievements and has made progress. However, the central issue appears to be lost. Unless everybody agrees and all views are taken on board, nothing will work or be sustainable.

The point has been made about policing and justice, which is germane to the debate, that two parties are expected to have a discussion and then come back and tell others what they must do. In that situation, the Alliance Party's Mr Ford, the self-appointed leader of the opposition — for years, he told the Assembly that he did not support the Programme for Government, the sectarian nature of politics here, the way in which the Assembly does business and so on — now does his level best to become the next Minister for justice. He has voted with the DUP and Sinn Féin on double-jobbing and all sorts of other issues, which, frankly, I find surprising.

The issue of consistency has been raised. It has been asked whether Members genuinely want the Assembly to work. I make no bones about it when I say that I believe in devolution. I believe in this place and in the bona fides of all Members, who come from different traditions and hold different points of view yet try to do the best that they can for all Northern Ireland's people. I believe in that, which is why I find it irritating and disrespectful for people to say that the Ulster Unionist Party is sectarian. My party is not sectarian. To suggest otherwise is derogatory.

Therefore, on the issue that is being debated, I take the opportunity to say to Members from the Alliance Party that Members to their left and to their right in the Chamber are trying to find a constructive way forward. It would be better for them to work with us rather than to take cheap political opportunities that they believe may give them electoral advantage at some stage.

Mrs Long: When Mr McCrea says that the Alliance Party should “work with us”, does he mean all the Executive parties or just the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for the extra minute that has been added to my time. When I say “us”, I mean those of us who are here. In fact, “us” is fairly weak. The Member's colleague Mr Lunn usually pulls me up to ask who exactly is “we” and who is “us”. I refer to all Members who want this place to move forward constructively. I assure the Member that the Ulster Unionist Party will respond constructively when it is given the opportunity to do so. Where we

have difficulties, they are genuine. The Member may not agree with them or even understand them. Only through dialogue can progress be made.

I will finish by saying that my party will support the motion, because it does not believe that the Executive are working properly. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to find a better way to move forward.

Mr O'Loan: It would certainly be easy to score many political points in the debate and to point to failures. Although it might be valid to do so, it would not be particularly useful. Would it make the situation any better?

Duncan Morrow, the chief executive of the Community Relations Council, remarked to me once that everybody in Northern Ireland basically agrees on what the problem is: it is “them”. Although we may think that we are broad-minded, we all carry that baggage to some extent.

Recently, Breda O'Brien, a columnist for ‘The Irish Times’, wrote about her involvement in a broadcast debate on abortion. She deeply opposed the views of another person who took part in the debate. They contradicted each other seriously during the programme. Afterwards, when they were discussing the role of the family in modern society and the issues facing young people, they found that they agreed on a lot of points. Subsequent to that, she made a new year's resolution to try to understand better those who, on the face of it, disagreed with her. I think that we can learn something from that.

It is clear that the Assembly has lost track and that people think that it has not delivered on their behalf. We know that from talking to people, and opinion polls have tested that well. I will mention a few areas of obvious weakness. I do not mean to do so in any spirit of recrimination but in the hope that we will learn some lessons and, in the end, find ways of going forward in a better way.

In education, the failure to deliver a transfer system is an item that, on its own, would have brought down anything that we would call a normal government. It also looks as though we might be coming to a solution on justice and policing because it serves a narrow political interest to do so, and there is a potential fear that the actual design might be put there because it serves a narrow political interest. With regard to the economy, there is no sense of getting off the ground. There is a constant atmosphere of cuts and crisis in relation to our Budget. Therefore we have a problem, and it is a big one.

The Good Friday Agreement states:

“we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.

We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.”

The Agreement also states that all the institutional and constitutional arrangements are interlocking and interdependent. That is aspirational and practical. There is a visionary element to it, but there is also a complex system of checks, balances and protections, and that system of checks and balances can be used to achieve the vision. Is that what we see in the working-out of our government? I think that it is not. I think that much has been lost. We lost a lot of the letter of the Good Friday Agreement at St Andrews, and then, later and, perhaps, before, we lost much of the spirit. Have we that sense of partnership in the Executive? I do not think that the public are seeing that.

There are a great deal of back-room deals going on between the two largest parties. Back-room deals are not wrong in themselves, but there are things wrong about them. First, for the most part, it is the largest parties who are involved in those back-room deals, and there is little consideration for other parties in the Executive and for the wider Assembly. Secondly, the deals are very much based on, “One for you, and one for me”. An attempt is being made before our eyes to create what has been described as a shared-out society, not a truly shared society. Is that working? The consequence that we can see before our eyes is that it is not working. There is no coherent strategy, and we end up lurching from crisis to crisis. One might ask whether there is an alternative, and there is. Just as the upcoming financial crisis could be used to our betterment, we could do some valuable rethinking, or, to put it better, we may be forced to do some valuable rethinking from which we may benefit. That is true also in relation to our governance.

I ask that Members be humble enough to learn from the failures of the past three years. There is a fundamental question being asked about where the Assembly is placed and how it may move forward. I ask that we go back and put in place the totality of the Good Friday Agreement in its letter and in its spirit.

Mr Hamilton: I am intrigued that we are debating a motion headed “Crisis in the Executive”, because, on 4 January, David Ford, the leader of the Alliance Party, issued a statement saying that the week beginning on that day was the last week in which a crisis in Stormont could be averted. However, at the same time, a motion headed “Crisis in the Executive” had been tabled. It was clear that Mr Ford saw that there was no chance of averting a crisis, and the Alliance Party had already pronounced on that one.

It would be churlish not to accept that there are major issues outstanding that are important to people and their lives and on which Executive agreement is required. Education is, perhaps, the most topical of the

outstanding issues and the most important for many people. Other outstanding issues include the CSI strategy, RPA and policing and justice. Nobody can stand here and deny that aspects of those issues are not agreed; some may be disagreed on in their entirety. However, to dwell on that negativity, as some Members would like to, does us all a disservice, and it overlooks the fundamental point that we have a difficult form of government here. There are systemic issues, including the fact that we have a mandatory rather than a voluntary coalition and the fact that there is historical suspicion — indeed, enmity — on all sides.

Aside from the differences that we have across the Chamber on the constitutional question, there are often diametrically opposed political positions. Some of us are centre-right, some are centre-left, and some are somewhere in between and do not know where they are. There are different views, and we all bring different perspectives on bread-and-butter policy issues, never mind constitutional issues.

Given that all those factors were and are in place, is it any wonder that there are outstanding issues? In having issues on which we cannot agree, are we any worse than other Governments — even single-party Governments, never mind coalition Governments — around the world that have difficulties in agreeing common positions on crucial issues? That happens in countries that do not have the distrust dating back decades that we have. There are still difficulties in delivering any response, never mind a quick response, to difficult issues.

However, in spite of all our intrinsic problems, which I hope nobody will deny that we face and that we must overcome in the longer term, can it really be argued that we have not achieved much? There has been no suspension of the Assembly and the Executive, at least to this point, which stands in stark contrast with the previous, post-Belfast Agreement attempt at government, when the Executive was up and down with seemingly weekly if not monthly regularity.

Whether or not they still agree with it, all parties in the Executive agreed a Budget, as they did a Programme for Government and an investment strategy. Those are fundamental documents of great importance that were agreed by all sides at the time. In September 2009, the First Minister told us the number of agreements that have been made at Executive level. He contrasted the current Executive with the 31 months of the UUP/SDLP-led Executive in the early part of the past decade. Under that previous Executive, 320 agreements were made, yet in a shorter time — 29 months — the current Executive have had agreement on 451 issues.

In spite of those fundamental agreements, Mr Lunn asks what we have achieved. He is fuelling the fire for the argument that we have achieved nothing. He may

not be proud of what we have done in the Assembly since 2007, but I am. I can think of a long list of achievements: record levels of investment in our infrastructure; the introduction of a small business rates relief; a cap on industrial rates; a freezing of the domestic rate; and the lone pensioner allowance, which has reaped over £2 million for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Those are initiatives that my party has helped to introduce, as have other parties in the Chamber. One of the Sinn Féin Ministers introduced free public transport for people over 60 years of age. As she reminded us earlier today, the SDLP's Minister secured what was, for the last decade, a record number of newbuild houses for social housing. The UUP Benches have introduced free prescription charges. Every party has made a consistent effort to do something, and we should be proud of that.

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

Mr Hamilton: If we want quick and good responses, reform of the system is needed. My party has been consistent in outlining how that can be achieved. We have achieved much, and there is certainly much more to do.

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

Mr Hamilton: However, beating ourselves up in the way that Mr Lunn wants will only fuel the fire for those who want to criticise the institution and knock it down. I am very proud of what we have.

Mr Elliott: We in the Assembly and the Executive deal with issues that affect people's real lives. One example of that is education, which has been mentioned. I feel so frustrated, because I hear the frustration of some of my constituents every week when they tell me that they have been unable to increase the size of their factories or to build homes for their neighbours, sons or daughters on their own land because of planning difficulties. The fact that those day-to-day practical issues are tied up and bogged down in the Assembly means that progress cannot be made.

4.45 pm

I am aware that the bigger issues such as the devolution of policing and justice powers are being looked at at the moment — or at least some people are looking at it. The Ulster Unionist Party will not accept being handed a piece of paper and being told what it is expected to sign up to on policing and justice if it has had no direct input into the process. I wish that the other parties in the Executive, particularly the two larger parties, would accept and realise that and bring us and the other parties to the negotiating table.

We must be realistic enough to know that any Executive or Government will have difficulties in their

administration and in making decisions. It is even more difficult with the type of system that we have here in the Executive. On top of that, it seems much more difficult for this particular Executive because the two larger parties appear to want to carve up the issues between them, isolate the rest of us and hope and assume that we will fall in behind them and do as they say. That cannot continue, and it is one of the reasons why we keep getting into this position. Mr Hamilton has said that we should be grateful that the Assembly has not been suspended, yet for five months the Executive did not make any decisions and practically nothing happened. It might as well have been suspended, because no progress was made.

I would like to see a more co-operative approach taken where possible. It may not always be possible, and, as a Member mentioned earlier, some issues need to be discussed and resolved between one or two parties. I am quite happy with that. However, in broader terms there must be more co-operation and better relationships, even though it is sometimes evident that there is not a good relationship between the two main parties when we see how they react to each other in the Chamber.

It is difficult to accept that the Alliance Party has tabled this motion, when at the same time it wants to place more difficulties before the Executive by devolving policing and justice powers at this time. We cannot resolve some of the simple issues, yet that party wants to have an input into an even more controversial issue. However, I suppose that that is no real surprise coming from that party, as it sees a personal opportunity.

Dr Farry: I am not going to rise to the bait regarding the alleged self-interest of the Alliance Party. What I will point out to the Member — perhaps he will respond on it — is the difference between our two approaches. We agree that there are problems with the Executive, but, while his party argues that nothing further can be devolved to a messy Executive, the Alliance Party argues that we must devolve further. The argument surrounding policing and justice is poisoning the atmosphere in the Executive and threatening the stability of the institutions. Devolution is part of resolving the crisis; it is not a further threat but a part of the solution.

Mr Elliott: I would be interested to see the Member's evidence of how the other issues will be resolved if policing and justice powers are devolved. I have no evidence as to how that will happen, but I am happy to give way to him again if he wants to produce that evidence or tell me how it will be done. Perhaps he has a secret mission from the Alliance Party; the first such mission that that party has had.

Dr Farry: The very early win will be in keeping all the parties around the Executive table; no one walks

away, and the institutions stay in place. Devolution is certainly necessary. It is not sufficient, but it is stage one of the process of bringing stability and better governance to Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his intervention, but still he has given no indication of how the Alliance Party will resolve the problems of education, planning and council reorganisation. Those are all sticking points in the Executive, as are many more issues, yet I have heard no indication of how they will be fixed. The motion comes from those who have been champions of opposition in the Northern Ireland Assembly for years, and, all of a sudden —

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

Mr Elliott: All of a sudden, we want to see them jump into bed with the Executive that they have criticised for so long.

Mr A Maginness: It is self-evident that we have been in crisis management from the beginning of this Administration; indeed, the previous Administration were in crisis management as well. Since I was elected to the Assembly in 1998, we have lived under the cloud of crisis management. That is a plain political fact.

The problem, as my party and I see it, is the failure to build partnership. We have to build partnership in the Assembly and throughout the institutions. In order to achieve the goal of reconciliation as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, we must use partnership. We must build a partnership between nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant, in this institution and in other institutions, and between North and South. The failure of some parties to realise or to buy into the importance of partnership is the central reason that we live under the cloud of crisis management. I believe that we can get out from under it and move forward. An opportunity presents itself to do that, given the fact that justice and policing powers will, in all probability, be transferred in the near future or, at least, that the issue will be resolved. If that issue is resolved, it will create a situation in which stability can be achieved in the Executive, and we can then address the other issues, among them education and RPA.

We should create good will among our people and among the parties in the Assembly. If we do that, we can overcome all our problems, because the lack of good will is the toxin in the system. Partnership is not simply attending the Executive or all parties being proportionately represented on that Executive or on Committees of the House. It is more than that. It is tolerance and respect for one another's point of view, the creation of good will among people and forgiveness of one another's faults, wrongs and hurts in the past.

I encourage Members to create that spirit of partnership, because that is the only way forward for all of us as a community. We owe it to the people who have elected us to heal the wounds in the community and to unite it. If we do that, we will create a new politics, a politics of reconciliation. However, we cannot achieve reconciliation unless we have genuine, sustained partnership.

At present, the two major parties are far apart and seem, in some respects, estranged from the idea of partnership. I hope that, given a new situation, they can renew that concept of partnership. The temporary change in leadership, with the new Acting First Minister, may be a step towards the widening of vision in the DUP. There could be a much wider embrace by the DUP of the principles and spirit of partnership, and I welcome the change in leadership — albeit that it may be temporary — in the Office of the First Minister. That has been an important contribution to the creation of a new atmosphere here.

If policing and justice powers, which give responsibility for law and order here, were transferred, the Assembly would have increased powers and increased responsibilities through which we would all share in the rule of law and the rule of justice here. That would provide a great opportunity for us to come together and fulfil the hopes of partnership. I hope that we can move from crisis management to a real, self-sustaining partnership that will transform political relationships in the House and in society.

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

Mr A Maginness: I hope that we will achieve the objective of the Good Friday Agreement, which is reconciliation.

Dr W McCrea: I have listened to a lot of doublespeak in the debate. Much of the debate's content has verged on a hypocritical analysis of the situation, and everyone has blamed anyone but themselves.

I agree with Mr Elliott that a more cohesive and joined-up approach must be taken. Democrats would certainly welcome that, and such an approach is important. I do not expect Mr Elliott or his colleagues simply to accept anything as a *fait accompli*, whether it is the devolution of justice and policing or anything else. The Ulster Unionist Party has a vital role to play on that issue, and it has a view to express. It is important that, rather than being on the sidelines of the debate, it is at the heart of it and of the decision-making process.

We are under a cloud in that the Assembly is based, in my opinion, on the unacceptable position of enforced partnership. This is not a normal partnership that the parties decide whether or not they desire. It is an enforced partnership, and we are told —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: With the greatest respect, the Member has had his moment in the sun, and we will now carry on with the debate.

There are those who not only have been politically opposed to unionism but have been involved in terrorism for many years, and yet we are told that, if we want to have a government in Northern Ireland, those people must be in the top positions in government. That would not be tolerated in any democratic society. That, therefore, is a cloud that we are labouring under.

As I have said before in the Chamber, major issues other than the devolution of policing and justice need to be dealt with. I agree with Mr Elliott that education is one of those issues. We have a Minister who is so pig-headed that she will not move from a certain position, which puts the education of all children in a state of confusion. That situation is totally unacceptable, and it needs to be dealt with. We have power to deal with the issue of housing and of whether people have a job in a recession, and people are saying that the Assembly should show that it can deal with those issues before it asks for extra powers.

People suggest that, if we can pull a magical solution for the devolution of policing and justice out of the hat, everything will be sunshine and light. We have problems to deal with, and my constituents are demanding that we deal with housing and the potholes in the roads across Northern Ireland. As representatives of the people of the Province, we have a bounden duty to deal with bread and butter issues. Somehow, we have got away from that, but dealing with those issues is the bedrock of a good society. The House must care about people who are sick and dying and about roads, housing and whether a person has a job, instead of always looking for more and more responsibility.

With responsibility comes accountability. We, therefore, have to deal with that that situation.

5.00 pm

It is not good enough for the SDLP to try to pretend that it can sit in an Executive and agree a Budget and then have the very Minister who agreed that Budget come into this House and try to blame all the other Executive members for what is going wrong. That is the height of irresponsibility, and it does not give the community any confidence.

Society is demanding real action on real issues. Many are just simple bread and butter issues that need to be dealt with. This House needs to deal with them; it has the responsibility to deal with them. Let it get on with the job of doing so.

Dr Farry: Members may be interested to know that today is Martin Luther King Jnr Day in the United States. He famously said:

“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

In our context, peace has to be seen as more than simply the absence of violence; it has to be the presence of a proper, reconciled society in Northern Ireland. We are far from that.

However, even turning that quote to look at devolution and the performance of this Assembly, we have to think of devolution as being more than simply about stability, or some form of pseudo-stability, or about simply achieving the maintenance of representatives from different sections of our society in government. Devolution, if it is to mean anything, has to be about delivering real change for the people of Northern Ireland: changing their lives, changing the economy, sustaining public services and building a shared future.

The Alliance Party is a critical friend of the Executive. It certainly welcomes the progress and the real change that has happened in Northern Ireland over recent years. Indeed, it wishes the parties that form the Executive well in their deliberations, and it wishes the process well over the next critical days as we try to find increased stability in our system.

I acknowledge that there have been positive achievements on the part of the Executive, particularly the way in which they managed aspects of their Budget with regard to investment, as Simon Hamilton mentioned. Equally, however, we have to acknowledge that there have been, and still are, major flaws in the institutional design that do not lend themselves to good governance. We do not have a system that lends itself to easy compromise. Parties are not encouraged to compromise in government and are not penalised for failing to do so. We have also failed to make key decisions in a number of areas, and, I presume, failed to seize opportunities that have come along for Northern Ireland. Had we been better organised, we might have been in a better position to seize such opportunities.

Comments were made about the Alliance Party position. It is ambitious to enter government. What party in the world is not? It would be foolish not to.

Mr B McCrea: If the Member or one of his party were to become Minister for Justice, who, then, would provide the opposition? Furthermore, does he feel that this democratic institution requires an opposition?

Dr Farry: I am tempted to say, as Ronald Reagan said: “There he goes again”, back on the issue of personalities. The issue of justice is about the delivery of devolution and the delivery of policy change on justice for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: Are you going to answer the question?

Dr Farry: Will you give me a chance? The Alliance Party's approach is not about self interest or bums on seats. It is about having confidence in our values and beliefs; it is about having the right policies and the desire to change things. If we go into government, we will not be abandoning any of our ideals or plans for change in this society, or, indeed, our freedom of manoeuvre.

On the point that Mr McCrea raised, and I can see that he is getting rather restless, we are, at the moment, playing a role of opposition. This system does not lend itself well to that of government and opposition. There are not the resources for a properly funded opposition.

In most societies around the world, parties move in and out of government and opposition. That is the norm; that is healthy. Our party looks forward to a day when we have a voluntary coalition that is, potentially, open to all parties, including Sinn Féin, and where parties are sometimes in opposition. That is what is healthy, but it is not what we have under the current rules. We must see how we can best achieve our objectives within the context of those rules.

Simon Hamilton spoke much about the achievements of the Executive. There have certainly been many financial initiatives, and no doubt they have been very popular in some quarters of Northern Ireland and have helped people. However, they have come at a cost. First, we have missed the opportunity to rebalance our economy; all we have done is cut the costs for people as things stand, but we have still the same underlying structural deficiencies in society. Nothing has changed. We have also had major opportunity costs with respect to the funding of public services. That debate will take place more and more frequently over coming weeks, particularly in the light of the announcement that was made last week by the Finance Minister. We will potentially preside over major cuts in public services, and the people of Northern Ireland will respond to that.

We must also be clear. There are a number of particular areas where we have major crises. It is a disgrace that the Assembly has contributed to a situation in which even basic timetables cannot be met. The education and skills authority was supposed to be operational by 1 January 2010. That was a major reform in education and it was announced well in advance. The Committee finally produced its own report, but the Executive have stalled over it and we have missed the boat in respect of legislation to meet that timetable. We have not been able to implement a replacement for A Shared Future. I accept that parties may have wished to do that, but they have not taken that opportunity. The most critical issue facing Northern Ireland is its divisions and we have no new policy to meet them. Unbelievably, after a seven-year review of public administration, we are potentially

about to mess it up and return, in consequence, to what we had before.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Dr Farry: Those types of crises are letting down the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Purvis: Collective responsibility is a good thing, and it means that whatever gets through the Executive will definitely stick, because it will have gained the support of a number of the political parties — and, soon, that will include most of the political parties in the Chamber, which ideally represents most of our community.

The problem is getting policy and legislation through that process. Instead of proposals having “stickability” once they have made it through the Executive, they have “stuckability” before they even reach the Executive, because they must first pass a DUP filter and then a Sinn Féin filter. It seems that the proposals just cannot make it out of the Executive meeting room.

The crisis to which this motion refers is not just limited to the Executive; rather, it affects all the devolved institutions that are meant to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. We are responsible for that. As political parties, in recent years we have focused largely on ourselves, and we continue to do so. We look at the institutions and the policies that they produce, or do not produce, through the lens of elections. We ask ourselves what will this do for my party. Where is the cut-off point? At what point do we start to look at issues and make decisions based solely on what is best for Northern Ireland, for the people who live here and the future that we are all forced to endure together?

Having collective responsibility means that there must be a shared vision for this country that the Executive want to realise. However, there is no shared vision for this country. The Programme for Government does not count. It is now fantasy stuff. It always was, but the recession has exposed the massive flaws in that plan to borrow, buy and build our way out of the future.

What the members of the Executive need to do now, in order to get collective responsibility, is to produce a genuine and collective vision for Northern Ireland based on the question about what type of society we want to live in. When we know where we are supposed to be going, it will be easier to agree on how we get there.

I support the motion.

Mrs Long: As we had hoped, the tone of this afternoon's debate has been reasonably constructive, with the sad exception of Tom Elliott's contribution, which was not particularly constructive. Most of the

debate has been carried out in the spirit in which the motion was proposed. The motion was not meant to be an attack on the Executive; it was meant to be an opportunity for an open and honest assessment of the problems that face the Executive. My party believes that those problems go wider than the issue of policing and justice, but, as we said during the debate, that is clearly a key part of the jigsaw in resolving the overall problems.

The motion is also a constructive call for more collectivity in the Executive. We veered away from criticising individual parties or groups of parties for lack of delivery. However, I must accept the point that the structures here do not necessarily facilitate good delivery and the operation of good governance. Therefore, the structures themselves are barriers that must be overcome in order for the Executive to deliver.

The institutions were designed to sustain the peace process and wider inclusion, rather than to provide for the efficient delivery of effective government. I know that Trevor Lunn's remarks that the survival of the institutions is our biggest achievement were made tongue in cheek. However, the coalition of the diverse parties that are involved in the Government is an achievement that should not be sniffed at. The fact that we are still here today, particularly given where we have been over the past two months, is an important achievement because the peace and stability that we have enjoyed since 1998 is largely due to the fact there has been a political process and a functioning Assembly for most of that time. It would, therefore, be wrong to underestimate the impact that the destruction of the institutions would have on the stability and peace that people enjoy in our communities.

The institutions are politically unstable because of the mix of parties and ideologies. However, instability also comes from people's perception that the institutions — this is what we really want to talk about — have not delivered to the degree to which people had hoped. Mitchel McLaughlin talked about what the Executive have delivered, and I agree that — this point has been reflected in a number of the contributions — Ministers in the Executive have delivered exceptionally well, in their silos. However, we did not say that there is a crisis in the Departments; we said that there is a crisis in the Executive. Difficulties have arisen when matters have had to come to the Executive for agreement, because that requires ministerial co-operation. That process has been particularly difficult when contentious issues are involved or when people use one contentious issue to gain leverage over another. Unfortunately, that has been the pattern of government: people have wanted to stow away issues that they can then trade on in order to ease the process. That is not good for government, but it is the reality of how the Executive have functioned.

I understand Mr McLaughlin's concern that the motion may fuel lack of confidence. However, that is not our intention, and I am glad that he reflected that. We have been very measured in the contributions that we have made. Those of us who are not members of the Executive are using the only Chamber available to us to reflect our concern about the community's lack of confidence in the Executive's ability to deliver, and to talk about building the confidence that everybody is seeking.

Basil McCrea said that he was surprised at how the Alliance Party has voted on a number of issues. There is no need for him to be surprised, because my party's voting patterns are due to the consistent application of policy and principles. That is also consistent with the remarks that David Ford made at the outset of the Assembly mandate. He said that we would provide a coherent and constructive opposition, and that the challenge for the Executive was to be as coherent and constructive. It is entirely appropriate that, on occasion, we have not set out to simply oppose the DUP and Sinn Féin. There will be occasions when we agree with both of them and other occasions when we do not agree with either. That is not an unusual set of circumstances. We will look at each individual item on its merits.

I will repeat our position on the issue of policing and justice for certain Members' benefit, but I know that they will not accept it. That perhaps answers Basil McCrea's question as to why we cannot work better with his party: it simply will not accept an honest assessment. We are working hard to see policing and justice delivered. We want to ensure that it is devolved quickly, that it is properly structured, that it is focused on the issues that matter to the people of Northern Ireland, and that it will be able to deliver on those issues.

In all that, the least of our concerns —

5.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I will not give way.

In all that, the least of our concerns is about the personalities, and I, and others, have said that before. Unfortunately, however, some Members are seeking to make party political capital out of that. That being the case, there is not much that I can say to convince them otherwise. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. I ask Members on both sides of the House who are having private conversations to move outside. It is important that the Member who is speaking be heard.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

If we cannot convince people of that, that is fine. However, to refer back to the previous debate, party politicking is one reason for the electorate's cynicism about the political system.

Declan O'Loan talked about the spirit of agreement and inclusion that accompanied the Good Friday Agreement and how he feels that that has been lost. I think that he is right. There has been a breakdown in trust, not just within the Executive but, more generally, between parties in the political institutions. The inability to deliver on key issues such as cohesion, sharing and integration strategies also creates the perception that resolving issues around confidence and trust is not high enough up the agenda.

Simon Hamilton talked about systemic issues, and I do not disagree with him when it comes to how the system is structured. However, the motion tries to reflect the measured discussion we are having around the concerns that we have.

The issue is not whether the Executive have achieved anything; rather, it is whether people outside perceive that they have. I suspect that there is a disconnect between the two, and that is what the motion is really about. Major issues, such as education and the RPA, are stuck in the system. The delivery of those big-ticket items would create a lot more confidence than perhaps the delivery of worthwhile, but much smaller, issues would.

Tom Elliott talked about the issues around isolation and carve-ups, and expressed frustration that his party was being ignored in much of the process. I admit to being confused by the position that the Ulster Unionist Party has taken on policing and justice. Today, Tom said that the UUP was not in favour of early devolution, and yet, at other times, we have been told that, if the conditions were right, it could happen as soon as is necessary and that it was something that the party was in favour of. I do not understand that position.

I reiterate the point that Stephen made —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I will not give way.

I reiterate the point that Stephen made in relation to the Executive. In areas where devolution is complete, a barrier in the Executive has been removed around trust and confidence in their ability to continue. If we are to resolve the currently unresolved issues, the Executive need to continue, and the lack of progress on policing and justice is one way of stopping that. That is the logic behind our argument. By devolving policing and justice, we would get one hurdle out of the way and one political crisis removed from the system, and we could start to deal with other issues. That is hugely important.

The tone of some of the Ulster Unionist Party's interventions has answered the question as to why we, as centre parties, cannot work together. The constant party politicking, which today has come only from their Benches, does not make it easier for any of us to find levels of co-operation.

Alban Maginness talked about the institutions being involved in crisis management and about the lack of goodwill being a toxin in the system. I agree with that. The lack of trust, confidence and goodwill is hugely important, and it is important that we try to build respect for each other's points of view and try to move forward.

In conclusion, there are challenges for all parties in the House. We brought forward a motion focusing on issues around the Executive because we are deeply concerned about the future and reputation of the political institutions. I believe that those institutions are a vital part of the peace process and that we are all beneficiaries of that process. However, the institutions must be more than simply a vehicle for the peace process. They have to be a vehicle for good governance, and that requires perhaps more give and take than anything else.

As the largest parties in the coalition, the DUP and Sinn Féin have special responsibilities around delivery and inclusion. That is something that they acknowledge, and they have done so in the Chamber. As significant partners in the Government, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists also have responsibilities. In the call for inclusion, that inclusion has to be on the basis that people are seeking to be willing partners rather than simply seeking out ammunition that can be used against others in a future election. To build confidence and trust, that has to be seen publicly as well as expressed privately.

I refer back to the previous debate around how to motivate the electorate. We motivate the electorate least when we are cynical.

The Alliance Party, the PUP, the Green Party and others are here to hold the Executive to account and to challenge them. That is the position in which the electorate has put us. We do that not to destabilise the Executive but to challenge them towards improved performance. On that basis, we do not put the motion forward for a vote.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can we have some clarity on what is once again a confusing decision on the part of the Alliance Party? Surely the motion was put after the Clerk read it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that I am right, because I agree with the Member. Therefore, I will put the motion to a vote.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been clearly established in the Assembly and in other legislatures that, at the final point of a winding-up speech, a Member may choose to press or to not press the motion to a division. I see that a constituency colleague of mine who also represents South Antrim in another place is nodding with me. Perhaps you will reconsider the ruling that you just made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It would have been very kind if I had been given some notice of the decision to not put the motion to a vote. Had that been the case, I could have sought the necessary information. I ask the Assembly to take its ease while I check whether the Member is correct. I repeat that it would have been nice to have been told.

If there are no objections, the motion can be withdrawn.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I object to the motion's being withdrawn. We have spent considerable time and energy discussing it, so surely we can have a vote on it. It is up to Alliance Party Members if they do not want to vote for their own motion; however, we have indicated that we want to vote in favour of it.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that the Member likes to think that he has influence in his own party, but it now appears that he wants to have influence over other parties. Surely it is up to the Members in whose names the motion was tabled to decide whether they wish to push it to a vote. If they do not, it is not for other parties to insist that they do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I can solve the problem, but I would have been able to do so earlier had I been told what was happening. If there is an objection, the Question must be put.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think that I should take any more points of order on the matter, but I will allow some latitude on this occasion.

Mr Ford: I can remember that on previous occasions in the House there were clear differences of opinion between those who wanted to support a motion and the proposer of that motion, who chose not to put it to a vote at the final stage of their winding-up speech. I notice that, in addition to the MP for South Antrim, the MP for East Antrim is now nodding with me. Both those Members have some understanding of parliamentary procedures. It is in the gift of those in whose names a private Members' motion is tabled as to whether they press it to a vote; it is not a matter for other Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It does not matter how many people are nodding in agreement with the Member, the

procedure is very clear. Mr Basil McCrea has objected, and I, as Deputy Speaker, must put the Question. I would be grateful if I were allowed to do that now.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 17.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Ms Lo.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Billy Leonard, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr F McCann and Mr McLaughlin.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will resume their seats, and I suggest that they put their mobile phones away as well.

We have a little technical hitch here. *[Laughter.]*

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the large number of critical issues that the Executive has failed to resolve; expresses deep concern about the consequences for good governance, the economy and public services; and calls on the Executive to meet their responsibilities and to act in a collective manner for the good of Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.37 pm.