
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Economic Development Policy

Monday 25 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

New Assembly Members: Mr Conall McDevitt and Mr Jonathan Bell

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Conall McDevitt has been returned as a Member for the South Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Mrs Carmel Hanna and that Mr Jonathan Bell has been returned as a Member for the Strangford constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Mrs Iris Robinson.

Mr McDevitt signed the Roll of Membership in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly/ Director General in the Speaker's Office on Thursday 21 January 2010. Mr Bell signed the Roll of Membership earlier today. Both Members have entered their designations and have now taken their seats.

Assembly Commission

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the Assembly that a vacancy exists on the Assembly Commission.

As with other similar motions, the motion to appoint a Member to fill that vacancy will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate. Before I proceed to the Question, I advise Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr Alex Attwood be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission —
[Mr P Ramsey.]

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I wish to make a statement on how I propose to take forward economic development policy in Northern Ireland. My decisions are based on the independent review of economic policy, the outcome of the consultation exercise on that review and my discussions with key stakeholders on the report and its recommendations.

As Members will be aware, I commissioned the independent review in December 2008. Its overarching aim was to assess the policy of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI to determine whether it was sufficient to help to deliver the productivity goal contained in the Programme for Government. In light of that, I asked for a root and branch review of economic development policy. I am grateful to the panel for its report, which was published on 29 September 2009, and for its detailed and wide-ranging recommendations.

Given the strategic importance of the review, not least because the economy is the Executive's top priority, I issued the report for a short six-week period of public consultation, which ended on 16 November 2009. I am grateful to the 69 respondents, and, as part of today's statement, I will publish a consultation report containing a summary of what was said during the consultation and provide access to the more detailed responses. Those responses added to the review and helped to shape the actions that I will outline.

Aside from responding to the recommendations, which I will detail shortly, I must say that the timing of the report is of immense significance. It comes at a time when we are working to rebuild the local economy, which, in common with that of other parts of the United Kingdom and beyond, has suffered and continues to suffer as a result of the global downturn. Since December 2008, the number of unemployment claimants has increased by almost 18,000, and many businesses have been forced to cut back or cease operations. Compared with the previous year, those factors contributed to a 63% increase in the number of redundancies notified to my Department. Moreover, the construction sector has been significantly hit by the downturn, and there have also been marked declines over the year in the output of other sectors, including manufacturing and services.

I welcome the fact that many economic commentators are beginning to forecast some improvements in the

local, national and global economies in 2010. There are some signs that the impact of the downturn may be starting to ease in Northern Ireland. For example, the latest increase in the claimant count is significantly below the average monthly increase experienced over the past year. As we work to implement the findings of the review, my aim is to improve further the prospects for economic growth and higher living standards throughout Northern Ireland.

Turning to the independent review, I warmly welcome the report and its recommendations. The report recognises the need to provide short-term support for companies along the lines of what we have been doing to ease pressures resulting from the recession. However, for the medium to long term, the review also endorses the policy ambitions of the Executive, namely to build a more value-added and productive economy. As I will describe later, many of the recommendations will be implemented by my Department and Invest NI as soon as practicable. Others, by their very nature, will require further analysis and discussion, which is to be expected given the strategic nature and importance of the issues that they cover.

A vital aspect of the review is that it clearly states that efforts to raise living standards and productivity in Northern Ireland cannot lie solely at the door of DETI or Invest NI. Other Departments also have important roles to play, particularly in terms of skills, planning and investment in infrastructure. Furthermore, as the review highlights, it is ultimately the responsibility of companies in the private sector to invest in areas such as skills, exports, R&D and innovation to boost competitiveness. I will return to how I intend to handle the cross-departmental proposals later in my statement.

Notwithstanding those issues, the report of Professor Barnett and his colleagues represents a significant piece of work that will help to shape economic development policy in Northern Ireland, particularly as we enter the new decade with its challenges and opportunities. Today's statement outlines my position on the recommendations, and I have asked my Department's permanent secretary to establish, with immediate effect, a steering group to implement the actions that I wish to take forward.

The group will include representatives from Invest Northern Ireland, and I will look to the group to report regularly to me on progress towards implementation. To add a degree of independence, Dr Ian McMorris, who is an independent board member of my Department, and Dr Bill McGinnis, who is the Northern Ireland skills adviser, have agreed to join the steering group. They will each add an important external voice, particularly in respect of their considerable experience in the business community.

The steering group will be supported by four implementation groups, which will be chaired at a senior

level and will include, where appropriate, officials from other Executive Departments. Each of those groups will oversee the implementation of recommendations that fall within the areas of the co-ordination of economic policy in Northern Ireland; DETI and Invest Northern Ireland's assistance to industry; autonomy, flexibility and decision-making; and policy development and monitoring.

I will now outline my response to the major recommendations of the independent report, and I will do so in the four areas that I have just mentioned. I will begin with some comments on the recommendations that were made on strengthening the co-ordination of economic policy in Northern Ireland. The most significant is that the core economic functions that cover existing DETI and Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) areas of responsibility should be brought together under a single Department of the economy. As I have mentioned previously in this House, that is something that I support strongly. It is imperative that we work to reduce the number of Government Departments in Northern Ireland, and the rationale for bringing together the responsibilities of DETI and DEL is very strong and clear. Without doubt, skills are a critical factor in economic development, not just for businesses locally but as a means of attracting value-added and internationally mobile companies to locate and develop their business operations here in Northern Ireland.

Of course, DETI and DEL already work together closely in order to align policy and match the demand and supply of skills. That has been acknowledged in the report, but the panel has stated rightly that we can and should go further. It has argued that bringing together the responsibilities under a single Department would ensure the maximum possible flexibility and responsiveness to business needs, both for local companies and to attract and retain international businesses.

As I have indicated, the merits of the proposal are very clear. I support the recommendation to create a Department that has a much broader policy remit than either DETI or DEL. However, as I indicated earlier, a number of the panel's recommendations will inevitably require further analysis and discussion. In some instances, they will also require agreement with Executive colleagues. This is clearly one such recommendation. Therefore, I have today issued a paper to my Executive colleagues seeking their agreement to consider the creation of a Department of the economy as part of the planned review of strand-one institutions. However, I also recognise fully, as the review panel did, that getting agreement and implementing new departmental structures is something that presents its own challenges and will inevitably take some time. That is why I also advocate in the Executive paper that we take the interim steps that were suggested by the panel to improve the structures that are currently in place.

Central to that is the establishment of a subcommittee of the Executive to prioritise cross-departmental action on the economy and to address not only the recommendations that fall to my Department but those that cover issues such as skills, planning and infrastructure. I welcome the proposals that Minister Poots put forward as part of his Executive paper on planning reform. I welcome particularly the fact that a number of the proposals in the Executive paper on planning are aligned with the recommendations that were made in the independent report.

In reaching Executive agreement on the establishment of a subcommittee, it will, of course, be imperative that we are clear on its membership and remit, and discussions will need to be held about those matters. However, while recognising that developing the economy cuts across all Departments, I envisage that, initially, the subcommittee should comprise Ministers who are currently responsible for the delivery of the Programme for Government goal of improving private sector productivity. That embraces DETI, DEL, and the Department for Regional Development (DRD), but it should also include the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), given their central role. I expect that other Ministers will be involved as specific issues arise.

12.15 pm

The panel suggested that the subcommittee should take forward the development of an economic strategy for Northern Ireland that builds on the findings of the review. Given that Northern Ireland is a small region, we should work to produce a single overarching economic strategy that aligns with and helps to shape other Executive strategies. It is vital to have that strategy in place to grow the economy as Northern Ireland emerges from the recession to ensure that we are able to compete more effectively, regionally and globally and to help to prioritise resources. I further suggest that such a new economic strategy should be at the heart of the next Programme for Government. Therefore, my paper to the Executive proposes that the subcommittee should begin to work on the development of an economic strategy, which should be completed well before the end of this calendar year in time to inform the Executive's next Programme for Government and Budget, which will take effect from April 2011.

I look forward to discussing those important issues with my Executive colleagues and to agreeing on how we take them forward as a matter of urgency. I stress that I am not relying solely on the new measures that I have outlined. To that end, I today welcome two important and significant initiatives on skills. First, as part of the incentive to attract new investments and expansions in Northern Ireland, DEL and Invest Northern Ireland will take forward a pilot project designed to

offer an assured provision of a skilled workforce tailored to companies' specific needs, based on a successful model of support in North Carolina. The details will soon be announced by the Minister for Employment and Learning. Secondly, DEL and Invest Northern Ireland are collaborating in the development of an integrated framework for management and leadership to improve support in that important area, as highlighted in the independent report.

Members are also aware that the independent panel made recommendations about how we might better tailor the assistance that DETI and Invest Northern Ireland offer business. Before I turn to those recommendations, I will touch briefly on the range of businesses that we assist.

The review panel highlighted a concern that Invest Northern Ireland support is not available for a large section of businesses in Northern Ireland that fail to meet eligibility criteria. In particular, it has been recommended that the concept of Invest Northern Ireland "clients" should be removed to allow Invest Northern Ireland to work through the entire business base to provide support for innovation, research and development, and export growth.

In reflecting on that recommendation, I acknowledge that Invest Northern Ireland currently supports the wider business base through many initiatives, including export programmes, which are available to any company in Northern Ireland that wishes to explore new markets; new schemes, such as innovation vouchers and the growth programme, which target small and micro businesses; advisory support, such as the credit crunch initiatives that I launched in 2008; and, of course, nibusinessinfo.co.uk, an online business advice service.

It is important to recognise the need to maintain an ongoing relationship with businesses in which many of our investments span a number of years. It is also imperative that Invest NI can fully monitor the performance of individual companies through the various stages of financial assistance. In that light, I have asked Invest NI's chief executive to review how the organisation could develop a tiered portfolio of support across the wider business base to accelerate innovation and export growth. As part of that review, I have also asked for the development of a small business unit to be considered. It could fit within the model to provide a more dedicated resource to supporting small businesses throughout Northern Ireland, in particular to open up supply chain opportunities similar to those that have already been developed for the aerospace sector. Invest NI will bring forward its proposals by September 2010.

An important aspect of the review will be to examine how small business support is co-ordinated with district councils in the context of the review of public

administration. It is evident today that, although I am keen that support be offered as widely as possible, it must be stressed that we are in a much tighter public expenditure environment than we have ever been before. That inevitably means that difficult decisions must be taken to prioritise our limited resources in favour of businesses and projects that offer the greatest potential for raising living standards and private sector productivity in Northern Ireland. In doing so, we must focus on projects that offer the greatest return to the economy.

It is important to recognise the fact that support is not just about financial assistance. The companies that I meet often comment on the real benefit of the practical, advisory help that they receive from Invest NI on a diverse range of issues, such as researching new markets, intellectual property or the strategic direction of a business.

That leads me to comment on the assistance that DETI and Invest NI provide to industry. A fundamental issue at the heart of the independent report is the view that there needs to be an accelerated shift towards support for innovation and R&D from employment-based schemes, such as selective financial assistance (SFA). First, the report highlights the very real prospect that regional aid limits for the support that we offer to projects through SFA will be reduced significantly. That process has already started, and we will see major changes from the end of 2010. Secondly, the panel drew on a substantial body of evidence that suggests that innovation should be considered as the primary productivity driver for a regional economy such as Northern Ireland. In particular, innovation is critical if local firms are to maintain and improve their competitiveness in export markets. Together, those factors provide both a push and a pull in the direction of increasing support for innovation and R&D. I fully accept that analysis, and, indeed, it must be recognised that, in recent years, Invest NI has already taken action to skew more resources towards innovation and R&D support.

For example, the independent panel acknowledged that, in 2008-09, compared with the previous six-year period, assistance for innovation and R&D increased by 20% in real terms. In the current financial year, that level of assistance accelerated as a result of Invest NI increasing its budget allocation for innovation and R&D by a further 30%, which represents a shift of more than 60% in the past two years. Expenditure on innovation and R&D now accounts for 38% of programme spend. I have asked my officials to continue to look for ways to maintain that trend.

The independent panel made a number of specific recommendations in relation to the portfolio of innovation policies and support programmes that are currently on offer. In particular, the panel suggested that the innovation system in Finland is an example of best practice and

should be explored further. My Department has already started a thorough and comprehensive review of best practice in economic development policy in other small, open economies throughout the world, including Finland, aimed at identifying transferrable lessons for Northern Ireland. The report on that work is due in late spring, and it will be used to inform the development of future policies and programmes.

The independent panel further recommended that additional support for innovation and R&D should not involve new public expenditure. Instead, it should be financed from savings in other areas, particularly grant support, in respect of which there were concerns about the low value-added nature of some of the projects that were supported, and, most notably, business expansions, in which there was lower additionality in certain areas.

That touches on the key issue of DETI and Invest NI assistance to industry. I shall, therefore, highlight a number of points on the use of financial assistance. First, I repeat my firm belief that there is no evidence in the report that resources have been wasted. Indeed, the review panel recognised that Invest NI has made a significant contribution to economic and employment growth in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the panel reported that, per capita, Northern Ireland has the most successful record in the UK for attracting foreign direct investment.

Secondly, the review report makes specific recommendations about the assistance that is offered to business expansion projects. However, it is important to recognise the realities of business investment, whereby companies often test the market with an initial investment before building an operation to a critical mass using a series of subsequent investments, often by adding new and other mobile functions. On occasion, those subsequent investments may require support from Invest NI.

Thirdly, the panel rightly recognised that we are entering a period when the availability of public expenditure is tightening and, against that backdrop, it did not wish to present a set of proposals that would, unrealistically, require significant sums of additional moneys. However, in recognising that reality, it is also important to reassure Members about the existence of the industrial development guarantee, which is designed to ensure:

“that no worthwhile proposal for eligible support to investment in industry or tradable service will be lost”.

As I mentioned earlier, we are entering a new policy framework in which changes to state-aid limits from the end of this calendar year mean that, going forward, we will not be able to support business using SFA in either the way that we have done to date or to the same extent. Therefore, we must look to increase support for

businesses using other existing or newly developed instruments.

The critical issue is how we should be deploying SFA now and in the run up to 2013 when we may lose it as a policy instrument. My view is that we should continue to use SFA for as long as we can, particularly as we seek to rebuild the economy in the aftermath of the recession. However, going forward in non-recessionary years, we also need to consider how we best deploy SFA effectively to improve productivity. That was a key point in the report. My view is that SFA should be used in the future to support investment in indigenous companies and to help to attract new and potential follow-on investments to Northern Ireland. That must be the key to improving relative living standards here.

I accept that it is a challenging area and one on which there are a number of views. During the consultation process, concerns were raised, principally from business organisations, about increasing the level of support for innovation and R&D at the expense of SFA. In that light, I have asked the implementation group covering DETI and Invest Northern Ireland assistance to industry to bring forward recommendations on when and where we should be using SFA. That could potentially involve setting higher job-quality thresholds than those that are currently in place. It may also improve supporting certain strategically important projects and those that are in areas of particular economic need. However, I stress that given the nature of our work, where multi-year financial support packages are agreed with businesses, it should be recognised that there will be limited scope to change Invest NI spending in 2010-11. It is, therefore, about preparing for change for the new Programme for Government period starting in 2011-12, although we will, of course, need to ensure that we are careful not to take any actions now or to enter into new commitments that would unduly compromise our room to manoeuvre in the future.

Moreover, looking forward to 2013, with the very real prospect of significant reductions to regional aid, I reassure Members that I and my Executive colleagues will be doing all that we can to secure the best deal for Northern Ireland. I have, therefore, asked my officials to begin preparing a case with other relevant bodies to seek to maximise state-aid cover for any future SFA-type programmes post-December 2013 and for other programmes that are designed to support business competitiveness, particularly in the areas of innovation and R&D.

My comments so far have focused on SFA. That is appropriate, given that the programme accounts for around 40% of Invest NI support and given that it was also the subject of much of the panel's analysis. However, Invest Northern Ireland also offers a wide range of other programmes to assist businesses; indeed, the

independent report also commented on those. In fact, the report suggests that Invest Northern Ireland's offering is unnecessarily complex, and it proposes that the number of programmes be reduced. I know that Invest Northern Ireland has made good progress in rationalising its programmes, but I believe that further progress could be made. Therefore, I have asked the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland to review the number and breadth of Invest NI programmes with a view to producing a consolidated suite of offerings in a business-friendly format that will support the growth of export and innovation in Northern Ireland businesses. I have asked Invest NI to complete the review by June 2010.

The panel also commented on Invest NI export assistance, suggesting the adoption of a more professional and fee-charging model. Entering new markets outside Northern Ireland is an important way for local businesses to realise their growth potential. I have seen at first hand the real value that Northern Ireland companies get when they take part in market visits, and I am encouraged that Invest Northern Ireland is committed to further developing its export assistance.

Obviously, the merits of the proposal need to be given more detailed consideration, and, when introducing or revising any fee-changing structure, we need to be careful to ensure that it does not become prohibitive. However, I am aware that Invest NI has already carried out some work in this area and will be bringing forward new proposals in March 2010 for the next financial year.

12.30 pm

Furthermore, the Department had already planned to evaluate Invest NI's export assistance. Work is due to be completed towards the end of 2010. Clearly, the implementation group that covers DETI and Invest NI assistance will need to reflect on the findings of the evaluation when it becomes available to ensure that we offer the best-quality exporting support to Northern Ireland's businesses.

The review panel also made proposals on assistance for training; financing of businesses; industrial land provision; exploiting telecommunications infrastructure; and the social economy.

The review panel recommended that Invest Northern Ireland should further reduce its support for company training and concentrate support mainly to small firms and projects with a high innovative content. Unsurprisingly, concern was expressed, principally from business organisations, about the impact of that recommendation. I understand that evidence that underpins that recommendation was drawn from an evaluation of the company development programme, which has been superseded by the business improvement training programme. That new programme is the subject of an evaluation that is scheduled for completion

by autumn 2010. That will help to inform company training.

As regards financing of businesses, I recognise that high-growth businesses are a key driver of economic growth, not only because they develop themselves and generate significant employment growth but because their dynamism stimulates competition and innovation throughout the economy as a whole. In many instances, equity funding is the most appropriate type of financing for such companies. Recent evaluations demonstrate that an equity gap still persists in Northern Ireland, particularly covering the seed, early, and development stages for deals of up to £2 million. Therefore, my view is that Invest Northern Ireland continues to intervene to support development of the venture capital market in Northern Ireland.

Today is not the time to respond in specific detail to the full list of recommendations. However, my position on all of them and, indeed, on all the other proposals that are contained in the independent report are set out in the detailed paper that I have included with my statement.

The third area on which the panel made recommendations was autonomy, flexibility and decision-making. The panel's review of global best practice suggested that successful development agencies benefit from having freedom to operate in a way that allows them to be entrepreneurial and responsive to business needs. I fully support that sentiment.

Indeed, a key element of the original rationale behind the establishment of Invest NI in 2002 was the desire to create a development agency that was more businesslike in its operations. However, a criticism that is often levelled at DETI and Invest Northern Ireland is that the governance system remains too complex and time-consuming and that that impedes Invest Northern Ireland's responsiveness.

I can indicate to Members that my officials have already held discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to explore how current delegated limits might be extended. I have asked that the relevant implementation group conclude on that issue as soon as possible. My aim is to try to establish new departmental governance arrangements by April 2010.

Furthermore, where major projects require DETI and DFP approval, I accept the panel's recommendation that those cases should be considered in parallel by a central project review group. Again, I have asked that officials from my Department and DFP agree the mechanisms that need to be established for that group to be operational from April 2010.

The panel's report also contains a number of recommendations that relate to the organisation of Invest Northern Ireland. In accepting the principle of greater autonomy, those are, for the most part, internal

issues for the agency to consider. I have asked Invest NI's chief executive to reflect on those recommendations and to advise the implementation group of any steps that he plans to take. That will cover areas such as the structure of Invest NI and training of its staff.

Finally, with regard to decision-making, the independent report recommended that all ex post assessments of value for money should be taken on a portfolio basis. I support that strongly. My long-held view is that we must manage risk better. However, in doing so, we cannot afford to be risk-averse. I have asked the permanent secretary in my Department to engage with DFP and the Northern Ireland Audit Office to explore how best that balance can be struck in practice.

Before I conclude, I turn to the independent panel's recommendations on the roles of DETI and Invest NI in policy development and performance monitoring. I agree that it is right that the Department have lead responsibility for policy development and performance monitoring and that it is important to have appropriate resources in place to deliver that.

The permanent secretary has begun to review the DETI structures, and I have asked him to look for ways to strengthen the Department's policy analysis and development function. The panel also recommended that DETI should assume responsibility for reporting on Invest NI's performance, and I can confirm that that will be the case for the next Invest NI performance report, which will be published at the end of the current corporate plan period. I can also confirm that Invest NI's operating plan for 2010-11 will include targets specifically for investments new to Northern Ireland, as per the panel's recommendation.

I also agree that it is important that my senior officials and I have access to top quality and timely economic and business advice. The panel has made a number of recommendations in that regard, particularly in relation to the future of the Economic Development Forum (EDF).

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

Since its establishment in 1999, the forum has played a very important role in advising on the direction of economic development in Northern Ireland. During my tenure as chairperson, I have found the engagement with members to be beneficial. Of particular benefit is the work that has been undertaken by the forum's subgroups on various issues, including recent work on such areas as the economic downturn, manufacturing and exports. However, as Members will be aware, the review panel suggested that the current mechanism for the delivery of independent economic advice, through the EDF, was not optimal. A recommendation was made to stand down the forum and replace it with a new, smaller advisory unit, comprising representatives

from the business and economics sectors. In making that recommendation, the panel also stressed the importance of continuing to engage with stakeholders on a bilateral basis.

I have given those recommendations very serious consideration, and I believe that the time is right to change the way in which I receive independent advice on the economy. I have, therefore, written to EDF members advising them that the forum will be stood down and replaced with a new advisory unit, which is to be established by April 2010. That unit will include representatives from Invest NI and the business, skills and economics sectors. The unit will also address a further recommendation that was made by the panel, namely the appointment of an independent economic adviser. I will continue to meet with stakeholders on the economy, bilaterally, as and when necessary.

In conclusion, I have set out my position on the independent report and the steps that I plan to take to promote economic development in Northern Ireland. There is no doubting the fact that the challenges are even greater now, given the impact of the recession on the Northern Ireland economy. Invest Northern Ireland uses the appropriate phrase, “Building locally, competing globally”. The course that I have outlined today will help Invest NI continue to do that in order to strengthen our competitive position — regionally and globally.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the Minister’s detailed statement on Professor Barnett’s report. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, in general terms, supports the Minister’s position. I particularly welcome two things. First, I welcome her intention to set up an implementation group. I hope that that group will produce an operational plan as soon as possible so that the report can be implemented as quickly as possible. Secondly, I welcome the Minister’s intention to pursue the establishment of an Executive subcommittee for economic policy, which is important in light of our present economic difficulties.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I say that Invest Northern Ireland should be given as much freedom as it can to get on with the job of regenerating our economy? I believe that the Minister is dedicated to that. Will the Minister assure the House that she will do all that she can to bring about a more flexible, robust and independent Invest Northern Ireland to deal with the specific difficulties of our economy and the development of a robust and worthwhile economy in the future?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Chairperson for his comments and for highlighting the implementation group, the Executive subcommittee and the issue of more flexibility for Invest Northern Ireland.

I want to make the purpose of the implementation group very clear. Along with my statement, Members will have received my responses to each of the recommendations. The recommendations have all been answered with regard to whether we agree or disagree with them, and we disagree with a very small proportion, as we agree with most of Professor Barnett’s report. However, I recognise that some proposals will take longer to implement than others. Therefore, to ensure that they are implemented in a timely fashion, I felt that there was a need for the implementation group, which will report to me directly, and I can ask it how the implementation is going. The Member is right to point out the importance of the implementation group in ensuring that we do not lose the momentum of what we have achieved so far with regard to the Barnett report.

The Executive subcommittee is also a key factor. If the current recession teaches us anything, it teaches us that it is felt right across Government and not just in one Department. If we develop an economic strategy in that way, we will get buy-in from the other Departments, and it will not be seen as being in a departmental silo, as it never should have been in the first place.

More flexibility for Invest Northern Ireland is also a key factor. Invest Northern Ireland was set up in 2002 with the aim of being flexible, so that it could meet the needs of business in a more meaningful way than that which Government could achieve directly. This approach is a way of doing that, and it will allow Invest Northern Ireland to become even more flexible and fleet of foot. There is a need to get answers quickly in today’s business world.

I recognise that we are dealing with public money and, therefore, we have to strike a balance between having the flexibility that I want for Invest Northern Ireland and, at the same time, taking account of the use of the large amounts of money that the Government instruct us to look after. There has been ongoing good engagement with the Department of Finance and Personnel, and we will be able to deal with that issue quickly. By April this year, those issues should be dealt with, and we will then be able to move forward.

Mr Campbell: I warmly welcome the Minister’s statement. It is unfortunate that a significant section of the press draws massive attention to an issue over which we do not currently have any control, while matters such as this, over which we do have control and which could make a significant difference to the wider population, do not attract the same attention.

The Minister has outlined comprehensively her suggestions for a new Department of the economy that would be sufficiently flexible to offer the skills training that is needed in the downturn — a need that we have seen, unfortunately, in some of our constituencies, for example, in Limavady, where 1,000 people lost their

jobs in one go — and the flexibility of introducing help and assistance for the small-business sector in times of recovery. What would be the dramatic difference between any new Department of the economy and what we have at present?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is fair to say the Department for Learning and Employment (DEL), DETI and Invest NI are working well together. However, a new Department would allow us to align our policies more closely and to take action quickly when necessary. Although I have put in place various measures to help to deal with the current economic downturn, such as the credit-crunch seminars or the short-term assistance scheme, Sir Reg Empey introduced a programme for skills, and those two schemes would have had more of an impact had we been able to wrap them together and deliver them from one Department. Moving forward and having a single Department of the economy would send out a clear message to other Administrations that we see the economy at the top of the Programme for Government and that we want to drive it ahead.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltim roimh ráiteas an Aire. I also welcome the Minister's statement to the House today. My two questions follow on from what Gregory Campbell said about reassuring the business community. A potential merger between the Minister's Department and the Department for Employment and Learning was mentioned. In the interim, will the Minister ensure that economic policy is kept in line and that it will go hand in hand with a skills and training strategy to meet the future needs of businesses?

12.45 pm

Invest NI has accepted the need for performance measures, but there does not seem to be much evidence that it is an ongoing feature of its work. At the end of her statement to the House, the Minister said that her Department would take on that responsibility, but will Invest NI continue to analyse performance measures and assess how far it has gone in attracting business? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The answer to the Member's last question is yes, absolutely. In my statement, I said that specific targets will be included in the new operating plan for Invest Northern Ireland. That will allow the Department to determine whether those targets have been met, and it will help to counter some of the allegations that are made against Invest Northern Ireland, which bear no relation to what I see on the ground. As my Department does not currently have such a responsibility, it is unable to produce a report. That change will add significantly to future transparency and openness.

In the interim, and as I said in response to a question from the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the subcommittee on the economy will be crucial in tying up the skills agenda with my Department's agenda. All large companies, whether indigenous or new foreign companies, want to be assured that the appropriate skills base is available here for any business expansion they wish to take forward. To my knowledge, to date no company has been unable to expand or invest in Northern Ireland because of a lack of appropriate skills, and we must ensure that that continues to be the case.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for her thorough and detailed statement to the House. I have two questions, the first of which relates to the proposed phasing out of support for business expansion. Will that action place Northern Ireland at a competitive disadvantage in attempting to attract inward investment and be to the detriment of future growth?

Secondly, businesses and trade unions disagreed with the panel's view that high energy costs have been addressed, and they suggested that more action is needed to bring down relative energy prices in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister share that view?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Conflicting evidence was heard on financial assistance. Professor Barnett felt that there was a need to move away from that quite quickly and to support research and development and innovation instead. However, in his original report to me he stated that:

“the severity of the ongoing recession highlights an important policy consideration, namely that financial assistance to industry will vary depending on the economic cycle.”

We must take into account the short-term difficulties that we face and retain all of the tools, including selective financial assistance, that are available to us. Why should we throw away that tool when other regions of the United Kingdom are retaining it? I understand the panel's point about research and development, and we are keen to move into that area in the medium to longer term. In the shorter term, however, DETI and Invest Northern Ireland must take cognisance of the fact that we are in the midst of an economic downturn.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Member will also be aware that money has already been indicatively offered for 2010-11 and that the financial assistance that has already been offered to companies cannot be removed simply to satisfy the report. The retention of selective financial assistance (SFA) is the right way to proceed in the shorter term. It will be up to the implementation group to consider whether SFA should be used in the future when, for example, companies offer jobs of higher value. There is a lot of work to be carried out in that area.

In relation to the Member's second point about high energy costs, regrettably, a lot of large business users have seen an increase in their energy bills, particularly over the last couple of months. The Member will be aware that the Utility Regulator is carrying out a review into energy costs. I met the regulator briefly just last week to establish how that review is going, and at that meeting it was indicated that all the energy companies have been working very closely with the regulator and that the review is being carried out as expeditiously as possible. I know that the cost of energy is a big worry for a lot of large firms here, and the Member has my commitment that we will do everything that we can to deal with those issues.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the speed with which she and her Department dealt with Professor Barnett's report. That report states that Invest Northern Ireland should concentrate more on small firms and projects with high innovative content. Does the Minister believe that the small business unit that she proposes to establish will deal with that?

In her speech the Minister said that the new economic strategy will form the heart of the next Programme for Government. Surely something can be done within the present Programme for Government to deal with the issues that have been raised.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that a lot of small businesses have for many years expressed the opinion that Invest Northern Ireland was not for them. Today, I have tried to highlight the fact that Invest NI actually did work with small businesses — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: However, there is a need to be more focused in helping our small businesses. The Member will know that our economy overwhelmingly consists of small and micro businesses.

I looked closely at what had happened in the aerospace industry. I know that it is a very specific sector, but that sector has been able to operate with a supply chain that works, involving companies such as Bombardier right down to small precision engineering companies that may have a couple of people working for them. Instead of having a large business unit and a small business unit, I want to see an integrated approach to business right across Northern Ireland, so that businesses in a particular sector can work through that sector without being labelled as a small business and not really being an Invest NI client. It is right to move away from Invest NI client status to a more integrated approach for small businesses.

In relation to the Member's second point, I referred to the economic strategy forming part of our Programme for Government in the next term. It is

absolutely key that we do that, but I hope that the Member can take from the rest of today's statement that I do not want to sit around and wait until then to move the economy forward. I have set out a number of ways that we can move forward quickly. I hope that the delegated limits and all the initiatives to make Invest NI more flexible will be in place by April 2010. Programmes have already been rationalised; I think immediately of the grant for R&D and the way in which it rationalised all the research and development programmes. A lot of practical work will happen before then, but I do realise that money has been committed for 2010-11. We are setting the economic strategy for the medium to longer term while dealing with the short-term challenges that are before us now in the most effective way that we can.

Mr Moutray: Like others, I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought this important and timely statement to the House so speedily. Will the Minister indicate whether the role of the Invest NI board will change as a result of her statement?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The members of the Invest NI board have worked very well together. The board provides a good challenge to the work of Invest NI and its chief executive. It has always fulfilled an important role in the work of Invest NI; for example, it sits on the case-work committees and helps to fulfil a challenge role. However, the precise role and remit of the board will be reviewed in the context of dealing with the revision of delegated limits. I have already said that I hope that that piece of work will be completed by April 2010.

Therefore, a slight change may be made to the role of the Invest Northern Ireland board. I thank the people who sit on the Invest Northern Ireland board, many of whom run successful businesses. They give much of their time and energy to Invest Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to the public service that they contribute to Northern Ireland, and I hope that they continue to provide that service.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for her statement. She said that today is not the day for her to respond to questions on specific details in the recommendations. However, I am disappointed that, when she mentioned that the report says that there is no evidence of resources having been wasted, she did not take the opportunity to demonstrate that the political will exists to develop and grow the social economy sector and to recognise the contribution of that sector to the economy and to the creation of employment in areas of disadvantage and need. Will the Minister recommend that adequate financial investment be given to the social economy sector to enable it to develop and grow?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member has asked me questions about the social

economy before, and it is important to recognise the role that that sector plays in Northern Ireland. When many other parts of the economy were not growing, the social economy grew, and I appreciate the work that is carried out in the sector.

I take issue with the Member's mention of money being wasted. The report recognises that Invest Northern Ireland has made a significant contribution to economic growth and growth in employment in Northern Ireland. At the time of the Barnett report's publication, scare stories, hype and noise were going around about money that had been wasted. The evidence of that is simply not there, and I urge people to reread the Barnett report on that issue.

The Member mentioned the need to deal with regional disparity. I asked that the report address that issue, and it does so. It says that companies should be allowed the scope to locate where they can operate most profitably. For external investors with increasingly tradable services, that means — unfortunately for me and my constituency — locating in large urban areas. I urge people to look at what the report has tried to do; it has tried to bring a step change to the Northern Ireland economy. That is what it is about, and it provides a good basis for moving forward.

Mr Hamilton: I will resist the temptation to engage in a discussion on the impact that regional disparity has on the Strangford constituency. The Minister talked about a consolidated suite of programmes. Can she outline what those programmes might be and any rationalisation that has taken place already?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have already referred to the fact that Invest Northern Ireland has looked at its suite of programmes and decided to rationalise in the research and development field. In December 2008, I launched the grant for R&D, which brought together all of the R&D and innovation programmes and allowed a single application to take place. That allows companies not to waste time giving consideration to what is the most appropriate programme for them to apply to but allows them to apply and get through the process more quickly. Business groups have told me that they found that that worked well, and they hoped that that would happen with other Invest NI programmes.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for the report and for her courage in pushing through much-needed reform to our economic policy. Many local authorities have expressed concern that Invest Northern Ireland has bought up property in prime locations that has not then been used and is denied to other businesses. Is the Minister minded to review Invest Northern Ireland's operation of its property strategy?

1.00 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I accept what the Member said. Paragraph 3.29 of the analysis of responses to the consultation exercise states that:

“Many local councils expressed their concern that Invest NI had purchased property in prime locations to hold for clients, which has then remained vacant and prevented other businesses from using the land.”

I presume that that is what the Member was referring to. However, contrary to that, a number of councils indicated that they would like Invest Northern Ireland to purchase more land as a means of attracting investment to their areas. Therefore, there are conflicting views on that issue.

It is important to look at our land acquisition strategy. The Member is right about that. An evaluation of Land and Property Services is under way, and I am due to receive a report on that in spring 2010. I hope that that means March 2010 as opposed to later in spring 2010 — I think that it does. That report will then go to the implementation group to take the matter forward. As I said, there are conflicting messages about the land acquisition strategy, and clarification is required.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her extensive reply to the report on the independent review of economic policy.

Although it may not have been specifically mentioned in the report, the Minister mentioned some fairly radical changes, including a closer relationship between DETI and DEL. However, it strikes me — we have discussed this before — that the missing link is a functioning postgraduate business school in Belfast that would embrace components of the universities. Has the Minister considered that as part of the radical restructuring, or has it been put on the long finger?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. It is not a matter of me putting it on the long finger. The Member is right that that specific issue was not addressed in the Barnett report. The review was, from a strategic point of view, more about considering the need for a Department of the economy. At present, such issues reside with my Executive colleague Sir Reg Empey and are to do with the skills and training agendas. However, I am happy to pass on the Member's comments to my colleague and, indeed, have a discussion with him about that issue.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that many businesses across Northern Ireland will support the establishment of a Department of the economy. Will Invest Northern Ireland continue to offer financial support to relatively low-paid tradable service projects, including call centres?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The key to all this is that Barnett was considering selective financial assistance in the medium to longer term. I made that clear today. I said that there was a push and a pull factor. There is a need to do that because we want to progress Northern Ireland through research and development. I nearly said *Vorsprung durch Technik*; I was thinking of that old Audi ad.

At the other end of the scale, Europe is looking at us and saying that regional aid may come to an end in 2013. Therefore, there is a need to consider the whole issue of selective financial assistance. However, given that we are in the midst of a recession, in the shorter term, we need all the tools that are available to us. Therefore, given the present circumstances, I firmly believe that selective financial assistance should remain available to us.

A lot of FDI companies come to Northern Ireland and initially place perhaps 15 to 20 employees here, do some research and development and, by doing so, attain Invest Northern Ireland's support. However, 75% of those companies then invest for a second time, and they grow what they have in Northern Ireland. It would be a retrograde step if we were not able to assist such firms with greater expansion in Northern Ireland. It would be detrimental to the economy. Therefore, I firmly believe that we may need to keep SFA available to us in the short term.

Mr O'Loan: I commend the Minister for what she is trying to do. I agree with her that simplistic criticisms about wasted millions or billions do not make any useful contribution to improvement. The amalgamation of DEL and DETI is an interesting proposal. That would be a major change, the full implications of which would have to be thought through, including how it might be done.

Will the Minister reconcile the need for innovation and sharp focus in the support systems for business with her very complex statement, which included a large number of specific initiatives? We want to encourage innovation and sharp focus in the business community. If they are not present in the support mechanisms, they will not be encouraged in that community.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not sure that I follow the Member. Is he asking whether there is a need to rationalise Invest NI programmes? That is certainly what we will do. I have asked the chief executive to bring forward that review to the date specified in my statement; I cannot recall that date just now. There is a pressing need to crunch down on the myriad of programmes available. It is too much to expect managers of small businesses to go through them all and see which ones apply to them. If

the Member is asking whether I am talking about rationalisation, the answer is that I am.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her lengthy statement, which lasted 40 minutes. At one stage, I was going to pass her my throat lozenges to help massage and soothe her throat.

We are clearly in an economic recession — I hate to use those words — and jobs are being lost. Will the Minister confirm that it is right to continue to focus on improving productivity?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his *ex post facto* sympathy. I did not see any sweets coming forward as I read my statement.

It is right that we continue to focus on productivity, particularly in the medium to longer term. If we want to produce a step change in Northern Ireland's economy, we must focus on it. However, Barnett and his colleagues on the review team recognised that there was a need to take the current economic cycle into account, and I have already referred to that in comments addressed to another Member. We must recognise where we are at the moment. Everything I have said about selective financial assistance should be understood in that context, and I know that the Member appreciates that.

Mr McHugh: Thank you, a *LeasCheann Comhairle*.

Almost every aspect of the Minister's statement has been covered, but there was a lot in it. I welcome the statement and the Minister's intent to look at Invest NI's delivery and try to leave us in a more competitive situation worldwide. It is important that industries become more R&D-focused to allow us to stay in the high salary bracket. We have to approach the problem from that angle.

My question has a local focus, and the Minister is aware of my position. We are moving forward to a new position and taking the new approach of R&D and innovation. Will the new Department reposition, and will mindsets change? All the innovations may take place, but it seems from all the Minister's answers that the Department is still adopting a Belfast-only position.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I do not know how the Member infers that we have a Belfast-only position. No one can accuse me of looking solely at Belfast in anything that is done in relation to DETI's policies. The Member knows that only too well, as Fermanagh will be the recipient of much telecommunications infrastructure in the near future. Advancing innovation and research and development can help any number of firms, regardless of location or size. With our excellent and growing telecommunications infrastructure, I envisage that

many firms across the country will take advantage of research and development and innovation assistance.

Research and development and innovation are not just about people wearing white coats; they are about new products, developments and processes, in whatever sector people work. I urge the Member not to see bogeymen where none exists and instead to work through the process and grasp what we are trying to do for the whole economy. Let me be clear: this is about the whole Northern Ireland economy, certainly not just about Belfast.

Dr Farry: The Minister has said that there is no waste in Invest Northern Ireland. Does she draw a distinction between waste and inefficiency, bearing in mind that, relative to other jurisdictions and compared with other inward investments, our job creation costs are high? Does she think that opportunity costs will arise from that?

The Minister also spoke about the importance of dealing with the current economic cycle. I had hoped that the report would have looked more to the future by focusing on restructuring the economy. Will the Minister speculate on how the recommendations will contribute to addressing the structural difficulties in the economy, which has a high dependency on the public sector, and the low level of productivity?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I will answer the last question first. The report is about a new economic focus for Northern Ireland by moving forward with higher productivity. That is why we are examining research and development and innovation, and it is why we are encouraging more private sector companies to be export-focused. We have seen many companies become more export-focused out of necessity over the past 18 months, and we want to support those companies in moving forward. Many smaller firms have grown from family structures, and they, therefore, do not have the necessary management structures to move ahead and make a difference through productivity.

Dr Farry also raised the issue of waste. I understand his point about additionality and about SFA having a lower additionality for research and development. However, when I visit different locations around the country for job opportunities, very few MLAs say to me that they do not want Invest Northern Ireland to give those companies assistance because they are providing low-value jobs. Members have choices to make. If they do not want Invest Northern Ireland to become involved in the so-called call centre phenomenon, much more work remains to be done to get foreign direct investment of that nature into Northern Ireland, because many of the firms that currently come here receive assistance from Invest Northern Ireland. Therefore, we have big choices to

make about the sort of economy that we want for Northern Ireland. For my part, I want an innovative economy that is based on research and development. I have seen the difference that research and development has made to the economies of countries such as Israel, and I think that it can do the same for our economy and do it very well.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an tuairisc seo a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Tá ceist agam ar an Aire faoi fhorbairt eacnamaíoch ar bhonn fo-réigiúnach.

Will the Minister assure the House that future economic development policy will ensure that subregional disparities will be addressed through the use of Invest Northern Ireland resources to produce a more balanced programme of economic growth throughout the North?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I said in response to a question about regional disparity from Ms McCann of West Belfast, I specifically asked the Barnett review group to consider regional disparity. It has said that companies should be allowed the scope to locate their premises wherever they feel that they can operate most profitably. That in itself presents a challenge for MLAs, because they must consider what they can give to their regions to mark them as out areas where companies will want to invest.

Through its regional offices, Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with all the companies that come to it for assistance. In fact, given that Invest Northern Ireland's client status will now go into the history books, many companies have the opportunity to move forward in partnership with Invest Northern Ireland and put themselves on the map, whether it be in research and development and innovation or in new export markets.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her lengthy statement. Paragraph 90 states that the permanent secretary will engage with the Audit Office to present a balanced way forward. Will the Minister assure us that the independence of the Audit Office will not be undermined in any way and that it will continue to evaluate the work of all Departments to ensure that taxpayers' money is accounted for in every way?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not responsible for the Audit Office, and I think that it would take unkindly to the suggestion that a conversation with my permanent secretary would, in some way, damage its independence.

I have long said that, if we want Invest Northern Ireland to manage its risk better, there must be an understanding across the Chamber, the press and the Audit Office about what we are trying to achieve, and that is the reason for the engagement between the

permanent secretary and the Audit Office. We are trying to achieve a situation in which that body can act more flexibly when faced with entrepreneurial business people. However, in doing so, that body must recognise that it is dealing with public money. That is why I asked my permanent secretary to have discussions with the Audit Office. I am quite sure that the Audit Office will remain independent at all times.

1.15 pm

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership: Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Mr Deputy Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Standing Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Declan O'Loan be appointed as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — *[Mr P Ramsey.]*

Statutory Committee Membership: Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Deputy Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Conall McDevitt be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — *[Mr P Ramsey.]*

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Universities: Protestant Students

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward measures to ensure that more students from a Protestant background are encouraged to opt for universities in Northern Ireland as their first choice.

The motion concerns what must be one of the most critical matters for education in our time and, if we fail to act, an issue that has long-term consequences for Northern Ireland and its economy. I refer, of course, to the number of Protestant students attending universities in Northern Ireland. The issue is not being raised to upset any political party or to attack the Minister. I hope that the debate will be taken in the spirit in which it is intended, which is to raise awareness and, hopefully, to address the serious situation before us.

Such a serious problem in our education system demands an urgent response from the Minister for Employment and Learning. The motion tells the Minister of the necessity for a strategic course of action that can realistically tackle, through a step-by-step approach, the serious imbalance in the number of Protestant students attending universities in Northern Ireland. The motion asks the Minister to go beyond a matter-of-fact response, because a deadpan restatement of the status quo is inadequate to current needs. There is restlessness in the Protestant community, and we need accountability and real answers from the Minister on how we are going to tackle the serious problem of low numbers of Protestant students attending Northern Ireland universities.

The challenge for our universities is to look to their figures, which have alerted us to the fact that Protestant students are not opting for those institutions as their first choice, and to ask why that is. Set against the background of the variety of choices that other parts of the United Kingdom offer, we would be pleased to see Northern Ireland universities encouraging Protestant students to elect them as their first choice. Let us take action to make Northern Ireland universities, which are a valuable resource, the first option and best alternative from what is available.

Given the scary statistics, which I will present, a valiant effort is required from the Minister and our universities to address the raw fact of the low number of Protestant students attending our universities. The

Minister will understand that we have to chivvy him along on that matter. I will set out evidence detailing the imbalance in the number of Protestant students and demonstrate to the House why it is necessary to bring forward measures for Northern Ireland universities to attract more Protestant students.

I will lay out the cold, clinical statistics on the state which we are currently in. For instance, at Queen's University in 2007 and 2008, there were 6,735 people from a Protestant background and 8,245 from the Roman Catholic community. At the Magee campus of the University of Ulster, 530 students were from the Protestant community, and 2,090 students were from the Roman Catholic community. At the Belfast campus of the University of Ulster, 450 students were from the Protestant community, and 545 students were from a Roman Catholic background. At the Jordanstown campus of the University of Ulster, 3,685 students were from the Protestant community, and 6,105 students were from the Roman Catholic community. At St Mary's University College, 10 students were from a Protestant background, and 910 students were from the Roman Catholic community. The statistics also show that students from a Roman Catholic background receive more information on funding than those from the Protestant community: 69% to 55%.

The Equality Commission published an expert paper titled 'Educational Migration and Non-Return in Northern Ireland'. That paper highlighted the stark fact that students from the Protestant community are more likely than their counterparts from the Roman Catholic community to migrate from Northern Ireland to Great Britain for higher education and stay without returning. Those are not my words but words used in the expert report, the findings of which will shock all right-thinking people.

Let me go further and look at the 2005-06 period, in which some 2,736 school leavers were tracked. A staggering 29% of our students migrated to Great Britain in that period, and Protestant school leavers were 11% more likely to migrate to study in GB than their Roman Catholic counterparts.

Although statistics can be dry, the following should excite and animate the House to action: two thirds of Northern Ireland school leavers who studied in Great Britain did not return to Northern Ireland in the short to medium term. An examination of community backgrounds shows the reality that more Roman Catholics studied in Northern Ireland than Protestants: 77% to 66%.

The picture becomes bleaker still when it is realised that, in absolute terms, 59% of all school leavers — 3,852 — are from a Roman Catholic background while those from a Protestant background make up 36%. I put it to the Minister that, despite increasing enrolment

to the Northern Ireland institutions, the proportion of Roman Catholic students to Protestant students in our universities has not changed for a number of years. When I refer to the Protestant exodus from our universities, the word "exodus" refers to the departure or, as some may rightly say, exit of Protestants from Northern Ireland universities and, indeed, Northern Ireland in the short to medium term.

The facts that I have outlined speak for themselves and ask the Minister why Protestant students are retreating from the courses available in our Northern Ireland universities. What do we need to do at home to ensure that our Protestant students do not withdraw and take flight to GB universities? How can we ensure that they do not refrain from going to university? Having established that there is a problem, let us apply ourselves in a hopeful way to the measures that the Minister needs to take to tackle it.

Dr Farry: Will the Member clarify why, as a self-proclaimed unionist, he views a person from Northern Ireland who wishes to study in another part of the United Kingdom as any more of a problem than someone from London who wishes to study in Newcastle?

Mr Easton: If the Member had been listening properly, he would have heard me say that people have the right to go to whatever university they want to. I am complaining about the lack of Protestants attending universities in Northern Ireland.

No longer is it acceptable to export our home-grown talent or not to take measures to encourage attendance at our universities. No longer will we stand idly by while our society and our economy suffer from a lack of Protestant students.

I challenge the universities to conduct detailed research into why Protestant students are looking elsewhere for their education or are not going to university at all. They should apply their brains and resources to the problem and produce an action plan on how to address the issue. That action plan should be able to be audited for success.

In the past, Protestant students found the atmosphere at universities here to be that of a cold house, and that encouraged them to look elsewhere. Terrorism also played a significant part in that, but thankfully we have moved on from the evil and ultimate futility of that, so let us try to ensure that the cold house is a thing of the past.

Research also informs us that teachers are a key influence in assisting and guiding students on where they undertake their studies. Should we look to teacher training and see how, as a key influence in providing guidance, teachers can promote and sell the benefits of what we have here?

I will return briefly to the circumstances or, more accurately, the plight of Stranmillis University College. Will the Minister give his detailed attention to Stranmillis and reprioritise so that its future can be taken into account? That future has a direct correlation to the future availability of places at an institution that has attracted high-quality students. Such reprioritisation should involve educating students here so that society in Northern Ireland can benefit. In many ways, Stranmillis has bucked the trend and helped to prevent the further deterioration of the already critical and severe calamity of a Protestant student exodus. However, even here we see changes, and the proposed merger of Stranmillis and Queen's may make the situation even worse.

The Minister must address himself to the access and equality issue. In fact, a significant 14.1% of Protestants acknowledge and have the limited perception that St Mary's is not welcoming to people from their community, whereas only 3.1% of the Roman Catholic community perceive that Stranmillis is not welcoming to them. If the Minister were to adopt an ostrich approach to Stranmillis's plight by sticking his head in the sand and letting it be, the Protestant student numbers would only be distressed further. That prospect is too awful to contemplate.

It is vital to tackle and stop the discrimination against Protestants that the Catholic certificate of education causes. The Catholic Church and the Minister have a duty to end that discrimination against Protestant student teachers. In order to address the unfair advantage that the Catholic certificate of education offers, dare I suggest that we do away with that certificate or create a controlled sector certificate to correct that imbalance?

The evidence base highlights the quality and quantity of what we can offer students. We must realise that students are in the marketplace. Are courses elsewhere in GB more attractive? If so, why? Given that the Internet has been identified as the key source of information to potential student applicants, should universities in Northern Ireland use the Internet more to promote themselves? Should we set targets for our universities so that the serious imbalance in student numbers can be corrected? Furthermore, researchers have said that government should do more to encourage Protestant students to apply and must take action to inform Protestant students of the financial support that is available to them.

The deteriorating situation for Protestants in our secondary schools compared with their Catholic counterparts merits further attention and the creation of an adequately resourced action plan. We must reverse the laissez-faire approach that allows proportionately fewer Protestant students from secondary education to progress to further education and university.

I have laid out in stark terms the position that we are in.

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

Mr Easton: Nothing less than a robust action plan with built-in criteria is required to address the serious imbalance in numbers.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Member who moved the motion raised a number of issues. I agree on one point: there is a need for an action plan but not one that is based on this motion. I will elaborate on that.

I am disappointed that we did not have this debate in October. At that time, I was interested to hear the Minister's views. In fairness to the Minister — I welcome him to the debate — I had the opportunity to read his press release, and it is important that we read some of it into the record. The press release gave a number of figures stating that we are losing fewer students today than 20 years ago. It also gave a breakdown of Protestant and Catholic numbers. Moreover, it showed that, in general, it is likely that more students from a Catholic tradition leave the North to study in the South or in Britain.

In saying that, I do not want to get into the issue of Protestant and Catholic numbers. There is a problem with student numbers from poor, working-class areas and with the number of women students. When talking about personal choice, we must realise that people choose to study in universities in Asia, America, England, Scotland or the Twenty-six Counties for a number of reasons. We should not, on the one hand, tell students that the world is their oyster but, on the other hand, criticise them for studying elsewhere to find the best education. Personal choice must be taken into consideration. The other reality is that some people do not achieve the relevant qualifications to study at our top-class institutions here, and others just want to see a bit of the world.

The research documents that the Member who moved the motion mentioned are very important.

It is important to note that the Equality Commission's research showed that more Catholics than Protestants — 40% and 34% respectively — went on to higher education. However, that research also stated:

“This was influenced by a number of factors, including ... aspirations and culture.”

That is the key to the issue. We need to examine that research; that is where the action plan comes in.

1.30 pm

The Equality Commission's research also suggested that:

“there may be cultural barriers to continuing in education facing boys from poorer Protestant communities ... many disadvantaged

Protestant communities were still adjusting to the fact that there were no longer the same opportunities available to school leavers” and

“that there was less support from parents ... regarding continuing their education.”

That is also a key factor. Fifteen or 20 years ago, boys from Protestant communities always had a job waiting for them. We must change the mindset of people from poorer working-class areas. We also need to consider the gender issue; the percentage of girls going on to university was much higher than that for boys, and that is before we even consider the numbers of Catholic girls and Protestant girls. We must tackle that issue.

I am conscious that we should not highlight figures when the statistics show that they are not true and that the situation has improved in recent years. I am keen to hear what the Minister says. However, if we are going to draw up an action plan, let us examine why more women than men and more people from affluent areas are going on to further and higher education. Let us ensure that people who want to go on to further and higher education have equality of opportunity and access.

Alex Easton will have gathered that we will oppose the motion. It does not make sense, and the figures do not add up. If he is going to quote research, he must be careful about what comes after it. It is all right to quote figures, but the research shows that there are issues in Protestant communities that prevent boys in particular from going on to further and higher education.

Mr McClarty: It is important to begin by stating that it is a fundamental right of all students to choose freely where they go to study. In a liberal democracy, it is not for the state to dictate where people should study. It is certainly not the role of a Department to take steps to ensure that students do not leave their region.

It is, of course, for a Government to create the conditions whereby people do not want to leave, but that is a very different prospect indeed. The Government should ensure that the quality of education in Northern Ireland is such that no one who wants to stay is forced to leave. The Government should also ensure that there are sufficient jobs in a range of sectors and at a range of levels so that no one is forced to leave for work purposes.

Very few students are forced to leave Northern Ireland. Veterinary medicine is one of the few subjects for which Northern Ireland cannot cater. However, in virtually the entire spectrum of subjects, Queen's University and the University of Ulster have the capacity and quality of provision to cater for any school leaver in Northern Ireland who wants to stay here. The vast majority of school leavers who go to the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain or further afield are

doing so because they are determined to do so. That is their right.

Many students leave for lifestyle reasons, simply because they want a change and the independence that moving away from Northern Ireland brings. Are we really saying to those people that that option should not be open to them? We must also remember that there are educational reasons why people may want to move. Queen's University and the University of Ulster are excellent institutions, and in fields such as medicine and law they are among the best in the United Kingdom. However, universities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Trinity College Dublin provide a tremendous draw for some of our brightest students; indeed, some Members have those institutions as their alma mater. Are we really to close that avenue to our brightest students?

The number of Protestant and Catholic students who leave Northern Ireland is roughly equal. The brain drain exists to some extent, but the Minister is addressing that through the "Come on Over" campaign. However, it is not true to say that there is a sectarian problem or that it is more of an issue for Protestants than for anyone else.

We must, therefore, put more effort into making Northern Ireland an attractive place for business. We must grow the private sector and provide a wider range of opportunities in Northern Ireland for our graduates, so that those who do leave for universities in other places have the opportunity to come back. That is the real issue, and that is what I want to be addressed.

Mr P Ramsey: In the lead-up to the debate, the SDLP gave careful consideration to any qualitative or quantitative evidence that would support the motion. Unfortunately, insufficient evidence exists to enable us to support it.

Going by comments made by some unionist representatives to the media, the motion seems to be predicated on the argument that there is a chill factor for Protestant students. We are not convinced that that is the case or that more Protestants migrate than any other group. Our assertion is, however, that more investment is required to increase the number of student places here and stop the overall brain drain from Northern Ireland. I will deal with those three points in turn, starting with the chill factor argument.

As a social democrat, if there was a chill factor for Protestants or any other group in society, I would be concerned, and my party and I would demand that action be taken. When I discussed claims about the chill factor with those in university management, they strenuously made the point that their organisations are professional, inclusive and diverse. Their universities are internationally renowned institutions that do not tolerate sectarianism, and they reject any claim to the contrary. I also met Protestant students in my constituency

and officials from the students' union, and they also reject any such claim.

In addition, I know of no rigorous study that shows that there is a chill factor. The Osborne study into secondary school leavers found that only about 2% of respondents felt that they would feel uncomfortable in a particular institution for religious reasons.

To provide confidence in that regard, and I say this in good faith to the Member who proposed the motion, I am prepared to request that Sir Graeme Davies, as part of his review of higher education, include a study on the question of a chill factor for any group in our universities. I will do that with the support of the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Minister's endorsement.

I take on board the point made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning about the attitude of young men differing from their female counterparts. There are several reasons for the migration of students and the historical religious imbalance. The University of Ulster's seven-year review states:

"Those who obtained their university education elsewhere may be broadly divided into two groups of roughly equal size. Firstly, there were the so-called 'determined leavers': in the main they had very good A-level results, came from the larger Protestant grammar schools and from better-off families, and proceeded to the older universities in Scotland and northern England. The second group were commonly characterised as 'reluctant leavers': they had lower A-level results, were evenly divided between the two communities in Northern Ireland, and tended to go to the post-1992 universities in Britain. A key factor in regard to this second group was that the points scores required for entry to the University of Ulster (And Queen's) were significantly higher than those required by comparable institutions. The net outcome of the situation was that most emigrants were Protestants and that both universities in Northern Ireland had a clear majority of Catholic students."

On the second point, I would like to deal with the migration figures. In October 2009, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, said that:

"The total numbers of school leavers from Protestant and Catholic communities leaving to study in Great Britain are very similar. In 2006-07 there were 1,137 Protestant and 1,105 Catholic school leavers and in 2007-08 there were 1,142 Protestant and 1,060 Catholic school leavers choosing to study at GB universities. If we examine the total number of Northern Ireland domiciled students studying in Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, it is likely that there are now more students from a Catholic background, rather than a Protestant background, choosing to study outside Northern Ireland."

A fair analysis of the studies from which I have quoted and other studies would be that Protestants from higher-income backgrounds and grammar schools choose universities in Britain because they see it as a matter of aspiration and perceived quality. They also see Britain and Scotland in particular as natural places to move to.

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

Mr P Ramsey: Catholics are more likely to opt to go to universities in Northern Ireland. We should not suggest that students should not opt for universities outside Northern Ireland. It is a personal and family choice.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party opposes the motion. We believe that it has a sectarian undertone that we cannot support. All our young people, regardless of community background or social class, should be encouraged to go to further or higher education colleges to reach their full educational potential here or elsewhere if they so wish. However, we acknowledge the need to enable Protestant working class pupils to achieve better in school.

We do not believe that the motion stands up to scrutiny. The figures, which some Members have quoted, speak for themselves. The total number of school leavers from the two major sections of our community who go to study in Great Britain are very similar. In 2007-08, 1,142 Protestant compared with 1,060 Catholic school leavers chose to leave to study in Great Britain. There is very little difference. As Sue Ramsey said, if one were to add to those figures the number of students going to the Republic of Ireland to study, it is likely that there are now more young people from a Catholic rather than a Protestant background leaving Northern Ireland to study elsewhere.

The motion also mentions choice. It is a matter of personal choice for the undergraduate to select the university in which they want to study, depending on that institution's reputation. We in Northern Ireland produce a large number of high flyers each year who achieve outstanding results at GCSE and A level. There is nothing wrong with their wanting to choose the top universities in the UK or the Republic of Ireland.

Although our home-grown universities offer quality teaching, Queen's University ranked only forty-second in the 'Sunday Times' university league table, and the University of Ulster was a few places behind at fifty-fifth place. One may argue the merits of such tables, but teachers and parents take notice of them. If your son or daughter finds themselves armed with four A grades at A level, should they not aspire to spend three or more wonderful years at Oxford, Cambridge, University of London or other institutions of a similar standing in our neighbouring jurisdictions? I am the proud mother of two sons who benefited from an excellent education in England, each attending the top university for their degree course.

Alternatively, those who do not make the grade to go to Queen's University or the University of Ulster, which have only 40,000 places between them, have to

go somewhere else. What is the problem with that? Let us not be so parochial.

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No, I am sorry.

We should be grateful that our students have so many options compared with students from other countries. After all, it is not a bad thing for a young person to leave Northern Ireland to live in societies that are more tolerant, diverse and progressive than ours. It will open their minds.

1.45 pm

We need to make Northern Ireland an attractive place that will entice people back once they have graduated. We need to be able to offer them a shared and better future in a place where there are job opportunities and where they can enjoy a quality lifestyle, free from instability, bigotry, segregation and division. I still hope that my two sons will return some day.

Mr Craig: I support the motion, and I look forward to addressing the issues that it raises. Although I agree fully with the argument about choice, we cannot ignore the fact that two thirds of students who leave Northern Ireland do not return in the short to medium term. Three quarters of those who choose to study at higher education institutions on the mainland are Protestants, whereas more Catholics opt to stay in Northern Ireland. There is no getting away from the religious imbalance in the make-up of the student populations at both Queen's University and the University of Ulster, where I studied.

It is vital that we try to retain students in Northern Ireland, not only for our education system. Something is driving Protestants away from universities in Northern Ireland. We can stick our heads in the sand and ignore that issue if we want to. Indeed, I get the distinct feeling that that is what is going to happen today. However, there is a religious imbalance. There is a lot of talk about equality in the Chamber, but where is the equality of choice for students here today, especially those from a Protestant or unionist background? Are those students really welcome in universities in Northern Ireland?

It is a long time since I was at university; it is 25 years, in fact. However, I know from my own experience that it was a cold house for anyone from a unionist background. The year before I started studying at Jordanstown — it later became the University of Ulster — members of our security forces were murdered in the vicinity. Unionists did not raise their heads above the parapet; if they did, they would have had them shot off, literally.

I agree with other Members, including the Minister, who said that things have moved on politically and socially since that period. However, we need to address

certain issues to correct the religious and political imbalance in the numbers who attend Northern Ireland universities. What is driving students away? What makes them more willing to go to the mainland? Is it all down to choice? Why do more unionists, or pro-British people, choose to go to universities in England, Scotland or Wales, or, as was mentioned, to the very good universities in Dublin? I suggest that there is more to it than choice.

Students have approached me to point out the imbalance in the teaching in our universities. For example, why has there been a long series of lectures on history from a nationalist perspective at Queen's? Why was the system not balanced to reflect the unionist tradition in Northern Ireland? It is divisive that not one of that series of 10 history lectures at Queen's reflected the unionist background. It creates the impression that students from a Protestant or unionist background are not wanted at that university and that their history does not count. We need to address the culture that has developed in our universities. I appeal to the Minister to examine those issues to see what is making our universities cold houses for Protestants and unionists.

Mr Leonard: Does the Member accept that he is possibly accusing some very professional people of creating an imbalance? Unionist advisers have taught in universities and continue to do so. There have been examples of university lecturers saying that collusion should not be talked about because it did not exist. Does the Member realise that there are two sides to the argument, and that he may well be engaging in quite a lot of professional negativism?

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

Mr Craig: I find the comments from our friend about collusion interesting. I was taught Irish history at school from a nationalist and a unionist background. The choice of what one believed was left up to the individual. I suggest that that is part of the problem in our universities. Students are given a one-sided story and one opinion. The opinions of people from a unionist background do not seem to count any longer. Until those issues are addressed, there is nothing to attract Protestants and unionists to our universities in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the religious imbalance in our universities in Northern Ireland will continue to grow.

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

Mr Craig: I support the motion.

Mr Butler: It is unfortunate that the motion asks the Minister to take measures to attract students of one particular background. The motion reflects more the state of unionism rather than what the Minister can do.

There is no question about it: we live in a divided society. Our kids are educated separately in primary and post-primary schools. When the University of Ulster was created, it was located in Coleraine rather than Derry. We had all sorts of problems at Queen's University with the flying of the Union Jack, the anthem and fair employment. Even the very backgrounds of our universities ran along religious and political lines.

I think that one of the Minister's statements referred to the piece of research that was done by Professor Osborne. The issue of why the majority of students at the University of Ulster and Queen's University are Catholic is much more complex than the DUP is trying to portray it as today. David McClarty touched on the issue of determined leavers, who are probably from more middle-class, Protestant backgrounds. They choose to go to places such as Scotland and the north of England because they think that they will receive a better education. The reluctant leavers go to universities elsewhere because of the grades and standards that are sought here.

If we look at more of Professor Osborne's research, we see that in maintained schools — this is not Sinn Féin's argument — there seems to be much more provision for, and focus on, kids going into further education. There is better post-16 provision than there is in the controlled sector. It is not the fault of the universities that the majority of students in both universities are Catholic; there are much deeper problems with which we have to deal. I recognise that Protestant underachievement in the Belfast area, for example, is far worse than it is in somewhere such as Glasgow. There are also other factors. A lot of Protestant kids would have looked to the traditional manufacturing firms, such as the shipyard and Mackie's, for employment. There is a changing economic situation.

The last time that this motion was due to be put to the House, Sinn Féin tried to table an amendment that called on the Minister to bring forward proposals to encourage students from all backgrounds to take up further or higher education in both of our universities. However, the amendment was rejected.

I am uncomfortable about the unfair language used by the DUP about both our universities. I understand that in the past there were issues around the Irish language and republicanism. However, that is unfair today. If asked, the students' union would confirm that people of any background — Protestant, unionist and republican included — can set up any society that they want. Both the University of Ulster and Queen's deliver activities and courses in a neutral environment.

The most recent evidence quoted by the Minister is that we are losing students from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. It is not a question of from one or the other. Some issues must be separated to assess

whether our further and higher education sectors are becoming sectarianised. We must look at how to deal with the underachievement of Protestants, particularly in the controlled sector in Belfast. The motion is presented in a way that tries to claim that somehow there is discrimination in further and higher education against Protestant students. I totally reject that.

Politically, we must try to ensure that the Assembly works, and that we can share power. That sends a message to people that there is a future here.

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

Mr Butler: I believe that many students in the Protestant community are registering a vote of no confidence in the political dispensation. We have to reject the motion.

Mr Irwin: I thank my colleagues for bringing this important issue to the Floor of the Assembly.

The 'Educational Migration and Non-Return in Northern Ireland' report states clearly that students from a Protestant community background are more likely than those from a Catholic background to pursue higher education in mainland Britain. It also concluded that:

"Around two-thirds of Northern Ireland students who studied in Great Britain do not return to Northern Ireland in the short-to-medium term."

Those two conclusions present their own problems for our learning and employment sectors. I believe that, as the motion states, measures should be brought forward to try to reverse that trend, and, in so doing, to increase our graduate base and stem the brain drain about which we have recently heard so much.

The wide-reaching effects on Northern Ireland of non-return and educational migration have already been stated. Many speeches have been made in the Chamber on the brain drain. Our bright young graduates are not choosing to return to Northern Ireland. The fact that one section of the community seems to be most affected by student migration and non-return should strengthen our resolve to try to address the 11% difference between Catholics and Protestants, as publicised by the Equality Commission.

In looking at some of the reasons for the situation, the research paper lists possibilities such as personal choice, aspirations, widening access to places and competition for places in local universities. Although we cannot and will not demand that students remain in Northern Ireland to study, the Minister can look at reasons for educational migration and non-return, and make some improvements to our higher education system to encourage students to study, and then seek work, in Northern Ireland.

There is stiff competition for further and higher education places here. The report mentions that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has made available some 600 additional places in the further education sector, which, at the time of the report's publication, had not been filled. I am keen to know how that situation stands a year on.

The common perception may be that affluence plays a large part in a student's decision to study outside Northern Ireland. Although the report lists affluence as a cause, it is not the sole driving factor behind a student's decision. The courses and degrees that students choose to pursue shape their lives, but the report makes clear that where they study also has an influence on where they gain employment. We must look carefully at the reasons for educational migration. The Department must do more to improve the situation for our students, with the emphasis on those from a Protestant background, to ensure that Northern Ireland has the graduates to sustain its economy in the longer term. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am concerned by the motion's overtones.

First, I believe that it strikes at the very heart of what we call democracy. I have said before and I make no apology for stating again that it would be wrong for the Assembly to interfere with the human rights of young people who apply to universities or higher education institutions throughout the United Kingdom, especially since we are part of the United Kingdom. One's right to freedom of movement and to choose where one completes one's education are part and parcel of the union.

2.00 pm

It would be an intolerable and unsupportable situation if we sought to influence students from a Protestant background to opt merely for the two local universities, rather than universities in other parts of the United Kingdom. We must remember that the United Kingdom is our country, and such measures would restrict and inhibit Protestant students' freedom of action and choice. At the very least, that is the presumption and thinking behind the motion. If not, the motion is meaningless. What is it: empty words or an attempt to restrict the lives and career choices of Protestant students? Any attempt to restrict the freedom of choice of students and school leavers is simply not supportable.

The other factor that turns me against the motion is that, in my experience of education — first in the Republic of Ireland, then in a university in Northern Ireland and then across the water doing research and studying law — not once at any of the institutions in which I studied did sectarianism ever raise its head. I object to anything that attacks the very heart of

education by bringing sectarianism into it. Education is for the benefit of individuals, not for any particular denomination or section of society.

Economic factors play a big part for young teachers who have gone through university and are applying for a job in our schools. Given that there are nine applications for every vacancy, is it any wonder that students who want to go into education look at the overall situation and decide that the best way to get a job is to go to a university near to where jobs are available? Economic factors apply no matter where young people are educated. Nevertheless, even when young people go across the water to study at universities in other parts of the United Kingdom, it is great that they are as well educated there as they would have been if they had gone to a university in Northern Ireland. For those reasons, I cannot support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the debate, because it provides me with an opportunity to counter some of the myths surrounding this issue. The motion is based to some degree on fact, but the wording of and thoughts behind the motion and the remedies that have been suggested are not well founded. To the extent that the motion has some validity, it is not clear whether the Department for Employment and Learning bears sole responsibility. The issue is broadly situated in several policy areas.

It is a reality that the proportion of Protestant students entering higher education who migrate to Great Britain is significantly higher than that for Catholics: 34% compared to 23%.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that, rather than generating something positive, today's motion will send out a very negative message to young prospective Protestant students considering going to university in Northern Ireland? Rather than achieving something positive and useful, the motion will do the very opposite. It is also highly offensive to our two universities, which, year after year, are on record as addressing problems of equality, including sectarianism.

Mr O'Loan: I agree. Indeed, I was going to make a similar point. I think that the Minister, when he commented on the motion which was not debated in October, did not present the full picture. He emphasised the actual numbers, which are roughly equal, of Catholics and Protestants going to Great Britain, but I think that the proportions are more important. The proportion of "what" is also very important. I quoted the percentages of people entering higher education, but equally important is the proportion of the age group that is eligible to enter higher education. I believe that that presents a very different picture, and I will return to that.

The Equality Commission, as has been noted, tells us that around two thirds of students who study in Great

Britain do not return in the short to medium term, but even that simple statement needs to be qualified. Not enough is really known about the long-term patterns, and it depends very much on the economic climate pertaining at the time. In fact, one author writing in the CRC research journal said that, on the basis of stated intentions at aged 16, overall Protestants are more likely to come back if they leave, and there is very little evidence of the actual returnee figures.

We need to take seriously the research evidence from the Equality Commission on the actual factors influencing student migration to Great Britain. Those include personal choice and aspirations; socio-economic status and affluence; student funding; and the availability of places. There is little or no evidence that chill factors have an impact on the composition of Queen's University and the University of Ulster. It is important to state and recognise that fact.

It is also important not to perpetuate myths around the issue. That is potentially damaging to the universities, as John Dallat said, and it might contribute to the problem that the proposers fear. If credit were given to them, they would be in danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, I hope that that credit will not be given to them.

Let us analyse what is going on: there is a shortage of higher education places in Northern Ireland; the number of places is capped by the Executive; and 29% of our higher education students leave, and very few come back. That is a major issue for us. Those who leave Northern Ireland must be split into two groups: those who want to leave and those who have no choice but to move. Incidentally, as some Members have pointed out, we should welcome the opportunity offered for experience outside Northern Ireland. On the whole, that is very healthy. Because of the scarcity of places, the grades required are higher than for equivalent courses in many GB universities.

Everything that I quote here is from established research. DEL research from 2008 states that Protestants are not getting as good A-level results as Catholics. There is no difference in the grammar schools, but there is a big difference in the secondary schools. The Equality Commission's figures confirm that Catholics are more likely to have the required entry grades: 47% of Catholic school leavers in 2005-06 had two or more A levels compared to 42% of Protestant school leavers.

There is competition for university places, and, as a result, many young Protestants may have to look across the water to get a place. Also, there is evidence that, although young Catholics have their eyes set on university, many young Protestants only look to further education. Therefore, it is important to identify the problem. Does anything need to be done, or can anything be done?

Far more Catholics than Protestants are going into higher education in any case: 40% against 34% in 2005-06. That is a remarkably stark and serious statistic. Therefore, the real task is to bring up the educational standards in Protestant secondary schools and to change the culture in Protestant working-class areas, so that there is a much greater aspiration to higher levels of education.

We know that our future here is in a knowledge-based economy, and we need to prepare for that. The party from which the proposer comes might need to think what can be done to address the real problem as I have presented it. That might make him and his party consider their education policies, particularly around the area of academic selection.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion. However, I listened to Mr Easton and Mr Craig, and I took Mr Easton at his word when he said that they did not table the motion as a means to get at anyone. He articulated his party's stance, which is well intentioned, and that is welcome. If any group faces barriers to accessing higher education, I fully support the raising of that issue in the Chamber and elsewhere. The debate is about widening access to higher education.

If, in the past, there were situations and contexts, either real or perceived, that barred young people or made them feel as though they were not welcome in higher education institutions, that was, clearly, unacceptable. However, evidence shows that society has moved on from that situation, if it existed. If there is migration to Britain by young people who want to study at universities there, research by Osborne, Smith and Gallagher supports the view that they go for complex and nuanced reasons, as my colleague Paul Butler mentioned. One such reason is cost. Certainly, it is difficult for young people from socially deprived backgrounds to go elsewhere to study. Other Members have raised that point. Perhaps, work needs to be done on another front to widen access and remove barriers to higher education.

As regards the chill factor, I refer again to the research that was carried out by Professor Osborne and others. As part of that research, a cohort of year-12 pupils were asked whether they were aware of any determining factors that would bar them from or make them not want to go to a particular university. Sixty-three per cent said that they were not aware of any factors that would bar them from or make them feel unwelcome at a particular university. The range of factors included ethnicity, disability and religion. Of the cohort, 4% said that there were determining factors. Of that 4%, I believe that 15 pupils said that they would consider religion to be a factor. That is a very small minority. Those figures came from asking young people.

Some Members mentioned the Equality Commission's research, which points out that, although Protestants are more likely to go to higher education institutions in Britain, that is possibly a matter of choice for some young people who do not consider that they will need a grant to study. Many of them considered that they would simply ask their parents to help them out. However, a young person from a socially deprived background cannot do that. Those issues must be examined.

I want to go back to the chill factor.

2.15 pm

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

Mrs McGill: I will finish on this point, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Equality Commission has stated that there is little recent evidence of political chill factors on this matter.

Mr Shannon: I look at this matter from a slightly different angle to that of the Member who has just spoken. The motion was tabled after recent figures showed that three quarters of Ulster students who choose further education institutions on the mainland are Protestants. That is the issue that is before the House. We are asking why that is the case. On 25 May 2006, the 'News Letter' stated that that phenomenon was due to the Province's higher fees and student loans. The newspaper stated that a study that it carried out found that fewer Protestants were applying for any higher education, and it found that one of the compelling reasons for that was that students were concerned about getting into debt. Many Members are aware of that. The fear of debt is deterring some students at secondary schools from going to university.

Any time that I speak on an issue in the Chamber, I speak from experiences that I have become aware of in my constituency office; it comes from the people whom I represent. That is where I am coming from in addressing this motion. Many boys from Protestant or controlled schools cannot see an advantage in investing in education, if it means getting into debt. Instead, they plump for a trade, especially in the construction industry, where there is a potential to earn big money relatively early in their career. Of course, the big money in the construction industry is long gone. We hope that it will return, but that will be some time in the future. Those same fears about debt were expressed by Roman Catholic male pupils but at significantly lower levels.

This haes men't that less warkin cless bakgroon Protestan maels hae pit in fer univarsitie wi' mony bein a majer kinsarn, en this wus a real feer whun univarsitie fees pit alang sied wi' an ennin o' grants an tha stert o' studen loans. Shairly this is sumthin which tha Meinstar must tak a closer luk at. Ther is wae in

which maer woarkin cless studens wull stae oan in further leer an that is by gien mare help en suppoart.

That has meant that fewer working-class Protestant males apply for university, with money a major factor. That is a real fear when one considers the level of university fees, coupled with the end of grants and the beginning of student loans. Surely the Minister must closely review that situation. More working-class students will stay on in further education if they are given more help and practical support. The criteria for help and aid must be looked at again to encourage more people to consider staying at home to go to university.

The Minister and his Department must take that into account if we are to induce the working class to go into third-level education. The idea of going to university is too daunting for young people from many struggling families. Those young people feel that to bring in money in the short term is better than a long-term investment in their future. That is the issue for many people. They weigh up the options of making money in the short term or making a long-term commitment to university.

We are left with the middle classes believing that they can get a taste of the so-called high life on the mainland at very little extra cost. They might as well go there than apply to universities in Northern Ireland, stay here, live at home and continue to struggle as much as they would on the mainland. The phrase “the grass is always greener” certainly applies to many young people who make such decisions.

The majority of students who study on the mainland do not come home. Therefore, they do not bring home their expertise, which would better Northern Ireland. We benefit from their work in the form of taxes that are paid to the UK Treasury and, subsequently, in the distribution to Northern Ireland of the block grant, but we would benefit more if we kept our bright minds in Northern Ireland to offer all that they had to move Northern Ireland forward. I have a simple question for the Minister: how best can we achieve that? That is where we are coming from in approaching this motion. Some Members who have spoken have grasped what we are trying to achieve.

The majority of school leavers from the Catholic community prefer to continue their education at home. Subsequently, they get jobs at home, and their expertise remains in the Province. That is great. They make a valuable contribution; that is what I am saying, and that is what my party is saying.

What can be done to ensure that the best of all sectors of the community contribute directly to the Province? That is the issue. I am not asking for restriction on freedom of movement, not by any stretch of the imagination. I am asking the Minister what can

be done to encourage those who have, for the most part owing to financial constraints, decided that they may as well go to the mainland rather than stay at home. We are looking for a plan of action and a method to address the problems.

The Minister has always been responsive to any issues that I have raised, and I know that he has acted similarly in respect of other Members who have asked questions. I ask the Minister to ensure that the matter is not left to worsen as the years go by and that we encourage our students to get the best education possible.

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

Mr Shannon: I support all the young people in the Province, especially those asking for help and change.

Mr G Robinson: I support the motion. I congratulate my colleagues on securing this debate, which highlights the great loss of potential and talent that Northern Ireland has experienced over the years. We must try to ensure that students who are considering going to universities outside Northern Ireland are encouraged as much as possible to attend the high-quality universities in Northern Ireland. It is disturbing to note that three quarters — 74% — of the students who expressed a wish to study at universities in other parts of the United Kingdom were deemed to be from a Protestant/unionist background.

All Members are aware that pupils in Northern Ireland outperform every other area of the UK at GCSE, AS and A level, due to the best education system in Europe and despite some people's determination to wreck that system. How can we sit back and watch that talent and potential walk away from Northern Ireland? We can no longer allow that situation to continue; otherwise we will end up with universities that will be perceived to be Catholic-only institutions. From experiences in my constituency office, I am aware that some young Protestants have that perception already.

As far as possible, we need our young people to stay in Northern Ireland. We need their skills in IT, business and bioscience research. The economic downturn will, eventually, turn into an economic upturn. If our young people do not gain those skills at our universities, we will not have the skills base in place to attract the employers who wish to set up business in Northern Ireland, and we risk having a skills base that is not truly or fairly representative of the Northern Ireland population.

Many people in my East Londonderry constituency have attended the University of Ulster at the Coleraine campus and the campuses at Magee and Belfast, and Queen's University — all excellent universities — to attain skills that can be used for the betterment of individuals in Northern Ireland. I welcome that, but I

want to see the Protestant exodus of students addressed proactively to ensure that we have equality of opportunity for all in Northern Ireland.

I urge the Minister to look at the situation urgently. I believe that Northern Ireland has a positive and bright future, but that future must be based on the inclusion of all in our society. Perhaps the Minister could look at the courses that students have left their homeland to study and encourage our native universities to offer those courses. That could encourage part of the exodus to stay at home. Can the Minister also examine the financial help that could be given to students, especially those from socio-economic backgrounds where finance is of particular concern? The issue will not go away and, if young Protestants feel that local universities are becoming Catholic-only institutions, it will continue to grow.

Mr Dallat: On this day of political uncertainty, it is a matter of regret that this motion is before the Assembly. It is not building on the cornerstone of the Good Friday Agreement, which is the promotion of partnership between the two sections of our community. My initial temptation was to ignore the motion.

If Mr Campbell wishes me to give way, I am more than happy to do so.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. According to Mr Dallat's premise, rights, demands and equality are OK when nationalists are making the demands, but he seems to have a problem when unionists have a problem that needs to be addressed. He cannot simply look at the merits of the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dallat: I understand Mr Campbell's enthusiasm for asking questions. However, if he had waited until I had finished my speech, I would have dealt with his issue.

Rather than ignore the matter, I pay tribute to the two universities and the other colleges of further education for their outstanding efforts to promote equality in all its forms. I served on the Committee for Employment and Learning for some time, and I know just how seriously the universities take the issue of equality. I also know that they have courageously attempted to address the underrepresentation of the Protestant community in the past. The universities have acted decisively on that issue, as they have on others.

I have personal knowledge of the issue: my son Diarmuid attends the Magee campus of the University of Ulster. Most of his friends there are from the Protestant community, and they have never expressed any concerns, which makes me conclude that he and they are enriched by studying and working together in a mixed environment. My daughter Helena was not so lucky and had to go Aberystwyth University in Wales

to study. As the father of an only daughter, I can tell the House that the anguish of losing her was much greater than the financial problems. However, for her, time abroad was good in other ways.

Mr Kennedy: Wales? Abroad?

Mr Dallat: I know that Danny Kennedy has been somewhat confused in recent times. His geography is not up to what I thought it was, and he has been wandering all over the place. However, perhaps I will present him with an atlas when I have finished speaking.

Rather than doing anything to assist the young people in the Protestant community who are sitting their A levels this year and who are making the most important decision of their life, the motion will perhaps put some of them off going to our local universities. I listened to Mr George Robinson in particular, and God grant that he has no influence. Young people from the Protestant community in the past unfortunately listened to politicians and took their advice, which of course was all wrong. Thankfully, the new generation does not listen as much, does not accept that it is defeated or persecuted and is working closely together with young people from different communities. That is happening in Coleraine, for example, where the university is responsible not just for academic education but for research, in the medium and long term, which will hopefully generate hundreds if not thousands of jobs.

As other contributors to the debate have said, the real issues are why there is a cap on university numbers here; why many more young people from the Protestant, Catholic and other communities do not have the opportunity to stay at home to study; and why, due to our economic problems, many are not going to university at all. We have a background here of talking a lot about education, but we also ignore the absolute need to improve our standards across the entire spectrum. Rather than dwelling on that issue, we should speak positively and encourage more of our young people to take up the challenge of going to university so that future generations will have job security and will not be forced to emigrate to Wales or anywhere else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Dawn Purvis. I think you have about a minute in which to speak.

Ms Purvis: I appreciate your letting me in, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The real question in the debate is not whether our young people are leaving Northern Ireland to study elsewhere but whether those young people — whatever their background — look to Northern Ireland as a place worth coming back to following that experience. Sadly, for many the answer is no, and there is a tragedy in that.

Northern Ireland is a relatively small place, and we will not be able to cater for the ambitions and aspirations of all the young people who are born here; we understand that. However, what disturbed me most in reviewing the research on the issue were the suggestions that young people from integrated education and those who are gay, lesbian and bisexual are the most determined not to return to Northern Ireland if they leave. That is a clear indictment of our society as one that does not offer a future for all.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

As other contributors to the debate have said, the figures indicate only a marginal difference between the number of Protestants and Catholics leaving to study elsewhere. Whatever the figures are, it is good news that a healthy proportion of our young people have the chance to study away from home, experience new things and be exposed to different societies, cultures and ideas. We will benefit from their experience but only if we can offer them a place to return to that is inclusive and embraces the broad spectrum of ideas and innovations.

Instead of focusing on ways to chain young people, Protestant or otherwise, to the Province, the authors of the motion would have done better to focus their efforts and the motion on creating the type of society that our young people would choose to live in and choose to come back to after living, studying or travelling elsewhere. Instead, they focus on propping up a system of compulsory education that discriminates disproportionately against working class Protestant boys. I do not support the motion.

Mr Speaker: The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Minister Empey.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Transfer 2010

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education for an update on transfer 2010. (AQO 619/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Cuireadh tús le haistriú 2010 cheana féin, leis an mbéim atá anois á cur ar chomhionannas rochtana chuig an iarbhunskoil. Cuireadh cuid mhór eolais ar fáil do thuismitheoirí agus do scoileanna lena chinntiú go mbeidh páistí ábalta aistriú chuig an iarbhunskoil ar bhealach ordúil faoi na socrúithe do aistriú 2010 atá anois i bhfeidhm.

Transfer 2010, with its emphasis on equality for all children in post-primary education, is now well under way. A significant volume of information has been provided to parents and schools to help ensure that children are able to transfer in an orderly fashion, with equality at its core, under the transfer 2010 arrangements that have been put in place.

My Department published two advice leaflets for parents of P7 children in September and December 2009, and it also issued detailed operational guidance to schools in September 2009 initially, with an updated version issued in December 2009. That was supplemented with separate and detailed advice on the issues of setting workable admissions criteria that abide by the law and the obligations of primary school principals facing demands for information to assist breakaway schools with the application of academic admissions criteria. That will be kept under review, and further advice will be issued as necessary.

Earlier this month, education and library boards published transfer booklets containing details of all schools' admissions criteria. Those booklets, along with school open nights, which are currently happening, will inform the process of parents completing a transfer form at a meeting with the primary school principal in February. Boards, or the education and skills authority, if it is established in time, will process transfer forms to reflect parental preference and the availability of places over the ensuing weeks, with equality at the core — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: That will lead to the issuing of placement letters at the end of May 2010.

Parents who are unhappy with school placement decisions may submit an appeal to an independent appeals tribunal.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Kennedy for a supplementary question, I remind Members that it is important that they continually rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question — “continually” is the important word.

Mr Kennedy: In light of the clear fact that the vast majority of schools are ignoring the Minister’s transfer 2010 policy, does she not now, even at this late stage, accept that her vision has failed? Will she join with other parties in entering talks on the issue of post-primary transfer without preconditions and with her mind open to the wishes of not only the House, but the vast majority of parents?

The Minister of Education: Unlike Members on the opposite Benches, who claim to represent the unionist community, I do not hide my head in the sand. I do not ignore the numbers of young people leaving our schools with inadequate literacy and numeracy. Neither I nor my party has ignored the number of young people who have been failed by our education system. The past distortion of the primary school curriculum has been a major factor in leading to the numbers of young people who are leaving the system without the levels of literacy and numeracy that we would like them to have.

The Members opposite can continue to ignore that and pretend that there is no impact, or they can join with the rest of us in understanding the impact of the selective system in the past on our primary curriculum and on our young people as they move on.

We have had the talks and the discussions. I think that there are questions that the SDLP must answer to its constituency. Is that party departing from a 40-year policy of saying that it is opposed to academic selection and inequality?

My party is totally and utterly opposed to academic selection and to inequality in the education system, and we will not continue with a system that discriminates against children, whether they are from the Catholic community, the Protestant community or any ethnic minority community. We are putting equality — comhionannas — as the cornerstone of the education system, and we are proud that we are doing that.

Mr O’Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans or proposals to introduce a regulated transfer system for current P6 pupils?

The Minister of Education: B’fhearr liom córas rialaithe aistrithe a bheith i bhfeidhm, agus tá mé réidh le hoibriú chun sin a bhaint amach.

I would prefer that a regulated system of transfer were put in place, and I am ready to work towards that. We cannot move forward on the issue until there is a common understanding that testing children at age 10 or 11 is unnecessary and detrimental to their educational development. Children should be entitled to education; it is theirs by right, not because they failed or passed a test.

Mr Storey: The Minister says repeatedly that equality is at the heart of all she does, so will she explain how, as shown by the publication of the education and library boards’ prospectuses for schools, hardly any schools have taken her advice on equality in regard to free school meals? One of the schools that have ignored the Minister happens to be that of a senior bishop of a religious order in Northern Ireland of which I am not a member. Why has the controlled sector been ignored yet again, and why have councillors not been appointed to the transitional arrangements leading to the reconstitution of the education and library boards? Can the Minister explain that, and, for the first time, give the House an answer?

The Minister of Education: Thankfully, the vast majority of schools in the system have operated fair admissions criteria. Only a small number of schools have departed and operated breakaway admissions criteria. I am glad that the Member has noted what the Catholic Church is doing, and I hope that he will join me in commending the Catholic Church at the highest level, as expressed by Cardinal Brady, on telling all schools in the Catholic sector that they should abide by transfer 2010 and that they should not operate breakaway tests.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How many schools have adopted the transfer 2010 guidelines? Will the Minister agree that the schools that will use the guidelines are already doing so in any case and that the majority of schools have ignored them, rendering them ineffectual? Will she further agree with me and with her colleague Jennifer McCann that the problem of transfer continues because nothing has been put in its place?

The Minister of Education: I certainly agree with Jennifer McCann that equality needs to be the cornerstone of the education system. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I listened carefully to what Jennifer McCann said, and I pay tribute to her for her stance in opposition to academic selection and for her support for equality to be at the core of the education system. Jennifer, like me and every Member on the Sinn Féin Benches, understands the importance of not failing children. I urge Members on the other Benches, who have their heads in the sand, to get a

transcript of Jennifer's interviews and listen to and take advice from her. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Jennifer and I agree on the matter. As the Member said, the vast majority of schools have been operating a fair system in relation to free school meals. Members will know that the secondary sector has a higher proportion of children who receive free school meals. That is not fair, and it will not continue, because we need more equality in the system.

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education why the consultation period for the review of special educational needs and inclusion has been extended.

(AQO 620/10)

The Minister of Education: Eisíodh an cháipéis chomhairliúcháin 'Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith — an Bealach chun Tosaigh do Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais agus Chuimsiú' le haghaidh comhairliúcháin ar an 10 Lúnasa 2009, agus ba é an 31 Deireadh Fómhair 2009 an chéad dáta deiridh do fhreagraí.

The consultation document 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' was issued for consultation on 10 August 2009 with an initial closing date for responses of 31 October 2009. As there had been a delay of more than one year while the Executive considered the draft consultation document, and following their approval in July 2009, I agreed to issue the document for consultation as soon as possible to avoid further delay and to enable the public, schools and other stakeholders to begin to consider the proposals. After a number of requests from parents, schools, MLAs and others, I agreed to extend the closing date to 30 November 2009. Then, in early December, after further consideration, I decided to further extend the consultation period to 31 January 2010. My decision is based upon my firm belief that provision for children with special educational needs is of vital importance, especially to parents and schools. I want to ensure that everyone who wishes to respond to the proposals in the document has the time to do so.

It is imperative that provision for children with special educational needs builds upon the good practice that is already evidenced in many schools and that it is substantially improved upon so that no child has to experience a delay before the appropriate intervention is put in place.

The review proposals aim to build the capacity of schools to meet more effectively the needs of pupils

with special educational needs through earlier identification of need, effective use of school-based interventions and through the advice and support that is available to them from a range of professionals, when necessary.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. How much of the funding for special educational needs will be spent on groups that have additional educational needs, such as Traveller or newcomer children? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathail. Ní aitreofar aon chistiú ó riachtanais speisialta oideachais chuig grúpaí eile a aithníodh faoi choincheapanna riachtanais bhreise oideachais.

No funding will be diverted from special educational needs to the other groups that have been identified within the additional educational needs concept. Each of the groups that have been identified has its own specific policy and attracts its own funding streams. That will continue to be the case.

In 2007-08, around £185 million was spent on special educational needs. In 2008-09, £202 million was spent on special educational needs; £6.5 million was spent on supporting newcomer children; £1.1 million was spent on our Traveller children; £569,000 was spent on school-aged mothers; £345,000 was spent on looked-after children; £7.65 million was spent on promoting positive behaviour; and £1.99 million was spent on the emotional health and well-being of pupils.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister agree that any changes in special educational needs procedure should not threaten the statutory rights of the children who have special needs or those of their parents?

The Minister of Education: I absolutely agree that it is important that the money that goes to our children with special educational needs is ring-fenced. I know that some people have stated that that is not the case; therefore, I will clarify it.

Meastar go mbeidh leithdháiltí a thugtar do scoileanna mar gheall ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais so-aitheanta agus inmhonatóirí.

It is envisaged that allocations that are made to schools under any special educational needs factor that might be developed under the local management of schools formula will be easily identifiable to schools, and, therefore, will be able to be monitored.

During the talks that led to the St Andrews Agreement, and, indeed, in any discussions that we have had, my party always prioritised rights and equality. Those rights and the equality of children will continue to be prioritised.

2.45 pm

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister acknowledge the findings of the Lamb inquiry, which showed that parents value a statement of special educational needs because it is legally enforceable and that they want a new system to work better than the present one? Will she assure the House that she will take into consideration the findings of the Lamb inquiry? Does she think that parents have a lack of trust in her to deliver a suitable policy?

The Minister of Education: Is í is aidhm do na tograí ná soláthar do pháistí agus do dhaoine óga a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu a fheabhsú taobh istigh den scoil.

The proposals aim to enhance the provision for children and young people with special educational needs within their school setting, by ensuring that they get the right support at the right time, without the need to wait for long periods for external assessment or support when it can be provided from within the school's resources. The proposals do not and will not reduce the rights of parents as currently available to them through the appeals mechanism of the special educational needs and disability tribunal. Depending on the detailed outworking of the proposals, parental rights may be differently reflected, but that detail is yet to be developed and can only be considered following consideration of the responses to the consultation.

I have been to many special schools and have met with the parents of many children with special educational needs. Our Department consulted with a very wide range of parents and educationalists, and we have produced for consideration a very thorough policy. We welcome anyone and everyone making a contribution to it, and we will read the responses very carefully.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

STEM Subjects

4. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Education why funds for developing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects have been returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQO 622/10)

The Minister of Education: Chuir mo Roinn cistiú faoi urrús ón geiste nuálaíochta le tacaíocht a thabhairt d'ábhair STEM agus d'fhás sainscoileanna STEM; tá mé sásta go bhfuil seacht scoil déag a bhfuil sainainmníochtaí STEM acu. Táimid ag déanamh réimse an-leathan nuálaíochtaí eile chun STEM a chur chun cinn.

My Department secured funding from the Innovation Fund Ireland to support STEM subjects and

the growth of STEM specialist schools. I am pleased that we now have 17 schools with STEM specialist designation. We are undertaking a wide range of other interventions to promote science, technology, engineering and maths. A programme of professional development for teachers has been commissioned to promote and support STEM in the primary and post-primary sectors within the revised curriculum, as well as improving the range and quality of resources available to teachers and pupils. We are also supporting the Institute of Physics in Ireland and the establishment of a physics teacher network here. STEM-focused career education, information, advice and guidance are other crucial elements of our efforts to promote STEM subjects and pathways.

Clearly, our work to raise standards in literacy and numeracy also contributes to ensuring that young people have the opportunity to develop the communication and mathematical skills they need to access STEM subjects and STEM careers.

My Department funds a number of exciting, major events designed to encourage our young people to consider careers in STEM. Last week, I told the Assembly about the BT Young Scientist and Technology competition. This year, entries to that from the North had increased by 66%. I was delighted once again to host a reception in the Long Gallery for all the students from the North who entered the competition and to attend the award ceremony in Dublin at which two out of four of the top awards in this island were made to schools in the North. My Department also funds the STEM Experience, which is planned to run for three years and aims to promote a better understanding of STEM. A total of 1,822 primary school pupils from P6 and P7, and 1,842 secondary pupils in years 8 to 10, attended the events. We also fund the very successful £1.2 million STEM truck, which is a resource that benefits the entire island of Ireland and a wide range of schools.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: It is a mobile teaching laboratory. What is happening is very exciting, but I am not complacent, and there is lots more work to be done. We have to find the spark — the chispa — that ignites the fire of learning in our young people.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister tell the House whether the entire budget for STEM subjects has been used, and how much has been returned?

The Minister of Education: My Department secured funding from the innovation fund to support the growth of STEM specialist schools. That funding included a £3 million resource allocation that is fully committed and a capital element that can be used only to support capital projects that are related to STEM specialist schools. As the innovation fund is a central

ring-fenced fund, it cannot be used to support other areas of capital development, and, if it is unused, it must be returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP).

Funding for the innovation fund was confirmed in January 2008 when the Executive published the 2008-2011 Budget, by which time important lessons had been learned from the experience of previous capital support grants to specialist schools. After a review of the policy, and based on the experience of schools in previous years, the funding arrangements were changed, and the capital support grant was removed and replaced by a current support grant. The same level of capital funding was not, therefore, needed, and the additional recurrent funding was made available through the existing Budget. The costs associated with the construction of the STEM truck fell — I am sure that Members are glad to hear that — thereby leaving a surplus in the 2009-2010 Budget of £816,000. In line with current budgeting rules, there is no flexibility to transfer capital budget to recurrent budgets, and there is a clear responsibility to secure value for money from all public expenditure.

The Department of Education declared other easements in respect of funding from the innovation fund. Those were: £0.6 million, which was caused by difficulties in recruiting staff, increasing the programme of professional development in STEM areas and the lower than expected bids received from STEM specialist schools; and £51,000, £40,000 of which was caused by delays in recruiting staff to identify gaps in STEM curricular resources and developing and disseminating such resources to promote STEM in the primary and post-primary sectors, and £11,000 of which was caused by the lower than expected cost of the independent panel's assessing the STEM applications from schools.

Mr P Ramsey: I acknowledge the Minister's comments about the importance of access to, and growth of, STEM subjects. Will the Minister outline her Department's implementation plan for the STEM review?

The Minister of Education: As Members know, the STEM report is a comprehensive document that was jointly launched by Reg Empey and me. The launch was exciting and innovative, and it took place on the same day that we launched the STEM truck, which I was proud to be part of showcasing at the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition in Dublin. The truck was at the exhibition all week, and students from all over the island had the opportunity to see it. I am happy to forward a copy of the STEM report and the Department's implementation plan to the Member, if he does not already have them.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Lord Browne, I remind Members that it is important that they continually rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question. There is no point in Members' rising once and then thinking that they will be called to ask a supplementary question, because that will not happen. I make that absolutely clear. I do not know how many times the Deputy Speakers and I have had to say that in recent weeks.

Lord Browne: Will the Minister tell us the rationale for reducing the capital funding of STEM from £75,000 to £25,000?

The Minister of Education: I already explained in a detailed answer that the capital funding is ring-fenced, and the rules for that. *[Interruption.]* I am not going to take the time to repeat that.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Most Members will, objectively, recognise the value of STEM subjects in rebuilding and sustaining a viable economy here. Will the Minister give us an indication of the events that her Department funds in promoting STEM subjects?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin, agus aontaim leat faoi STEM. Promotion of STEM subjects is important for future economic growth, and my Department is fully committed to playing its role. I also wish to mention the revised curriculum, because it focuses on ensuring that all pupils have the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in communications, mathematics, ICT and science, and the skills needed to succeed in life and work.

Some of the best experiences that I have witnessed involved young people in primary schools learning science through play. I watched one class, in which the children had built a volcano and learned about volcanoes through an interactive whiteboard. Those children did not realise that they were learning. However, they were learning, and in a real and very stimulating way. That is much better than the 11-plus, in which children learned about the life cycle of the frog and, in many ways, were bored to death. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: For the past two years, and for the first time ever, we have been funding the BT Young Scientist and Technology exhibition in Dublin, which is an absolutely fantastic event. I have been working very closely with BT and with schools in the North; and, every year, there is an incredible increase in participation in that event.

Earlier, I mentioned the Institute of Physics in Ireland, and the Department has a special programme

with primary school principals. On the North/South agenda, there was a conference in Cavan on the teaching of mathematics in primary schools, which brought together teachers from across the island to share good practice.

The Department is funding a specialist schools programme, and there are 17 schools with specialist designations in science, technology and mathematics. Reg Empey and I, and our Departments, are working very closely to ensure the promotion of science, technology, engineering and maths.

Educational Disadvantage

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of whether there is educational disadvantage among Protestant boys compared to the rest of the population. (AQO 623/10)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn míbhuntáiste oideachasúil ann i measc buachaillí agus cailíní Protastúnacha agus Caitliceacha araon. Is minic a bhíonn baint aige seo le míbhuntáiste socheacnamaíoch agus go mbíonn sé níos measa mar gheall ar an easpa dóchais.

Educational disadvantage exists among Protestants and Catholics, among boys and girls, and among our ethnic minorities. Too often, it is related to socio-economic disadvantage and is compounded by poverty of aspiration.

Educational underachievement can be defined as those children who leave school without having achieved at least five good GCSEs at grades A* to C, including maths and English or Irish. In 2007 to 2008, the number of Catholic boys not achieving at that level was greater than the number of Protestant boys, with almost 2,900 Catholic boys compared to just over 2,600 Protestant boys. Although that represents a greater number of Catholic boys, a greater percentage of Protestant boys did not achieve at least five good GCSEs, with 52% of Protestant boys versus 48% of Catholic boys not achieving at that level.

For girls, the picture is very similar, with 38% of Protestant girls not achieving at that level, compared to 36.5% of Catholic girls. However, at 2,200, the number of Catholic girls who do not achieve at least five good GCSEs, including maths and English or Irish, is greater than the number of Protestant girls, at almost 1,900.

I hope that my answer shows the importance of us not sectarianising the debate. We need to deal with underachievement wherever and whenever it exists. I am fully committed to improving outcomes for all young people whether they are Catholic or Protestant, boys or girls, or from our newcomer communities, the

children from which have so many hurdles to overcome.

I am putting in place a jigsaw of interconnected policies that put the child at the centre of the education system. For example, the 'Every School a Good School' policy, transfer 2010, the revised curriculum, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the review of special educational needs and inclusion, the Achieving Belfast and Derry programmes, and the establishment of the ESA.

Mr K Robinson: Despite the smokescreen that the Minister has put up, she often regales the House with her claims that she is concerned about children from the Shankill, Rathcoole, the Waterside and other areas. Given the empirical facts in front of her, why, since 2007, has the Minister not addressed that specific issue?

3.00 pm

The Minister of Education: I am looking at the empirical facts. I respectfully suggest that every Member on the Benches opposite studies very carefully the empirical facts. The Members opposite have hidden their heads in the sand. They are afraid, for whatever reason, to deal with some of the deep inequalities that affect children from the Falls, the Shankill and the Waterside.

I have brought forward policies and proposals; I am not afraid to deal with the impact of academic selection on our working-class areas. I have shown Members the statistics for the number of children from the Shankill and New Lodge that get access to grammar schools. I am not the one sectarianising the debate.

I have brought forward policies that are based on dealing with inequality, wherever it exists. Neither I nor my party is afraid to deal with the difficult issues, and we will not stand by and watch as more generations of young people are failed by the system. That is why we have a literacy and numeracy strategy; that is why we have the review of special needs and inclusion; that is why we have our task force on the education of Traveller children; that is why we have our Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry initiatives; and that is why we have transfer 2010.

We are taking on the small number of people who do not want change in the system. Those people think that, if they operate breakaway tests, they will stop us from continuing with our proposals. However, they will not.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Belfast Metropolitan College

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why the consultants appointed to review the efficiency of Belfast Metropolitan College were not able to meet with the former director.

(AQO 633/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): When the review was undertaken, the college director was ill. He has subsequently retired on ill-health grounds.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the Minister confirm whether the Department of Finance and Personnel will have any involvement in the review that will take place at Belfast Metropolitan College?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The review has been completed, and work is ongoing on its implementation. There is a new chief executive at the college, and she has made it clear that the college and the board are working very closely on the implementation of the recommendations in the review. I am confident now that the new chief executive is in place. The chief executive post was filled for a long period by Dr Raymond Mullan, who was acting up. He did a first-class job under very difficult circumstances. With the new arrangements in place, the college will be able to restore its financial position to the extent that we can be confident that it can go forward into the future.

Mr A Maginness: I note what the Minister said, and I understand the circumstances in which the previous director was not effectively consulted. That was regrettable, but we have a new director for the college, we have a review and we have an opportunity to move forward. Does the Minister agree that that represents a very important opportunity for the college to move forward in this new decade?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree with the honourable Member. The new director will address the Committee for Employment and Learning in the middle of next month, and it is my hope that we will have a meeting before that. The financial position for the year before last was unsatisfactory but, in the current year, although there may continue to be a deficit, it will be on a much smaller scale, and the college will have the reserves to meet it. The combination of those events and decisions will result in the college coming back into balance shortly.

The provision of education is the primary objective, and I should say that I am satisfied that it is continuing and that the number of students is continuing to grow. The college is well placed, particularly given that the new estate is being built in the Titanic Quarter. It has a bright future as our largest single further education

college, and I am confident that we have taken the steps that are necessary to ensure its viable future.

Holylands Area

2. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline progress on issues affecting the Holylands area of south Belfast following the Holylands stakeholder forum held in October 2009.

(AQO 634/10)

15. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to promote improved student-community relations surrounding this year's St Patrick's Day holiday, especially in the Holylands area of Belfast.

(AQO 647/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 15 together.

I confirm that additional community safety wardens were deployed in the university area from 25 October 2009 to provide support during the Halloween period. Moreover, the PSNI dedicated significant resources to the area. Overall feedback has been positive, and it is hoped that the same procedure will have a beneficial impact on St Patrick's Day 2010.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister and his Department for their initiatives with the Holylands stakeholder forum. I am concerned about St Patrick's Day this year and want to know exactly what discussions have taken place, particularly with the PSNI, the universities and other organisations, to put measures in place to ensure that, compared with last year, we have a good St Patrick's Day this year.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I share the honourable Member's hope and expectation that St Patrick's Day 2010 will be an enjoyable occasion for the students and people in the Holylands area. As the Member may know, the inter-agency group has been expanded in the past few months to include Departments, including my own, and other relevant organisations. Moreover, Belfast City Council has established the Holylands inter-agency group, and planning approval is being sought to place CCTV cameras in the Holylands area.

On the question of student and community relations, since March 2009 I have been actively involved in discussions with key stakeholders, including, as the Member will know, elected Members, residents' groups, landlords and the licensed trade. We have had two major meetings, and consultants and a facilitator have worked throughout the summer to prepare a report. We are working closely with the police and have consulted the Northern Ireland Office, the

Department for Social Development, the Department for Regional Development and other agencies.

The Member will know that it is not possible to guarantee anything. All that I can say to him is that the level of engagement has been much higher and more intense than it has been at any previous time. After last year's events, I decided that it was necessary for the Executive to take the lead on the situation. We have done that throughout the past year, and I hope that our actions bear fruit. We have engaged heavily with students and the student body because, at the end of the day, their members are involved in the problem. However, people from outside the area come into it to exploit the situation. The PSNI has a clear role in that area. I do not want to consider it a law and order situation, but I hope that the measures that we have taken will help to alleviate the situation.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his progress report. Given that virtually all respondents to the stakeholder forum's initial piece of work attached high importance to the question of compulsory landlord registration, has the Minister discussed the matter with any other Ministers, particularly the Minister for Social Development?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As the Member may be aware, there has been extensive communication between the various Departments, and it is perfectly obvious that a multi-agency and multi-Department approach has been taken to the matter. The Member will know from his experience in other places that there has been an underlying planning issue in that area for a long time. People ignored local representatives' advice year after year.

That said, the whole area has been taken over by local landlords who rent out houses for multiple occupation. The local residents feel marginalised, pressurised and, in some cases, intimidated. I can assure the Member that all the agencies that we could find and that have a role have been engaged up to ministerial level.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Speaker, I will take this opportunity to thank you and your staff, and colleagues from all parties, for the warm welcome that you have given me.

As the Minister is no doubt aware and as Mr Spratt pointed out, the St Patrick's Day celebrations are now upon us. Last week, Ms Ramsey kindly provided me with a copy of the response from the University of Ulster. In that response, the university advocated the extension of extra powers to the police to deal with situations such as those that occurred in the Holylands, and said that it would support emergency legislation for the extension of on-the-spot fines by the police in such situations. What is the Minister's opinion of that?

Furthermore, does the Minister have an update on the proposed schools outreach programme that was to be undertaken? What numbers of schools have been contacted across this region? Has there been a positive uptake of that programme?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As my colleague said, that was more of a maiden speech than a question. *[Laughter.]* I suspect that the warm welcome that the Member has received in this place will no doubt be short-lived.

I cannot be precise about the school outreach programme, but I will write to the Member about that. We have had extensive discussions with the police about the Holylands issue, but I do not see this as a purely law and order situation. I was there at 11.00 pm on St Patrick's night last year, and the idea of PSNI officers going around issuing spot fines did not strike me as something that would be very successful. There were other issues, such as the inability to go into a garden where a lot of young people were gathered. Paul Goggins, the Northern Ireland Office Minister of State, has been represented in the discussions with the stakeholder forum, and I have written to him. The police have been heavily involved, but the idea is that we should avoid having to involve them.

I do not want to see police Land Rovers in the Holylands at 7.00 am on St Patrick's Day to occupy the ground. I want people to celebrate and have an enjoyable day; that is the way it should be. Unfortunately, some elements from outside see an opportunity to have a bit of a rumble and to attack the police and whatever other authority figures might be in the area. Sadly, the people who get the real hammering are the students who want to go about their business and the unfortunate residents who are subjected to those disturbances all the time, not just on one day of the year.

Ms Lo: I commend the Minister for his effort in co-ordinating the work on the issue in south Belfast. However, there is a need for ongoing inter-agency work, because there are so many different issues that contribute to the bigger problem on St Patrick's Day. The misuse of drink has been a big problem in the area. Has there been any progress on licensing issues and on addressing the low cost of drink?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I know that my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is looking at that. There is quite a lot of evidence to suggest that the unit price of alcohol is an issue. The licensed trade was represented on the stakeholder forum, and it is promoting a code of practice among its membership. Some might say that such a code of practice might be fairly weak, but I welcome any progress in this area.

Nevertheless, I believe that there should be a national decision on the price of a unit of alcohol. I am

not against people having a good time, but what I saw last St Patrick's Day, and what has been seen in other situations throughout the city on other occasions, is not about having a good time. It goes beyond that, and, unfortunately, a lot of young people frequently get hurt, and others get criminal records. The licensed trade must be extremely careful in its response. In certain supermarkets, however, large amounts of alcohol can sometimes be bought for less than water.

3.15 pm

Training Programmes: East Londonderry

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people who have been made redundant in East Londonderry in the last two years have entered retraining programmes. (AQO 635/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not collect information that identifies individuals who enrol on training programmes after being made redundant. The Department is notified when more than 20 people are made redundant. During 2008 and up to November 2009, there were 1,035 redundancies in the East Londonderry constituency. The figure for 2008 was 863, which was mainly a reflection of the closure of Seagate Technology in Limavady. Workers who are made redundant are eligible for early entry, on a voluntary basis, to Steps to Work, which is the Department's main employment programme. From 1 April 2008 to 30 November 2009, some 2,280 people started on the Steps to Work and New Deal programmes in the East Londonderry constituency.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that most of those who undertake those training and skills programmes are endeavouring to gain employment in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector or wish to become self-employed, how adaptable are those programmes in preparing people for those types of employment?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department's current suite of programmes is infinitely more flexible than that of a number of years ago. As the Member will know, someone who becomes unemployed can attempt to form his or her own business, and he or she will retain benefits for up to 26 weeks to help with that opportunity. That is the most flexible scheme possible. If an individual spots a genuine opportunity to get a job, a variety of schemes is available, and we will help as best we can. Rather than having a situation in which more people chase fewer positions, we must concentrate on stimulating jobs. I stress that the suite of options that we now have at our disposal is as good as we have ever had.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How do those recent figures for Steps to Work compare with figures that were released last week showing that unemployment is on the increase? Does the Minister envisage the recent Budget statement having a negative impact on unemployment? Although that was issued from a different Department, there are issues about reskilling and upskilling. I am concerned because, if the Minister is saying that more people are joining the Steps to Work programme, surely the unemployment figures should have come down?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is true that the unemployment figure rose slightly, but the rate of growth slowed significantly, as was the case nationally. The Northern Ireland figure remains lower than that for the rest of the UK, significantly lower than that in the Republic and below the European average. That, of course, is no relief to those who are currently unemployed or worried about unemployment. If I may make a political point, sometimes the bubble within which we occupy ourselves in this place is some distance from the worries and concerns of ordinary people who are worried about their jobs, education and health. At times, our list of priorities differs from theirs.

I assure the Member, however, that the Department works with the local authorities. In the East Londonderry area we worked with Limavady Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council and Derry City Council on, for example, job fairs. All the help that we provide is through partnership at a local level.

The Member asked why unemployment figures are not going down. Unfortunately, the number of redundancies is increasing in certain sectors. That is particularly true of manufacturing and services, from which more and more people have been added to the unemployment register. Today, approximately 47% more people are on the register than 12 months ago.. That gives some sense of the additional workload that our systems have had to accommodate.

Mr Dallat: The figures for East Derry are startling, particularly on a day when there appears to be grave political instability. What means does the Minister have to track training schemes to ensure that people are not in a revolving door, joining scheme after scheme? What opportunities are there for employers to evaluate courses? I thank the Minister for his efforts to date in my constituency, which must be among the worst affected.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: All levels of training are subject to quality assessment by the Education and Training Inspectorate. Therefore, a regime is in place to ensure quality. The Member asked whether we are going around in circles, and the fact that that was happening was one of the criticisms of

the previous New Deal arrangements. I believe that the new arrangements are of a higher quality.

We need to conduct what are described as longitudinal studies. We are carrying out studies on the new contract arrangements that were entered into. I accept that they did not start off as vigorously as they should have done, but they are coming on. The training providers have performance indicators for the schemes that inform the Department whether it is getting value for money. I assure the Member that it is in our interests to ensure that such information is at our disposal.

I will consider whether a longitudinal study to evaluate and check against the risk that the Member raised should be carried out, and I am happy to write to the Member in that regard.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his responses and his efforts, not only in my constituency but in other employment black spots throughout Northern Ireland. Will the Minister briefly outline what retraining programmes are available?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A variety of programmes is available. The programmes depend on the individual's particular circumstances. We have introduced a suite of services that has been particularly tailored to anyone with a disability or learning disabilities. Our staff are trained to identify those needs; that is an integral part of the process.

Several programmes are available to someone who signs on. The Member is familiar with the principal schemes, as he has joined me on at least one occasion in visiting some of the facilities. All-age apprenticeships are available, and we work closely with further education colleges. The Bridge to Employment scheme is a bespoke recruitment and pre-employment training programme designed to help people learn the skills needed to be job-ready from day one of their employment. Our Training for Success scheme is well known as the Department's major flagship scheme.

We have a sufficient variety of facilities at our disposal. The key factor is not just skilling unemployed people but upskilling many people who are already in employment. We must endeavour to have the prevention as well as the cure.

Management Skills

4. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance is being provided by his Department to promote investment in management skills and development during the economic downturn. (AQO 636/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have made available a wide range of management and leadership programmes, which are aimed at meeting

the needs of new entrants right up to senior directors. Since March 2009, the Department has offered 100% funding across a range of approved programmes to enhance uptake of leadership and management development.

Almost 600 individual managers and 120 companies have been engaged to date. The successful initiative has been complemented by a dedicated and ongoing awareness-raising campaign across Northern Ireland. The Made Not Born campaign aims to show small and medium-sized enterprises the benefits that better leadership and management can bring to business.

As outlined in Minister Foster's earlier statement and highlighted in the independent review of economic policy report, Members will note that my Department has collaborated with Invest NI in the development of an integrated framework for management and leadership to improve support in that important area.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The publication 'Management Matters in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland' places special emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises. Will the Minister outline what steps he has taken to develop management capabilities in that area?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member hits on a point that is dear to my heart. The vast majority of businesses in Northern Ireland are small, and perhaps the greatest difficulties arise for such businesses. Members can imagine that it is extremely difficult for a small business, in which the proprietor may carry out multiple jobs, to allow a staff member to spend time training away from the company. The irony is that companies that invest in training help their long-term survival prospects by doing so. We offer management and leadership training at nil cost to a company. I have tried to maintain the 100% funding because I believe that that is the best way in which we can contribute in that area.

The second way in which we contribute is by trying to make companies aware of the options that are available to them. The Department's contribution has been a combination of those two measures: offering management training at nil cost to a company and making companies aware of the significance of receiving extra training. All the reports and evidence throughout these islands are clear that the more effort and resources a company puts into training, the better that company's survival chances will be.

Mr O'Loan: I fully support the Minister's work on management and leadership development programmes. In light of the significant cuts to departmental spending that were announced in the recent budgetary review for 2010-11, is the Minister in a position to say whether he will be able to protect those important programmes from spending cuts?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I cannot anticipate an announcement from my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I would be happy to make the announcement for him, but that is not possible. However, I can tell the Member that I have placed much emphasis on this area of activity. The 100% funding was to be brought in only for a limited time, but I agreed to extend the period during which it is available.

My Department's spending power was due to increase by more than 6% in 2010-11. Therefore, I have directed any efficiencies and reductions required by the Executive into areas in which growth was already due to take place. That approach to the proposals may mean that growth is restricted rather than any actual cuts having to be made in cash terms. I should also point out that the Executive are considering how they can create more efficiencies across the public sector. If they achieve further efficiencies on pay, for example, the sums of money generated will be put back into the pot, and Departments will have to reduce their spending by less.

Mr Savage: I also congratulate the Minister on the schemes that he has brought forward. Are any of those schemes available to the agriculture industry?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am sorry that my colleague from North Belfast is not in the Chamber because he could have prompted me in some of my responses.

The schemes are available throughout Northern Ireland. The Department for Employment and Learning deals primarily with individuals. In other words, the services that we provide are people-driven rather than geographically driven.

As the Member knows, we also work very closely with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise. I am satisfied that many of the growth industries and businesses of the future will be based in rural areas. Therefore, if the opportunity presents itself, we have sufficient flexibility to direct training towards any areas in which we believe growth will take place.

3.30 pm

Furthermore, we are looking closely at what options we can produce with the colleges of further education. In their rapid response programme to the economic downturn, they produced a whole suite of measures that can be rolled out. I assure the Member that the situation regarding rural areas is kept very much at the forefront of our minds. At the very highest level, extra PhDs were sought three years ago, and extra money was received to do that. I assure the Member that the agriculture sector was included in that scheme, along with other STEM subjects that were referred to earlier by the Minister of Education. We attach the highest priority to that sector.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Universities: Protestant Students

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward measures to ensure that more students from a Protestant background are encouraged to opt for universities in Northern Ireland as their first choice. — [Mr Easton]

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and I thank all of the Members who contributed to the debate. I recognise that we have covered a lot of ground today, but I will try to address as many of the points that were made during the debate as possible.

This subject has attracted a good deal of interest in the Chamber and beyond. Higher education plays a very significant role in the recovery of our economy and in Northern Ireland's continued future growth prospects. In this country, we must seek to secure a sustainable and globally competitive economy. Members will be aware that, to achieve that, we must move from a position that relies on low costs to compete to one that is based on higher value-added products and services, innovation, creativity and high workforce skills.

Increasing workforce skills and, in particular, increasing the proportion of the workforce with higher education and intermediate level skills will be key to achieving the objective of a competitive economy. During their careers, those who have a degree level qualification will, on average, earn 30% more than those with no qualifications. However, higher education is about much more than just getting a degree or a well-paid job: it is about personal fulfilment, forging new relationships and friendships, and developing skills in preparation for the rest of one's adult life. Above all, it is about investing in the future.

In 2008, over 9,600 Northern Ireland school leavers entered first year in higher education institutions throughout the United Kingdom. Of those, 2,500 students chose to leave Northern Ireland to study in Great Britain. It has already been stated that 1,140 were Protestant and 1,060 were Catholic, and the rest were of no, or other, religion. In addition, 1,025 Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland's institutions, which is a decrease of 3% from 2007-08. However, although no breakdown of the religious composition of that group is available, it is fair to say that, anecdotally, a very high percentage of that group was from the Catholic community.

A number of recent studies have challenged previously held perceptions that young people are

compelled to travel to study due to a lack of higher education places in Northern Ireland, or that more Protestants than Catholics choose to study in GB due to a perceived chill factor for Protestants in Northern Ireland universities. I will spend a wee bit of time on this issue because it goes to the heart of the debate. There are a number of misconceptions that require addressing. The Equality Commission's research update of May 2008 stated that some of the factors that influenced educational migration included personal choice, level of affluence and higher education policy. There is little recent evidence of political chill factors impacting on educational migration.

Further to that, one of my early decisions as Minister was to appoint Professor Bob Osborne to carry out some work in that area. Published in 2008, his research indicated that 1.5% of respondents felt that Queen's University was not welcoming to the Catholic community, while 2.9% felt that it was not welcoming to the Protestant community. The University of Ulster's figure for Protestants was 2.6%. To all intents and purposes, the number of students who felt that they faced a chill factor in those two institutions was next to negligible. I would have preferred those readings to have been nil, but, given the background, those figures are very convincing.

People must remember a number of things. In the 1998-2003 Executive, a ministerial predecessor of mine, Sean Farren, raised the maximum student number cap by 1,000 places, which went some way towards dealing with the insufficient provision. In his remarks, Mr O'Loan hit the right tone, because different factors are at play. If we increase the number of student places, some individuals who would leave in the current circumstances may not do so, because entry-level standards might be lower. On the other hand, the evidence in Bob Osborne's report showed that a lot of people left because they wanted to. The Department calls such people determined leavers. Happily, the percentage of determined leavers is lower today.

I do not doubt that Mr Craig's remarks about the situation when he was at university may well have reflected the situation at that stage. However, folks, circumstances have changed. Regardless of their religious persuasion, young people do not see our institutions as a cold place. Importantly, it should be pointed out that the number of people who are not expressing any religious identification is also growing.

The big thing that is being missed in the debate, although it was touched upon by Mr O'Loan, is the role of the Department of Education's activities. The underlying problem is the failure to get a balance in educational achievement in the community at a much earlier stage, well before the point at which people come to university. That is the area to which we must draw attention.

There is no doubt that, in particular, Protestants from secondary schools are far less likely to opt for higher education. The statistics to prove that are there. However, the fault for that lies not with universities but with the system at a much earlier stage, and there is no question that that must be addressed. My Department can play a role through various schemes, such as the University of Ulster's absolutely excellent Step-Up programme, which I have been asked to extend; a request that I am considering. That first class scheme involves the university engaging with schools much earlier, so that young people know what to expect at university. Step-Up is designed to reduce the number of dropouts and the shock to new students.

To Members who asked what support my Department was offering, the answer is a broad range, financial and other. Indeed, there are people in my Department concentrating on widening access to universities here, because that is what it is about. We understand that we have a problem, and departmental staff are working on it full time to bring proposals to me. I have engaged with those staff, and they know that my very clear view is that work has to be done.

I must take issue with Mr Craig over one of his comments, and I cannot let the debate close without dealing with it. He said that there was nothing to attract a person from a Protestant background into our universities.

I cannot stand over that statement, which is totally untrue. Our universities are much improved institutions, and they have a long tradition of success. Indeed, Queen's University recently became a member of the Russell Group of universities and, just before Christmas last year, was named entrepreneurial university of the year for the United Kingdom. In the past five or six years, the research assessment exercise (RAE) ratings for the University of Ulster and Queen's University have dramatically improved both institutions' positions in the United Kingdom. Mr Craig's statement is simply not true.

Furthermore, in 2008, the research profile that the RAE panel produced for history at Queen's University graded 60% of its research activity as world leading or internationally excellent, and 95% as internationally recognised or above. Similarly, in 2001, history at the University of Ulster was awarded a RAE rating of 4, with 5 being the top mark achievable, and:

"This result reflected the high quality of the publications of History staff and their success rate with MPhil and doctoral students. Historians at the university have always seen a thriving community of postgraduate students, both full-time and part-time, as contributing to the overall research culture of the subject."

That is evidence that, at both those levels, our universities are doing extremely well.

In May 2008, in 'Educational Migration and Non-return in Northern Ireland', a report prepared for the Equality Commission, it was stated:

"Widening access, in particular for boys and from the less affluent Protestant communities where there is an under-representation in the numbers progressing to HE, would increase numbers proceeding to HE who otherwise may not have considered this as an option. Any initiative aimed at widening access would need to be based on equality and thus not exclude individuals from either community."

It is clear, therefore, that this is a cross-departmental issue.

As a result of the research that we have carried out, I can tell the Member that the chill factor that may have existed 20 years ago is no longer there. People choose to go to our universities for a vast number of reasons. Having said that, I am acutely aware that many of our brightest people do leave, and my Department has been doing what it can to get them back. We ran the C'mon Over campaign, and our roadshow has been to universities in Scotland and England. Indeed, the last roadshow that I held, in early autumn, was in Dublin, which was the one area to which we had not gone. We had to have a gap in the roadshow programme owing to the economic recession, and, at the moment, I am not able to continue with them because the employers whom I brought with me and who had real jobs to offer students who came along no longer have those jobs. I want to get everybody back, but we cannot hermetically seal people into Northern Ireland. At the end of the day, people from a unionist background do not consider themselves to be leaving anywhere. In their terms, they are simply moving to another part of the country.

I want to do everything that I can, and since I have been the Minister for Employment and Learning I have put a great deal of effort into trying to grow the amount of money that goes into research in our universities, because I believe that that will be the source of high-quality jobs in future. From talking to students, I get the impression that the courses that are offered, their own potential, and their long-term economic future determine where they want to go. In addition, we were all young once, and anyone from the greater Belfast area will know that, for many people, going to the University of Ulster or Queen's University is just a matter of going up the road, which does not seem like going away to university. Many young people want to get away for the full student experience, and we cannot deny them that experience.

Nevertheless, there are things that we can do. We can make a case for more student places, and I am looking at a number of proposals for raising the number of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) places. Indeed, there is a proposal on my desk from the University of Ulster for Magee College, and I know that we have been putting a great deal of effort

into encouraging people to study STEM subjects. However, looking at the myriad subjects from which people want to be able to choose, no single university, or even two universities, can offer everything.

3.45 pm

Academia is a colossal area. On balance, the situation today is radically different to the one that pertained a number of years ago. We have an excellent higher education system, and I cannot detect a chill factor. Evidence shows that there will always be the odd anecdotal case, but racial issues, and others, can arise in any university, and we do not want those any more than anybody else does. Generally speaking, we are on the right track. However, the real problem lies further down the education spectrum. The real reason why more Protestants are not coming forward is that fewer of them are applying to university, because fewer of them are getting the relevant qualifications at school. That is where the problem lies, and the real solution to the problem lies there. We are taking steps to address that, and we will continue to do so. We are looking at our proposals for widening access and, undoubtedly, with respect to policy, there is no case to answer. Protestant working-class students are under-performing. I will not argue for one minute about that, but, as far as we are concerned, there are right and wrong ways of going about addressing that.

Mr Speaker: I call Thomas Buchanan to conclude and make a winding-up speech. The Member has 10 minutes in which to speak.

Mr Buchanan: I thank my colleague for bringing the motion to the House, and I thank all those Members who took part. The issue raised a bit of debate around the Chamber. I want to point out from the start that the motion has not been brought forward to exclude anyone from a university place, nor has it been brought forward to seek to exclude people from attending universities outside Northern Ireland. That has not been the reason for it. Some people have sought to politicise the motion, but we are simply asking the Minister to look at the issue again and put in place some sort of mechanism to encourage young Protestant students to stay in Northern Ireland and study at the universities here.

It used to be that many of our sixth formers were able to find suitable employment and build careers without going to universities, which usually meant that they stayed in Northern Ireland. However, today most young people feel compelled to enter third-level education if they are to have any chance of getting a foot on the employment ladder. Therefore, universities play a more crucial role in society than ever before. During the Troubles, Protestant students tended to prefer to study in universities in Great Britain. They wanted to get out of troubled Northern Ireland, and

few of them returned. I suppose at that time we wished them well, but it was not good for Northern Ireland, and it caused many of us to despair for the future. Thankfully, the Troubles are, hopefully, behind us, but the problem remains that the exodus of Protestant students still continues.

In answer to a question that I tabled in October 2009, the Education Minister provided me with some figures for the 2008-09 academic year, the latest year for which figures are available. The figures reveal that 56% of places in higher education in Northern Ireland were taken up by Roman Catholics, 37% were taken up by Protestants, and 7% by others. That continuing imbalance is not good. In fact, it is simply unacceptable.

As Northern Ireland moves out of its troubled past and we have a much more peaceful society, we have to ask why Protestants are still going across the water. There are several answers to that question. For example, more Protestant students live in the east of the Province, and many of them live within travelling distance to our local universities, yet they feel the excitement of going across the water to study and to get a different experience from studying here at home. However, there are other more worrying reasons why they are leaving. Sadly, our local universities are still perceived by many Protestants as being more welcoming to the nationalist community than they are to the unionist community. For example, Queen's University —

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am deeply grateful to the Member for giving way, as I appreciate that it is unusual to make an intervention during a Member's winding-up speech. However, I must point out that the evidence from the 2008 report by Professor Osborne, which I sponsored, does not provide that information. That is the point. The difference in perceptions and chill factors between the various religions is 1%, 2% or 3%; it is extremely small. I ask the Member to revisit that point if he would be so kind.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his intervention. However, let us be clear: not only is the chill factor a concern in the Democratic Unionist Party, it is a concern in the Minister's own party. His party colleague Tom Elliott said that he was shocked to discover how many more Roman Catholics stay in the Province to study, which suggests that there is a Protestant brain drain. That difficulty and perception exists throughout the entire unionist community; it is not focused only in the Democratic Unionist Party. The Assembly must be realistic and look at that matter. Since the figures speak for themselves, I do not want to repeat those that were cited in the debate. They will be available to everyone in the Hansard report.

Although local universities are perceived to be a cold house for Protestants, there is no doubt that many

seek to improve that image and to be seen as a warm place for students from that community. That is to be welcomed. Universities have a responsibility to take a long, hard look at how they promote themselves to Protestants. The Assembly and the Executive must take a proactive role on the matter.

The Executive have, quite rightly, placed the economy at the heart of the Programme for Government. One of its key aims is to attract high-value-added, well-paid jobs that will provide security and stability. If Northern Ireland is to attract such jobs, it is vital that local graduates have the required skills that are sought by potential foreign investors. If students cannot be kept in Northern Ireland and choose to go elsewhere, that will create a vacuum that is detrimental to the economy.

Many Protestant students focus on STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and maths — which are key to the economy's development. Closer working relationships between universities and colleges are needed. If they were properly funded, colleges could take in students who drop out of STEM subjects courses at Queen's University. The Assembly must look at that issue if it wants to encourage students to stay in Northern Ireland. STEM subjects provide a strong basis on which to mount a strong stay at home campaign in schools and universities, particularly among Protestant sixth formers.

I want to pick up on issues that were raised in the debate. I am aware that time is moving on quickly. The proposer of the motion, Alex Easton, spoke of the variation in the numbers of students in each of the universities in Northern Ireland. The figures, which are documented, show that many more nationalists than Protestants study at Northern Ireland's universities. The Assembly must deal with those stubborn facts.

As regards funding inequalities, 69% of Catholic students receive information about funding compared with 55% of Protestant students, and the Assembly must look at that issue to determine what can be done to provide that information.

Mr Leonard: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: My time is almost up. The proposer of the motion, Alex Easton, called for a robust action plan to address that vital issue and to stop the perceived discrimination of Protestant students that results in their moving away from Northern Ireland. That is an issue that we have to look at.

I have not got time to go into what the other Members who spoke said, but I think that most of them admitted that there was a difficulty and that a lot of Protestant students were leaving Northern Ireland and going to study elsewhere. That fact was acknowledged by almost every Member who spoke, and it is something that we need to address.

I welcome the Minister's response, and I agree with what he said. We need to take a step back into the education system and further back into our schools and, subsequently, our colleges. We need to start the process there and build on it. That will help to alleviate the problems that we face regarding our students in Northern Ireland.

Question put and negatived.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Location of Public Sector Jobs

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

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the significant social, regional development, economic and long-term environmental benefits of a programme of decentralisation of public sector jobs; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to reconsider his stated position on the implementation of the independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs; welcomes the Minister's recognition that it requires an Executive decision; and calls on the Executive to discuss the issue at their next meeting with a view to taking immediate action to fully implement the review's recommendations by assessing options for decentralising public sector jobs within all government Departments and public sector agencies.

I welcome the Minister to this afternoon's debate. I hope that he will be able to respond to the debate and, considering the concerns, rumours and goodnight Irelands that we have been hearing all afternoon, I hope that it will not be his last opportunity to respond to a debate.

We are talking about the review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, which I will refer to as the Bain report. It has an impressive set of authors. They consulted widely, and they carefully considered conclusions that should be taken seriously. The Bain report cites three main arguments for the redistribution of jobs, which are:

"first, to enhance the delivery of public services by improving operational efficiency and effectiveness; second, to promote more balanced regional economic development and reduce social deprivation; and third, to promote sustainability by achieving environmental benefits through changing commuter patterns, operating in more energy-efficient buildings, and helping to revitalise the economic and social infrastructure of local communities."

The SDLP agrees that those are worthy goals.

We in the SDLP are particularly concerned at the spatial imbalance of economic development and well-being across Northern Ireland. Decentralisation is one of a number of investments that government can make to redress the imbalance that has historically existed in Northern Ireland. That can be addressed only through delivering strategic regional investment.

I ask the Minister and the House to give careful consideration to the type of Northern Ireland that we want to develop. Are we satisfied that a large proportion of Northern Ireland has serious infrastructural deficits, which lead to high unemployment and low wage employment? If we do not invest, why should, and how can, the private sector invest? Do we want to develop the entire region or just the subregions that

give the best short-term value for money return? Or, will we ensure that every subregion in Northern Ireland is developed? That would ensure that every part of Northern Ireland works for all of its people.

The relocation of public sector jobs can create a win-win situation from social, environmental and economic perspectives. The Bain report makes that point. It states:

“In France, Finland, Ireland and the UK, relocation has been used to create jobs and encourage economic development in provincial regions, while at the same time reducing inflationary pressures in property and labour markets close to capital cities.”

4.00 pm

There is a clear imbalance in development in Northern Ireland. The Minister will be fully aware of the figures for employment and unemployment across the North. The Minister will also be aware that the low levels of per capita GDP, particularly in the west, result from complex reasons and historical decisions and actions. Some of those relate to the sustained campaign by the Provisional IRA against the economy and jobs, when businesses and people were attacked. Some relate to historic Government decisions on transport and university education in particular.

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

There is a strong case for decentralisation to locations in the west. The west is the main region of high unemployment outside any reasonable travel-to-work distance from Belfast. Therefore, for good, sound economic and justifiable reasons, it is a natural region to which to relocate jobs. Derry is the major hub of the north-west, which includes Strabane, which is also a town of very high employment but is within easy reach of the city of Derry. The Bain report is particularly clear on Derry's position as a prime candidate for the relocation of jobs. The report states that only Derry has the capacity to sustain large grade-A offices of the type required for large-scale relocation. It is well outside the Belfast travel-to-work region, and it has a university campus, which means that it would be able to supply suitably qualified staff in that locality. The west is also geographically suitable for the location of cross-border bodies. The SDLP agrees with the Bain report's recommendation that there should be a presumption against new bodies being located in Belfast.

The SDLP understands that there are up-front costs — relocation is not free — and it concurs with the Bain report's recommendation that:

“any business-case process should ensure that the long-term, non-monetary benefits receive primary consideration and should not be determined by value-for-money considerations alone.”

Judging by his previous comments, the Minister of Finance and Personnel is clearly concerned about the cost implications of decentralisation. However, it is not clear whether he supports decentralisation in principle

as a means of creating better balanced economic development, environmental benefits and a better service provision. Perhaps the Minister will comment on those three areas later.

As with many things, timing is crucial. It is rarely the case that decisions are made when all stars are aligned. The SDLP recognises the difficult economic circumstances that exist. Clearly, it would be better if we were not in recession. However, we are conscious that there is an intention to invest in upgrading public estates. We are going through the RPA process, and new public bodies are being created. This is a period of change and investment, and that is why it is crucial that the right location decisions are made now. Once new systems become embedded and refurbishments are complete, relocation for any Government will become much more difficult.

There are key social, environmental and long-term economic reasons for decentralisation. This is the right time to carry decentralisation forward. I appeal to the House and the Executive to give serious consideration to the Bain report's recommendations. The people of Northern Ireland are watching us closely, and they want to know whether the Executive will provide only caretaker subsistence investment in Northern Ireland or whether they have the vision, strength, intelligence and leadership necessary to carry this and other long-term initiatives to develop every region across Northern Ireland.

There was concern when the Minister put a damper on everyone's enthusiasm by saying that, for financial reasons, now was not the time for decentralisation. We want to know whether the Minister believes that he made the right decision.

Many thousands of jobs have been haemorrhaged in the north-west in recent times, so is now not the time to invest properly and for good social and economic reasons? It is clear from the Bain report that:

“Derry should be a primary site for the relocation to absorb a substantial number of jobs in the... short term.”

The areas named for the relocation of public sector jobs in the Bain report were Derry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine. Those are all areas of need, and the Members who represent those constituencies will no doubt make that point. The criteria set out by the Bain report include regional economic balance; labour market capacity, which involves establishing whether there is a market and whether the regions have the capacity to support the workforce; whether those jobs can be made sustainable — and they can; whether those regions have the transport or public transport infrastructure to develop on a theme of decentralisation; and whether a clustering effect will create other employment opportunities.

We must know whether the Minister and his Department will ensure that the Executive commission an independent report that will take data from across Northern Ireland and bring key people together in order to inform opinion. However, there is not much point in the Executive and the Department constructing an independent report unless the areas that need to be challenged and brought forward are prioritised. We must ensure that that report is delivered on and that yet another position paper is not binned.

Mr McLaughlin: I welcome the motion; I support it and will be voting for it. The issue of decentralisation is not one that can be judged solely in the here and now. I, too, was disappointed when the Minister indicated that his intention was effectively to bin the Bain report, because decentralisation is a key factor in investing in recovery, which is one of the key principles that the Executive must address. I do not have any particular prescience about how the current situation will resolve itself. However, for the purposes of the debate, I will assume that there will be an Executive and an opportunity for us all to work together to address that key priority, which was correctly identified in the Programme for Government and the Budget.

The invest to save initiative that was identified by the Minister during the debate on the draft expenditure plans for 2010-11 in January is very interesting and progressive. Indeed, in my contribution to that debate, I welcomed that initiative and congratulated the Minister on its introduction, and I feel that the same concept could also be applied to decentralisation. There would inevitably be short-term set-up costs, but there have been remarkable and revolutionary developments in technology, particularly communication technology.

There are well-established and road-tested techniques in remote working, working from home, hot-desking and the establishment of satellite offices. Indeed, there have been some very interesting experiments in the South, where shared service centres have been established to deal with the consequences of the peripheralisation of the towns and cities that lie outside the Pale and the Dublin conurbation. That principle has been established and the effectiveness of the approach demonstrated. It would, therefore, be short-sighted of the Executive if they did not examine and bring forward pilot projects to demonstrate the value of addressing the need to rebuild the economy, to identify the type of economy that will sustain itself in future and to deal with the historical legacy of underdevelopment.

I make the point repeatedly that this is a tiny geographical entity. There are no excuses for not providing equality of opportunity or for not dealing with the legacy of disparity and underdevelopment. It

is not the fault of any party in the Assembly that those patterns emerged. They have emerged over many decades, and our responsibility is to try to do something about them. The Bain report, with its modest proposals, provides an opportunity for us all to work together to begin to address those issues that continue to affect our community and could well continue to do so in the future.

We have sound economic reasons for taking action on the Bain report. There are allied environmental reasons for reducing the number of people on the roads, for reducing congestion to enhance the future development of this city and for ensuring that we deliver effective government and services cost-effectively. That does not mean sticking, in all circumstances, with the old system and the old patterns of government deployment. It does not mean ignoring, in a Luddite fashion, the developments in technology and communication. We can deliver those services in a way that does not require people to get up at the crack of dawn every day to commute to Belfast, do their day's work and then commute back home again, with all the consequences that that brings, such as cost, inefficiencies and stress for commuters.

There is an opportunity here, and I exhort the Minister to reconsider his position and to consider the benefits of working with his Executive colleagues. Let us devise the pilot programmes and bring them forward.

Mr McNarry: To embark on an expensive scheme to decentralise civil and public service jobs right across Northern Ireland — conservative estimates suggest that it would lead to additional costs of some £40 million — at a time when the Finance Minister has asked Departments for £370 million of expenditure cuts is really not on. There are many things that we would like to do and which, in the future, I trust we will have the opportunity to do. Implementing the Bain report, either partially or in its entirety, may well be one of those things.

However, as we debate the issue today, some of the representatives of areas that could benefit from the report are trying to bring the House down. This is not the time to do it. We have a fiscal duty to be prudent and an overriding duty to maintain the House. We have a duty to be good custodians of the public purse. At a time when we face the worst recession since the 1930s, when unemployment has doubled in the last year, when 50% more people are claiming jobseeker's allowance than were claiming it a year ago, when we have an economic inactivity rate that is 30% higher than the national average and when the cancellation and postponement of government and school infrastructure and development projects have led to the loss of many construction jobs, we find that some people stand accused today of a wrecking exercise and are failing their electorate.

Some people — namely, the DUP's republican partners — set policing and justice as a higher priority than what is, for other people, the struggle of putting bread on the table and keeping a roof over their head. I understand the intentions behind the motion and the frustrations of the proposers, but, given ongoing events elsewhere, I ask Members to look around them. Who is listening? What is the point in bringing business to the Floor of the House when turmoil rules instead of democracy? When are we all going to say that there should be no more pretend business until there is an established, reliable and stable Executive who can secure public confidence? This dysfunctional, squabbling, two-party coalition Executive is making a laughing stock of the rest of us, and it really cannot continue.

No one is knocking my office door down to demand the devolution of policing and justice powers as a top priority. They would want to identify more with a debate such as this, and those who say anything different are reading the public mood wrongly. The public want us to activate urgently issues that are connected to job creation and protection. They want us to determine how we might shore up the economy, which is already alarmingly dependent on the public sector. They also want us to establish how we might make things better for business and to find ways to protect the people who are most in need of our help. They want action on all fronts; they do not want distractions, such as those that are occurring today, from the priorities.

4.15 pm

Bain's committee did not invent relocation; rather, its report was a reaction to an idea that had been around for some time. Decentralising government jobs is a politician's issue. At present, we should be spending less time on that matter and more time on dealing with the issues that are concerning people. We must handle those issues competently.

I would welcome areas in my constituency of Strangford benefiting from relocation. As an Assembly, however, we must take a broader view and discharge our financial duty properly in the interests of all. We have got to put that in front of us all at a time when cuts are the order of the day. It is more important to direct public money into front line services.

For those reasons, I cannot support the motion, and I ask the cavalier republicans — a contradiction in terms — to please get a grip on themselves and to listen to what people in the community want, rather than throwing up garbage to the House today and perhaps for the next few days.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Dr Stephen Farry, I ask Members to stick to the subject.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, as the horse bolts.

I have some sympathy for the motion, and I am open-minded on the issue in general. However, I am not entirely uncritical of it. I agree with Mr McNarry that it is not valid to push the issue in the current context. Each of the report's individual proposals on relocation would probably fail under Treasury green book guidance, and, even if a political decision were taken to override that and make a leap of faith, we would have to face up to the fact that considerable costs would be involved in any decisions on relocation.

The debate comes in the context of some difficult economic and financial circumstances. It would be difficult to implement the report's proposals in any context but, in today's circumstances, that is an impossible ask. If we were to do it, it would be at the opportunity cost of doing something else, to use an economic concept on which the Finance Minister keeps lecturing us.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr McNarry also referred to the financial cost of implementing the report's proposals. The review of public administration also has a cost, yet we do not hear of that being shelved on the basis of cost.

Dr Farry: I do not necessarily disagree with the Member's point.

It is important that we seek to prioritise our economic resources for protecting and growing the economy and for protecting and sustaining our public services. We must also bear in mind the sheer stress that would be put on what is currently an overstretched public sector. We must be responsible in what we ask for. During devolution and in recent years, Departments have been asked to undergo considerable changes, some of which have been productive and some of which have not. We must bear in mind how the system can take the strain that has been asked of it. An extreme example is LPS, which has been asked to implement a huge raft of changes in rating. It has struggled to do so and is only now coming round to dealing with those issues.

I can certainly understand and identify with the argument about the poor distribution of economic activity and wealth in Northern Ireland. To some extent, that mirrors a wider point that I and others have made about regional imbalances across the United Kingdom, where three out of 12 of the NUTS regions are net contributors to the Treasury. Against that, though, we have to acknowledge the counter-argument about the tendency for jobs and economic activity to cluster and to concentrate. We then have to ask ourselves whether that clustering is benign or malign. Perhaps, when talking about the long-term future of Northern Ireland, we need to have a debate about whether there is enough balance.

At times, I become a little concerned and frustrated because our economic debates often become more

about the internal distribution of inward investment or jobs and about how the cake is distributed rather than about the overall size of the cake and the creation of wealth. Ultimately, as an Assembly, that has to be our main concern, and, in some senses, we will all benefit if we manage to make some progress on that issue.

It should also be borne in mind that public sector jobs are, in themselves, a poor substitute for private sector jobs. They do not create wealth; rather, they exist to provide an important service in helping the public with health and education, for example.

We should be somewhat concerned when we see a UK-wide pattern in which the British Government are shifting a lot of public sector jobs to the north of England and to Scotland. That becomes almost a surrogate for trying to create alternative forms of economic activity in areas that have suffered from deindustrialisation over the past 30 years. Therefore, let us have a balanced approach to job creation.

The issue about the distribution of public sector jobs in the greater Belfast area was missed in the Bain report. Relocation was deemed to be about moving jobs from the Stormont estate or Belfast city centre to other regions of Northern Ireland and ignoring the suburban ring, where a critical mass of people live. Many of those people commute to Stormont or to the centre of Belfast. It would be beneficial to move jobs to that suburban ring. There is a myth that there are a lot of Civil Service jobs in such areas, particularly in my constituency of North Down. However, it is worth bearing in mind that there are actually very few Civil Service jobs in North Down. A lot of civil servants who live there have to commute, and, as a result, they clog up the traffic in the mornings at the expense of other economic activities.

I have been lobbied about the location of public sector jobs, and I was very conscious of a suggestion that was made several years ago to move the headquarters of the Department of Education from Rathgael House to somewhere in Belfast. Even though that building is in an inferior state when compared to others, there was a clear sense from those who work in it, particularly those in lower grades, that they wanted to stay there because that is where they built their livelihoods and that is where their families were located. They did not want to have to relocate because of all the disruption that would have been involved. Therefore, the interests of workers who are well settled in their jobs should also be borne in mind. It is not in everyone's interests for jobs to be moved around like pieces on a chessboard.

Mr Weir: Given the surrounding circumstances, there is, as some Members pointed out, a slightly surreal aspect to this debate. Perhaps what is most surreal for me is that, during a debate about finance and personnel issues, I find myself largely agreeing

with Mr McNarry and Dr Farry. I do not know which of them should be more worried.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): You should be worried.

Mr Weir: Maybe I should be deeply worried. I should maybe revise my speech completely. I may disagree with a few of Mr McNarry's points; however, given the current spirit of unionist unity, I will not pick up on them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I did ask Members to stick to the motion and not to decentralise to other subjects.

Mr Weir: I shall try to centralise this debate and, indeed, my concerns about the motion.

There is no doubt about the sensitivity of the issue. We would all admit that there are sensitivities in all parties because this is an issue of geography more than anything else. Indeed, people from areas that could lose jobs will be fiercely defensive of the status quo, while people from areas that may gain jobs will have a strong desire for that movement to take place. Therefore, I suspect that there are nuances of positions in all parties about this issue, because, in many ways, it is a zero-sum game. It is not an issue of introducing new jobs; rather, it is a question of potentially shifting jobs. That is why the analogy with the RPA is awry. Although there may be some question marks about the overall cost of the RPA, at least it is aimed at saving money in the long run. At most, implementing the Bain report would create expensive dislocation costs with no particular financial gain. There may be gains and losses for individuals but, overall, there is no net financial gain to Northern Ireland as a whole.

As has been indicated, there are flawed assumptions behind both the Bain report and this motion. The idea that shifting jobs to one location means that there is a massive economic boost for the people in that area is highly questionable. Belfast is in second or third place as regards the number of public sector jobs per head of population; interestingly, Omagh has the highest number. One might think that having those jobs would be a massive boost to the Belfast economy, yet, of the 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, 18 are in Belfast. Therefore, wealth does not necessarily follow the location of public sector jobs. Additionally, there is an assumption, fuelled by a parochial attitude, that having jobs in their area will mean that people will have only to walk a few hundred yards to their job, whereas, in reality, a much wider net is cast.

I agree with Mr Farry that one of the flawed aspects of the Bain report has been the attitude to greater Belfast. In the parochial attitude that I have described, locations such as north Down and Rathgael House are lumped in with Belfast. If certain plans were implemented, there would be a danger that public

sector jobs would be taken away from north Down, where there is a deficit of jobs, and transferred to the centre of Belfast. That is one of the flaws of this motion.

In many ways, Rathgael House is a good example. Many of the staff there have sought transfers to work there, in order to take care of local needs such as family responsibilities, care responsibilities and so on. We need to take a more imaginative approach, encourage flexible working and see where transfers can occur without the massive costs of relocation.

Northern Ireland is much smaller than other jurisdictions; it is not England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland, and so issues of distance are not quite so crucial. Where relocation has been attempted on a large scale, whether in Scotland or the Republic of Ireland, it has not been an unalloyed success. In the Republic, things have largely ground to a halt; in Scotland, relocation has created major problems. Leaving aside the merits of relocation as a concept, the fatal flaw in this motion and in moving ahead with Bain now is affordability, given the current economic circumstances. We now have a situation where Departments will have to give up a total of £370 million in revenue and capital. Therefore, at this time when there is added pressure on a range of vital services, we cannot spend £40 million on a dubious plan of relocation.

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

Mr Weir: It would simply produce an additional burden, and that would be foolish.

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

Mr Weir: I urge Members to vote against the motion.

Ms Anderson: Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank the proposers for tabling it. I welcome the motion's determination that the issue of decentralisation is for the Executive to decide. It is not for the Minister of Finance and Personnel or anyone else to decide unilaterally. I made that point when the Minister made his ill-advised comments in October.

The Minister talked about the cost of implementing the Bain report. He said that the estimated cost of relocating 5,000 public sector jobs as recommended by Bain — £40 million — was not affordable. However, as my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin pointed out last week, the Minister talked about the concept of invest to save, whereby we spend in the short term —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member tell us what services she will cut to get that £40 million? Choices must be made. From where will the £40 million come?

Ms Anderson: I am talking about invest to save, whereby we spend in the short term. I do not know

whether the Member was present for the Minister's contribution. We would benefit from that investment in the long term. I ask the Member, where is the value for money in maintaining an imbalanced regional development? Where is the value for money in maintaining what many regard as an ineffective top-heavy Civil Service?

4.30 pm

I stress that this debate is not, as some Members commented earlier, about Derry versus Belfast. A balanced economy is good for the North as a whole, and the Finance Minister should bear that in mind. He should also remember that the decision on whether to implement the Bain report's recommendations will be taken by the Executive, not him alone.

Sinn Féin supports the Bain review and its endorsement of the argument that public sector jobs should be spread evenly across the Six Counties. I know that the review was warmly received by the many civil servants who live in rural communities and in places such as Derry and Newry and who have to travel to Belfast for work every day. Obviously, those important issues must be managed in a sensitive manner for the benefit of public sector workers who may be affected by decentralisation. The core argument of the Bain report is that public sector employment should be part of a broader move towards a balanced approach to regional and economic development across the North, and it is one that Sinn Féin has long supported and advocated.

For its part, Sinn Féin will continue to approach the issue on the basis of equality and of addressing historical regional disparities. Indeed, Sinn Féin Ministers are actively seeking ways to decentralise Civil Service jobs to areas outside Belfast. It is well recognised — this has been demonstrated internationally — that the relocation of public sector jobs gives a significant uplift to the local economy in which they are situated. That is particularly true of areas such as Derry — stand up for Derry; I could not go without saying that — which Pat Ramsey and I represent, and which has suffered decades of neglect and underinvestment. Perhaps that explains the determination by some parties to defend the historic pattern of locating government jobs. I refer to the earlier comments of Mr McNarry and to the fact that the DUP and the UUP have defended other historical patterns, such as wanting unionism to be the largest party in the Six Counties, but “the times they are a-changin’”. We witnessed some of that antipathy in the debate on whether to declare the north-west as an area of special economic need. However, we will not allow that to derail us.

Redressing regional inequality is not just the right thing to do, it is a Programme for Government

commitment, and my party has no intention of letting up on its demand for that to be implemented. The relocation of government jobs is just one tangible measure that the Executive can and should take to help redress those inequalities, and I fully endorse the demand for immediate Executive talks with a view to implementing the Bain report in full. I support the motion and call on other Members to do so.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to speak on an issue that is of direct significance to my constituency of East Londonderry. Its two major towns are Coleraine and Limavady, which the Bain report suggests may benefit from the decentralisation of public sector jobs. That will be of tremendous benefit to many people throughout my constituency who commute daily to Belfast and other areas. Many people who live in other areas outside Belfast are also forced to commute long distances each day because their Civil Service jobs are based in Belfast. Therefore, moving public sector jobs to locations outside Belfast would reduce many of those journeys and alleviate the traffic problems that we encounter daily on the roads.

There are, however, many more details in the proposals that must be investigated. At a time when economic pressures are at the forefront of everyone's minds, a scheme that may cost upwards of £50 million cannot be entered into lightly. A value-for-money principle must be uppermost in all our minds. We cannot throw precious financial resources at the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs without being sure that there will be a good return for that investment. A huge number of issues in places such as Coleraine and Limavady would benefit from the investment of a tiny proportion of that money.

Other areas such as Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have already entered into a programme of decentralisation of public sector jobs. We must examine and learn from the problems that those schemes faced. There is no point in blindly following the proposals. We must study examples from other countries, learn about the problems that they encountered and ensure that we do not repeat their mistakes. The reason for comparing examples from elsewhere is to evaluate the benefits and pitfalls. The greatest potential benefit lies in locating new bodies in areas outside Belfast, and we should focus on that. The further decentralisation of public sector jobs should be examined in the future. That is important, because we must take into account that the current financial situation demands caution. We must also ensure that we achieve value for money from every penny that we spend.

In conclusion, I urge extreme caution in supporting the motion.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for bringing the topic forward for discussion. I

agree entirely that Northern Ireland needs and deserves a public sector that is efficient, fair and rooted throughout Northern Ireland.

Although we are content with the many positive aspects of the Bain report, it is not perfect, and, therefore, I do not want it to be implemented to be in full, as intimated in the motion. The report failed to recognise inconsistencies in the current travel-to-work areas. A huge geographic variation exists within those areas. Is that a good judgement on which to base relocations?

My constituency of East Antrim is ranked as one of the lowest of the 18 parliamentary constituencies when it comes to public sector jobs, having only 2.4%, or 5,171, of the 219,000 jobs listed. That already low figure has decreased still further, with the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) office in Larne being earmarked for closure and relocation, changes happening in the Department for Social Development (DSD), centralisation in north Belfast, and a new processing office has opened in Ballymena.

Page 58 of the Bain report states that councils in East Antrim have among the lowest number of public sector jobs per 100 of the working age population. Larne has only eight public sector jobs for every 100 of the working age population, Carrickfergus has 8.2, and Newtownabbey has 10.3. Those figures compare with 35.6 public sector jobs in Belfast for every 100 of the working age population, 21.8 in Omagh and 19.2 in Londonderry.

Other areas are similarly affected. For example, the Ards council area has 8.5 public sector jobs for every 100 people. Again, the issue of huge variations within each travel-to-work area was not addressed by the review. It is not only an issue for areas west of the Bann, as some of the issues also affect areas in the east of the Province.

Members have failed to grasp the cost implication. It is easy to say that we should use money from the invest to save fund. However, to have money for that fund, a choice must be made to take it from other projects. I would wish for money to be diverted from other projects only if the long-term economic benefits were certain. Money should not be moved from one area merely for the luxury of re-juggling where civil servants are located.

Mr McLaughlin: I invited Members to consider an extremely worthwhile concept. I was not talking about redeploying the budget that has already been earmarked for a range of projects, all of which I support. I was merely recommending the concept.

Mr Beggs: All Members ought to know the severity of the finance proposals contained within the recent announcement. We have to save £370 million, and, for the Health Service alone, that amounts to £113,000 of

additional savings in the next financial year. However, proposals to relocate Civil Service jobs would incur an additional cost. How would that be paid for?

On Friday, I met the chief executive of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. I learned of the huge pressures facing that trust because of the increasing birth rate in the area. At the same time, the elderly population is increasing. Both place considerable demands on the Health Service and require particular resources. In addition, hospital outpatient referrals are up by 7% this year and attendance at accident and emergency departments is up by 8%. A decision to relocate civil service jobs means deciding not to provide money to front line services, and we must be careful that that does not happen.

When the Bain report was published, the Ulster Unionist Party gave guarded support to many of its recommendations. We noted that the relocation of public sector jobs would help to create a better and more balanced regional economy, encourage wealth creation and reduce economic disparity. However, we also stipulated that the Executive would have to ensure that value for money was at the forefront of any decisions that they took.

Mrs D Kelly: It strikes me that that has not been the practice thus far. For example, how can the Member explain away the appointment of four victims' commissioners? Where will the £118 million cost of the review of public administration be found?

Mr Beggs: It is for others to argue why there are four victims' commissioners instead of one.

The review of public administration and the reviews of other Departments and organisations present an opportunity to look at relocation where there are minimal set-up costs and where efficiencies can be shown. We must take great care when moving entire Departments and structures en masse. We must be careful to make sure that such moves will produce savings and that a new work arrangement will kick in at the same time. Such moves must be carefully planned so that savings are made, thus enabling reinvestment for the future.

We ought to learn from the Republic of Ireland's painful experiences of job relocation: huge expense and considerable upheaval of services. As other Members said, the Scottish Executive have had virtually to reverse their decentralisation policy and give increased weight to value for money.

The last thing that the Assembly should be doing is wasting taxpayers' money or heaping any more pressure on our already creaking public services. We must ensure that any changes are carefully thought out and bring short-term financial rewards.

Mr Gallagher: This is the second time that the location of public sector jobs has been debated in the Chamber. After the Bain report was first published a couple of years ago, I proposed a motion on the location of public sector jobs. I am delighted that there is an opportunity to remind the Executive of the importance of taking the initiative forward. The previous SDLP motion was inspired by our desire to see equal opportunity and fair treatment for people everywhere in Northern Ireland.

I do not want to go over history, but the clear evidence of the economic neglect of the west has not been properly identified. Everyone would agree that economic neglect leads to a lack of economic opportunity, which can cause social deprivation and other problems. We all have a responsibility to address those problems.

I agreed with David McNarry when he talked about the mood and atmosphere in the Chamber. The topic that we are discussing is crucial to people everywhere, who want to see the Executive deliver. The number of empty seats in the Chamber is a statement in itself.

I did not agree with David McNarry and other Members who asked where the money will come from for the decentralisation of public sector jobs. The failure to tackle social deprivation and all the resultant issues, and their effect on our society, means that we simply cannot afford to do nothing. As Members know, six towns were identified in the Bain report, and I welcome its recommendations for those towns. However, three other towns — Cookstown, Downpatrick and Enniskillen — were mentioned in the Bain report as having the potential to share in the relocation of public sector jobs; they should not be forgotten.

Those places had problems with infrastructure, which Bain recommended should be tackled first. The infrastructure in those three towns, spread out as they are, should be addressed. The infrastructure was said to be weak, and I forget the exact wording that was used about Enniskillen, which is in my constituency. It is the most westerly town that is identified and should not be set aside or allowed to fall out of the Bain recommendations.

4.45 pm

Various Departments have responsibilities for Enniskillen. The roads infrastructure must be improved because there is no railway system. It seems that the small airport there will never be developed because no investment has been provided. Therefore, it is important that the Executive not only take on board the importance of implementing proposals in the six towns that are mentioned in Bain but take responsibility to tackle the infrastructural shortcomings in the other three towns, for which investment will be required.

I mentioned the importance of investment in roads in the west. However, the Department of Finance and

Personnel is currently consulting on a massive cut to the roads budget. It is not good enough that people in the west are not included in the recommendations of the Bain report, and it will certainly not be good enough if the Executive fail to provide the investment to improve the infrastructure, as was highlighted in the report and on many previous occasions. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Regional Development have responsibilities.

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

Mr Gallagher: All our government bodies and the Executive face challenges. They should be taken seriously, and we need some action to address the shortcomings.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which is important at this time. We have been told that the cost of around £40 million is causing problems. We must consider how the business case is put together and on what it is based. What questions do we need to ask to get an answer?

Professor Bain issued an explicit health warning and explained the limitations of the indicative costs modelling that was undertaken as part of the review. He pointed out that significant political will is required to implement relocation because of the acute cost benefits that were forecast. Moreover, he considered the issues around long-term social and economic benefits, which must be factored in and will form an important part of the consideration of relocation. Cost is not the only issue. The current structure works within certain parameters, which may need to be reviewed and changed as we progress.

People in public sector jobs have been surveyed. Stephen Farry said that people in those jobs do not want to move. However, other people want to move into such jobs but cannot do so because they are not available in their area. They do not want to travel on the M1 or M2 every morning to work in Belfast. They want to work in local towns and villages. Relocation to rural areas is an important part of that process and will ensure that those people have the opportunity to take up some of those jobs.

It does not make sense that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is based in Dundonald House in east Belfast. It could be relocated to the Loughry campus of CAFRE, where there are many empty buildings and many acres of ground to build on. Moreover, a section of the Forest Service could be relocated. People from Enniskillen travel to Dundonald House to make decisions about forestry around the country.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the Member on that issue. In whose gift is it to make the decision to relocate

those jobs? Can the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development make that decision, or would she have to rely on money from the Minister of Finance and Personnel?

Mr Molloy: I will repeat what my colleague Martina Anderson said; it is an Executive decision. The Minister has said in the past that she would be interested in relocating jobs if the Executive made the decision and provided the necessary resources. During and after her pregnancy, she worked from an office at Loughry, so she was able to decentralise in that way. Parts of Departments could be relocated, creating new employment and new opportunities, instead of being based in expensive rented Belfast city centre offices that are owned by developers and Departments alike.

Look at what happens on the M1 every morning and every evening to people who commute in and out of Belfast. We should look at other opportunities. Members ask where the savings would be made. Why not wind up a lot of the quangos and bring their functions under direct ministerial control where they would be more accountable? Services such as roads and water have been centralised, and health is being centralised in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast while local areas are losing out on hospitals. We must look at that situation.

Discrimination west of the Bann was a very blunt instrument that affected everyone. I heard George Robinson say that his constituency could do with jobs being relocated there. Everyone west of the Bann was discriminated against because they were denied services, infrastructure, businesses and industry. All those issues must be rectified if the Assembly is going to deliver anything for the people. Let us bring the quangos back under the control of Departments, promote the idea that we are interested in preserving our social fabric, and deal with the community cost of providing jobs in places to which people do not have to travel long distances every morning. We must deal with the perception that discrimination still exists west of the Bann.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the thrust of the motion and the debate, although, given the wording of the motion, there are issues to which I take exception. I know that, having spoken privately to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, he is very excited and very positively disposed towards the issues.

People would be mad not to recognise that, as constituency representatives, we want as many good opportunities as possible to flow to our areas. The motion allows for a genuine and detailed debate on that issue. The debate is not and should not be seen as a whinging session during which Members make demands for their constituencies and ignore everyone else. There is merit in the motion and the debate.

We should remember that the Bain review was commissioned by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, now the First Minister, Peter Robinson, who encouraged out-of-the-box thinking whereby people would be tasked to examine opportunities to develop the location of public sector jobs outside the main cities of our Province. Those of us who represent largely rural constituencies see great vitality and opportunity for such projects to go forward.

However, we would be kidding ourselves if we were not alive to the economic climate in which the new Minister of Finance and Personnel finds himself. That economic climate has, to a degree, unfortunately curtailed the ambition of the Bain proposals, largely because the money is not there to relocate many of those posts; neither is there the opportunity, given that public sector jobs will be put under significant pressure over the next year. If there is a new Government at Westminster, that pressure will be greater than people here have given proper thought to. Therefore, we have to recognise the tightening-of-the-belt situation that we are in.

However, opportunities still exist that should not be lost. It has been proposed that opportunities be developed in Ballymena, which is in my constituency. I would like to see that happen. Ballymena acts as a hub for Coleraine at one end of the constituency and as an employment hub for Larne and Carrickfergus at the other. The areas that were identified in the Bain report should be considered whenever an opportunity for such hubs to be built arises or for public sector jobs to be located or created.

The previous Member to speak, Mr Molloy, who is a Member for Mid Ulster, made valid points about DARD. Most people from the rural community who have to interface with DARD would like to see people in that Department employed in the rural community and in parts of Northern Ireland that are much more accessible than east Belfast. That does not do violence to anyone's current position or to the standing of the Department. Dundonald House is a building that is, quite frankly, not fit for purpose, and if the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development found that she wanted to close it, or if the Executive wanted to remodel or rebuild it, there would be considerable merit in locating what is one of the largest Departments to an area that is easier to access by those who use it most, namely, the rural community and farming sector. Therefore, various opportunities exist.

Opportunities also exist through the creation of, for example, the new Charity Commission and the Commission for Victims and Survivors. Those bodies provide opportunities for people in public sector employment to be relocated or newly located. I hope that those issues are not lost on the Minister or the Department when they look at the motion, and I hope

that they see it as promoting a concept that could, under better economic circumstances, be given a fair wind and some encouragement.

Mr Savage: I welcome the debate, and I congratulate the Members for securing it. Given that I will talk about the Craigavon Borough Council area, I declare an interest as a member of that council.

The decentralisation of public sector jobs has a role to play in securing the economic stability of our Province. Understandably, Belfast is the central location for public sector jobs. However, that means that many people have to travel far and wide to maintain their employment. There is no real call for that.

I accept the assertion in the motion that the implementation of the Bain report would, in some shape or form, have significant social, regional and economic benefits now and in the future. Take, for example, Craigavon, which is in the centre of my Upper Bann constituency. As many people know, Craigavon was planned as a large urban and suburban conurbation that was designed to encourage people to move away from Belfast, ensuring a more even distribution of development. Many people also know that difficulties ensued, with the major employers in the area, such as Goodyear, failing to make regular profits. Those companies had to close, making many in the area redundant. That situation was compounded by the Troubles, which served only to stunt Craigavon's growth.

Craigavon still remains, and it is an important area that is thriving. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency classifies Craigavon as a large town, and the 2001 census showed that there were 81,000 people in the area. With a census due next year, I would suggest that there are many more than 90,000 people in Craigavon. Lurgan and Portadown are the main towns in the Craigavon urban area, and the area now extends to Banbridge and Lisburn on one side and to Dungannon on the other. Bearing that in mind, I contend that the Craigavon area is ripe for an influx of public sector jobs. That said, however, I can hope, wish and lobby for jobs to come to the Craigavon area.

The reality is that it will not happen in the current financial climate. With the public purse pinched like never before, it is abundantly clear that the finances and other necessary instruments are not there to allow the Bain report to progress to the implementation stage. We must ensure value for money at all times, and that does not currently seem to be apparent. I hope that the situation will change.

5.00 pm

I am unable to support the motion but call on the Executive to maintain a watching brief on the matter. The Craigavon area is ripe for growth. We can only hope that the Executive can distribute those jobs in a

more even fashion, which would help stimulate what we intended to do in Craigavon a number of years ago.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There appears to be a fairly normal divide on this issue, which is to be expected: people are picking their spots. I support the motion.

Rural constituencies sometimes suffer a double whammy of decentralisation in the wrong direction. We see jobs going to Belfast and Omagh, for example, because some people cannot look further than the border of Fermanagh and see it as land's end from a Northern point of view. There is duplication of many jobs, from Carrick-on-Shannon back to Enniskillen and Omagh. The loss of revenue and the cost of that has not been looked at on a cross-border basis, and that is also part of the debate.

During the debate, many Members, some of whom support the motion, have explained the cost of implementing the review and said that that is the reason why we cannot look at this now. It is more about mindsets than about whether it can be done. This is at least the second time that we have debated the subject.

I know about Rathgael House. Stephen Farry said that people from the greater Belfast area are defending their positions in the sometimes cosseted comfort zone of Belfast. When they look to the outback, which to them is anywhere beyond the M1, there is the belief that they would need a work visa to go to somewhere like Fermanagh. That is where we are with the Civil Service, and it leaves us in a difficult situation that is made more difficult through the new phenomenon of equality of service, let alone equality of jobs.

We have to deal with call centres that offer the option of pressing 1, 2, 3, or 4 to answer a call. One cannot deal with actual people unless one gets in the car and drives to Belfast. People in Belfast can go directly to those offices and meet people to discuss issues; we do not have that benefit. Anyone in rural areas will find that those services are not as good as they have been, and that they cannot talk to a real person in order to resolve various issues.

The issue of equality of jobs is a big one, and there is no balance. If someone were to be promoted in Fermanagh, in agriculture for example, a person offered a grade three position must take it up in Belfast. If they do not, they will never see that promotion go beyond the paper stage in their working life. If they want to live in Fermanagh, they will never be promoted beyond grade two. There is dislocation from areas.

Some Members have agreed that the concept should be agreeable to everyone. It is ironic that this same debate has taken place in the Dáil, and the cross-party divide on the issue is exactly the same as in this place. Only one of every two MLAs represents a rural area. We are outnumbered, and we will always lose the

debate, however long it goes on. It is about propping up Belfast or Dublin. All the buildings occupied by the Civil Service will be kept, because it feels comfortable. Similarly, the six major hospitals are in and around Belfast. Members from cities such as Derry have argued in favour of the motion. It is ironic that people who should agree are arguing the same points but only from their own positions.

People from rural areas will always have difficulty getting through to those in ivory towers. People in the Civil Service have built up their ivory towers over long periods of time. Agriculture and education have been mentioned in the debate. Indeed, it was too much to ask even for the Department of Education to move its headquarters from Rathgael House in Bangor to Belfast city centre.

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

Mr McHugh: I hope that progress will be made over time, because cost is not the only issue.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member for North Antrim Mr Paisley Jnr, who has now left the Chamber, started his speech by saying that I was excited by the prospect of the debate. I must say that I am neither excited nor not excited, but, given the attendance, it seems quite clear that the House is not excited by the debate. Of course, we all know why that is the case.

The Member for Strangford made the point that some of the Members who have talked most vociferously about the importance of addressing this issue are far more interested in grandstanding and creating instability in Northern Ireland through their tactics in the discussions on the devolution of policing and justice. I do not think that the Northern Ireland population is overly excited about that issue either, yet it seems to have become an obsession for some Members, to the extent that it may well put what we have here at considerable risk.

Members have asked me to be straightforward and honest and to give clear answers. The proposer of the motion was one of those who made that request, but, as he well knows, I never do anything else. I will look at some of the issues that have been raised and address them in a straightforward way.

Many Members, mostly those on the other side of the House, expressed the view that economic benefits need to be spread across Northern Ireland. Neither I nor the Executive disagree with that. However, the impression has been given here today that the Bain report's modest proposals for the relocation, not creation, of some 3,000 jobs will somehow dramatically change the distribution of economic activity in Northern Ireland. If the Members who put forward that argument thought about it, they would realise just how shallow and paper-thin it is.

The main driver for the spread of economic benefit is the massive programme of investment — £1.7 billion of capital investment, for example — that is undertaken every year as a result of Executive decisions. Consider, for example, the amount of money that DRD is spending to improve infrastructure in the north-west. Over the next 10 years, £800 million will be invested in infrastructure to the benefit of the north-west. That kind of investment is likely to draw even more investment from the private sector and elsewhere. If we want to deal with the problem of economic inequality across Northern Ireland, perhaps we should focus attention on that rather than on the Bain report.

It struck me as odd that Members call for more public sector jobs to be relocated to rather than created in their areas. I do not know whether they have ever listened to anything that I have said in this House or whether they ever read the newspapers, but the jobs that will be under threat in the forthcoming years are the very ones that they are asking to have relocated to their areas. For the next 10 years in the United Kingdom, we will face economic pressures that will be directed increasingly towards the public sector as we try to reduce its debt and borrowing. If ever there were a loser to be backed, it is investing in public sector jobs in the areas about which Members have spoken.

There have been some very odd allies in this debate, particularly Mr McNarry and Mr Farry. I begin to get worried when I find that I am lined up with those people. Mr Farry made a very important point: if we have £40 million to spend, we ought to spend it on jobs that will create wealth and have spin-off effects, not on the area of the economy that is relocating.

Mr Molloy and members of the SDLP made great play of the commitment of their parties to spreading economic benefits across Northern Ireland. I will talk about their Ministers in a minute or two, but what do their parties do? Do we find that, in the interest of spreading economic benefits, they locate their party headquarters in Londonderry, Enniskillen or Omagh? Not at all. The SDLP's party headquarters is in rich south Belfast. It is right in the city centre, presumably because that is handy. Sinn Féin's party headquarters is in west Belfast. It is significant that, even though this is an SDLP motion that is supported by Sinn Féin, those parties have kept their Belfast representatives and their greater Belfast representatives strangely silent. It is because they know that there is an inconsistency in the approach. Their parties make decisions in certain ways that are reflected in where they locate their headquarters and, therefore, in the staff who are associated with those headquarters.

Mr Molloy and other Sinn Féin Members talked about their party's commitment to spreading economic benefits, yet he mentioned the Department of

Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Mr Beggs from East Antrim pointed out that, when the Agriculture Minister looked for efficiencies, she centralised DARD jobs. My constituency and the town of Larne lost jobs because of DARD's centralisation. Dundonald House was mentioned. If the Minister wishes to relocate those jobs, it is up to her to bring forward proposals and to present a business case. As far as I am aware, no such business case has been made. No such decision has been made because she knows that she has to live within a certain budget and, to do that, there are certain realities that she has to face.

A row has been going on around the countryside because the Social Development Minister has looked at benefit offices and decided to relocate jobs. Indeed, the decentralising Minister from that decentralising party has moved those jobs from Larne to Corporation Street in Belfast. The parties opposite say that they are all for decentralisation, but, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of making the economic decisions, their stance is no different to the stance that I have adopted.

5.15 pm

Secondly, we are told that there are vast economic benefits. I am glad that some Members have said that they welcome my important proposals for an invest to save fund that will enable us to save money in the future. However, to think that the invest to save proposals are applicable to the relocation of public sector jobs indicates that the Members who talk about the fund either do not understand what it is for or have not read Bain. Investing to save means that we spend money now in order to make savings in the future. Bain said the following about the relocation of jobs:

“Accurate cost benefit and value-for-money assessments will be difficult”,

if not impossible, to prove. Therefore, when it comes to an invest to save proposal, Professor Bain has said that it would be impossible to generate those figures. In fact, he indicated that:

“relocations require up-front investment and are unlikely to produce financial benefits in the short term.”

When I announced invest to save, Members asked me what my criteria would be. The aim was to ensure that savings were maximised and made as quickly as possible. So, even on the basis of the report that Members want to debate in the House today, applying invest to save proposals is very unlikely.

Members on this side of the House have pointed out that no Member has indicated how to find the money to be spent on relocating jobs. The closest we got to it was Mr Gallagher. He did not identify where the money might come from, but his answer was — I am growing sick and tired of these kind of answers in the House — that we simply cannot afford not to do something. What kind of an answer is that? It is all

about a challenge, and the challenge is this: if he wants to spend £40 million, tell us where it will be taken from. That is the harsh reality.

I do not want to prattle on about opportunity costs, because I mention it nearly every time I speak in the House. However, it seems that Members still wilfully ignore the fact that money cannot be spent on one thing without taking it off something else. Choices must be made. That is not a value-for-money consideration. That is why Professor Bain couched it in terms of there having to be a political will. In other words, one must look beyond the economics to a political decision.

At this time of tight constraints on finance, we do not have the money to meet all the demands being made by Ministers and Members and to be made when we debate the Budget in a month's time, if we ever get that far. Are Members seriously telling me to ignore value-for-money considerations and throw aside the Government green book on public spending in favour of spending on this because it is good for us to have a debate and to tell our constituents that we are fighting to get public sector jobs relocated to their town? That is what is being asked.

Other jurisdictions that started with the high ideals of wanting to relocate public sector jobs have, in the face of the hard economic reality that they have encountered in public finances, shelved their projects or gone back to value-for-money considerations. Indeed, when the matter was last debated, the Assembly's wish was that the decision should be based on value-for-money considerations.

Some Members asked about some of the other things that the Executive are spending money on, including RPA. There are up-front costs associated with RPA, but there are also quantifiable benefits, which are well in excess of the costs. I accept that many of the Executive's past decisions probably did not produce value for money, and I will not try to defend them on that basis. With hindsight, perhaps we should not have made those decisions, but, in the current economic circumstances, does that mean that we should go on making wrong decisions?

The next argument was for the environmental benefits; people will travel less. The truth of the matter is — even Professor Bain pointed this out — only 264 people travel every day from Londonderry. If we relocated an office to Londonderry, is it likely that all those 264 people would be employed in it? The answer is no, because their skills and qualifications, the Department in which they work and their ability to move from one job to another would not allow 100% of them to move to whatever office may be located in Londonderry. Indeed, you would probably find that just as many people who currently live in Belfast would simply travel to Londonderry. I must inform Members

that burning petrol coming from Londonderry to Belfast produces the same carbon footprint — something with which everyone in the House knows I am well acquainted — as coming from Belfast to Londonderry, so there would be no environmental advantage. Likewise, sitting in a line of traffic in one direction is the same as sitting in congestion in the other. Let us not presume, therefore, that there would be environmental benefits.

The next point that was made was that it is an Executive decision. I am not passing the buck: at the end of the day, it is an Executive decision, and it will not be made by me as the Finance Minister. I just happen to have stuck my neck out and given my view on the matter, but do not forget that the Members who protested that it is an Executive decision all have Ministers from their parties in the Executive. Within a couple of months of the matter first being debated in the Assembly, Nigel Dodds took a report to the Executive. In October 2009, I again took a report to the Executive. Neither of those reports has been acted on, so maybe the Members who said that it is an Executive decision should ask their respective Executive Ministers why they have not acted on the reports from two DUP Finance Ministers, one of whom is a sceptic. I suspect that it is because they know that the underlying economic reality would present difficulties. Why have Executive Ministers whose parties we are told are so tied to the principle not brought forward proposals for decentralisation? Indeed, as I said, some of those Members' proposals would actually entail centralisation.

Many people will recognise that there is a myth around this subject. I listened to Mr McHugh, who spoke about a mindset of protecting Belfast. If he had taken the time to read the Bain report, he would have found that 60% of public sector jobs are located in the greater Belfast area. That is not totally out of sync with the proportion of the Northern Ireland population in the greater Belfast area, which is 52%. Therefore, the idea that there is massive skewing is wrong.

There were allegations that the west of the Province is badly done by, but, if one looks at the distribution of public sector jobs per 100 of the working population, the highest proportion is not in Belfast; it is in Omagh. The last time that I looked at a map, Omagh was west of the Bann. Furthermore, Londonderry has the third-highest proportion, at 17.2%, and, as far as I know, Londonderry is located in the west of Northern Ireland. Therefore, of the top three locations, two are located west of the Bann.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close, Minister.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I believe that this debate will go on. I have sought honestly today to look at the arguments that have been made,

but I believe that many of them are shallow. Therefore, I ask Members to reject the motion.

Mr O'Loan: Two lines of poetry by Wilfred Owen have kept recurring to me all afternoon:

“O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?”

Those words were written amid the carnage and mayhem of the First World War, and it is almost sacrilegious to quote them in relation to the more minor mayhem that is going on around us. Nonetheless, they kept recurring to me because they seemed appropriate. As some of us try to do something workmanlike inside the Chamber, there are others outside it who, without good reason, are quite prepared to pull down the structures by which we are governed. I even find elements of mayhem around the motion and the issues that it addresses. What is the point of commissioning, at considerable expense, a 200-page report on an issue and then, as one Member put it, binning it? I do not think that that indicates a strategic direction on the part of the Assembly.

David McNarry talked about the Assembly doing real things. I tried to intervene, but he would not take an intervention. Nevertheless, I wanted to ask him whether he rejects the issue of parades and the Parades Commission being brought into a discussion of how we are governed here. Does he reject that absolutely and say that we should concentrate on the things that are actually of some importance?

I welcome the wholehearted support from some Members and the more guarded support from others. Throughout my contribution, I may omit many comments that Members made, but I will try to do justice to most of them, because valuable comments were made. I thank Mitchel McLaughlin, Martina Anderson, George Robinson to some degree, Ian Paisley Jnr, Gerry McHugh and others who supported the motion. At one point, I was going to include George Savage in that list, but he and Roy Beggs seemed to be saying that the delivery of the Bain report is absolutely essential but then saying that it cannot and should not be done. That is not an example of great political leadership.

The chairman's foreword to the report states:

“We were established in December 2007 as an independent review to put forward ‘an agenda for action’ and ‘a set of practical recommendations for the longer-term approach to the location of public sector jobs’.”

They were given the instruction to put forward an agenda for action, and it was the former Minister of Finance, Peter Robinson, who issued that instruction. I still think that Peter Robinson is committed to the issue. I note an answer that he gave to my colleague Pat Ramsey on 21 January 2008:

“There are real advantages for Northern Ireland if we can have a fair distribution of jobs around the Province, with reduced pressure on our infrastructure if jobs are close to people rather than bringing people along our roads to jobs. If we can grow the economy, particularly in the areas that we are pressing for — financial services, business services, and computer technology — those jobs are more likely to come to the greater Belfast area. Therefore, it becomes all the more important that we look at the jobs where we have a greater control of location and consider their displacement to other areas of the Province.”

I thank Peter Robinson for his support.

5.30 pm

I could quote at length the report's actual contents and recommendations, which are not given enough consideration. Often, quite a few of its early recommendations are not even discussed, such as flexible working; a network of regional satellite offices; an information and communications technology strategy for flexible working; a network of touchdown office space on the Stormont estate for flexible use by officials; policies on remote working and homeworking as a matter of urgency; and wider use of telephone, video and web conferencing. Those are not grand, dramatic proposals, which the report has avoided. It suggests phasing them in over a five-year period.

Members are aware that six hub towns were identified, with the possibility of three others being added in the longer term. The report proposes that there should be a presumption against locating in Belfast when establishing new public sector bodies. It states that new bodies should be candidates for relocation, which should be considered with regard to operational/processing units, common services organisations and cross-border bodies. Another recommendation is that relocation should be considered in the event of restructuring of Departments, lease breaks and where opportunities exist to enhance service delivery. I commented on the Minister's remarks because he was unfair to those proposals, as though they would involve dramatic dislocation of existing job positioning.

The report is specific in its proposal to use opportunities. It names 13 bodies that are either new or significantly restructured, where considerable change is necessary and inevitable. The Minister was not fair to that proposal from the Bain committee at all. The report also proposes how that will be delivered by the Executive and a secretariat, none of which, sadly, has been introduced by the Minister.

The issue of cost was dwelt on at some length. Peter Weir told us that affordability is the fatal flaw. Roy Beggs supported that position. Perhaps the figure of £40 million is in the report somewhere. However, I read quite a bit of the financial information yet struggled to find it. If one reads the contents of the text and the appendices, it is clear that the matter is much more complex. The cost is variable and depends, according to the report, on many assumptions. It is

uncertain and depends on which particular project is being taken forward. It certainly cannot be pitched simply by creating a worst-case-scenario figure of £40 million and then saying that it is not doable. That is not constructive and is unlike the Minister, who is capable of original thinking and is willing to get on with tackling problems. I am disappointed that he continues to take the approach that he is taking.

Stephen Farry told the House that if particular cases were analysed, opportunities sought, and cost-benefit analyses carried out, they would all fail the green book. That depends on what values they have, on which I will comment further, and to what degree and how the benefits that have been discussed are costed, which may or may not be capable of financial realisation.

We are, of course, living in difficult financial times. However, rather than say that we cannot touch the £40 million, and thereby do nothing, I suggest that it is the Minister's job to sort that out. To dump the problem on the Executive, as he did, and to tell other Ministers to bring him their proposals is not what the Assembly expects from the lead Minister. It expects that Minister to produce the beginnings of proposals.

The Bain committee's overall proposal is modest. Nonetheless, he wants it to be delivered strategically. Although I accept that it is more difficult to do that strategically if it is done piecemeal, it is much better than doing nothing.

I want to mention the collapse of Workplace 2010. There is a huge need to upgrade the Civil Service estate. That is an opportunity to be used. It must be remembered that modern office buildings are much cheaper to run. That argument has been made for investment in buildings. I praise the Minister for his openness to the invest to save concept. I would like to think that he is listening to me. Why does he not apply his invest to save thinking to that issue? The simple fact that office rentals are much cheaper outside of Belfast must also be remembered. The report provides evidence of that.

Last week, I attended a conference on spatial planning and economic development. Of course, that particular discussion is part of a wider debate on spatial planning. Bain considered the regional development strategy when he was devising his proposals. If our regional development strategy is to go anywhere, the spatial planning element needs to be thought of in the context of the whole island.

I want to make an important point relating to Stephen Farry's concerns about distributing the cake versus baking more cakes and his remarkable comment about public sector jobs being a poor substitute for private sector jobs. I do not think that that is a proper analysis of the value to society of public sector jobs vis-à-vis private sector jobs. It is not a competition in

that sense. However, it raises the point that all spatial planning has a value base.

I am told that Scotland has embraced a culture of spatial planning more strongly than we have done. It has been embraced by the political elite there to the extent that spatial planning sits within the Department of Finance and Sustainable Growth. We need to decide where we want to go. We must not be put off by the first obstacle. The current financial obstacle before us is major, but we need to decide where we want to go, what our values are and what our political decision is.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I am not permitted more time, and I have only a few seconds left. Therefore, with respect, Mr Campbell, I cannot give way.

I want to repeat an analogy that was used: use a garryowen, and do not forever stay stuck in the scrum.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 32; Noes 39.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Leonard, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr G Robinson and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Adjourned at 5.49pm.

