

Official Report (Hansard)

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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 1 March 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council: Housing

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Social Development that he wishes to make a statement to the House.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): In compliance with the requirements of section 52C of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and of Standing Order 18, I wish to report on the second meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) housing work stream, which was held in St Mary's University College on the Falls Road in Belfast on 16 February. The report has been agreed by, and is being made on behalf of, junior Minister Robin Newton MLA, who accompanied me at the meeting.

Before I get into the body of the report, I want to make some overarching comments. As Members know, sometimes in politics it is difficult to see the wood for the trees when trying to identify the big strategic issues beyond the details and vagaries of political life. What I found useful about the British-Irish Council meeting in housing sectoral format was that, when politicians at a ministerial or equivalent level were brought into the room to interrogate and bear down on the particular issue of housing, the fog began to clear.

I found that, in conversation at a political level, when the democratic interest is properly asserted, one can bear down and get conclusions that are very useful in terms of shared practice and common interest going forward. That was very clear in the meeting. Although we came from a diversity of jurisdictions, the common interest in housing — housing finance, housing models and housing need — was crystal clear.

That is a further reason I felt the meeting to be very important. It all arises from the initiative of Margaret Ritchie, as it was she who identified the gap in the institutional structures that suggested to her that the British-Irish Council could usefully bear down on housing issues. The report from Robin Newton and me indicates, and the work of the sector confirms, that her judgement was timely and appropriate in beginning to scope how we move forward on the issues. I am the sweeper in the Department, taking forward the legacy of Margaret Ritchie, and that was true of the BIC housing sectoral meeting last month.

At its summit in Cardiff in February 2009, the British-Irish Council identified housing as a new work stream. The fact that Margaret Ritchie was asked to lead that work was indicative not just of her personal commitment to the issue but of the fact that the Northern Ireland housing sector and the Department were ahead of the game in best practice in housing developments in the jurisdiction of the BIC. For those reasons, Margaret Ritchie was asked to take the matter forward.

The first ministerial work stream was held in the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle in December 2009, and I hosted the second ministerial meeting, at which all eight jurisdictions were represented. The British Government were represented by Neil McDonald, who is the director of housing standards, homelessness and support at the Department for Communities and Local Government. The relevant Minister was unable to attend as there was a three-line whip in Westminster — in the Commons and the Lords — on legislation that was proceeding at the time.

The Irish Government were represented by Michael Finneran TD, the then Minister of State with responsibility for housing and local services. Given the various demands on Ministers in the South, including electoral

demands, it was important that the Minister from the South was there. He made a substantial contribution to the meeting. I congratulate all the parties that performed successfully in the recent election in the South and commiserate with many good TDs who no longer represent their constituency in the Dáil. Many good men and women are no longer fulfilling that role.

The Scottish Government were represented by Alex Neil MSP, the Minister for Housing and Communities. As we will hear, his contribution was particularly timely. I had a long meeting with him in January when we scoped how we might proceed over the next five, 10 or 15 years, including considering housing models and housing financial options. Alex Neil spoke to those issues usefully and in some detail at the meeting.

The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by Judith Askew, a senior housing official, and the Jersey Government by Carl Mavity, also a senior housing official. His Housing Minister could not attend because he had been elected Housing Minister only the day before. The Guernsey Government were represented by Graham Guille, the Deputy Minister for Housing, and the Isle of Man Government were represented by the Hon Martyn Quayle MHK, Minister of Social Care. Junior Minister Robin Newton and I co-chaired the meeting; together we represented the Northern Ireland Executive.

During the day, we considered papers on three areas of work and received two short presentations from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The first paper sought to identify new forms of investment for affordable housing. Ministers agreed that, given the very challenging budgetary position that each of us faces, it was important to find new ways of financing our work. The paper that Alex Neil presented on behalf of the Scottish Government identified alternative financial opportunities that we will explore further. I am sure that I will be asked questions about those opportunities.

The second paper, which was presented on behalf of the British Government, looked at the issue of mobility in social housing. Evidence suggests that finding suitable social housing can be a problem where tenants move from one area to another. Details of the proposed house swap scheme were shared, and Ministers agreed in principle that that is an area that each Administration should explore further. However,

we noted that there were regulatory and legislative issues associated with such transfer of tenancy. Indeed, some Administrations attach specific residency conditions to social housing provision in their jurisdiction.

Notwithstanding those issues, Ministers were supportive of any plans that could increase the social mobility of those in public housing, and work will begin to scope out areas in which that could be done on a voluntary basis.

The third paper looked at the possibility of including social clauses in government contracts. I introduced that paper, as I insisted that spending in my own Department must include conditions to provide work placements and, ultimately, apprenticeships for the long-term unemployed. I confirmed to ministerial colleagues that the initiative under way in my Department was brought forward unilaterally by me on 1 January 2011. In 2009-2010, government spending here among Departments, agencies, and non departmental public bodies accounted for more than £2.3 billion. I firmly believe that such spend can be used more constructively to provide real opportunities for those who are out of work. Details of that unemployed clause were discussed, and Ministers agreed that the introduction of such a clause would assist in providing the long-term unemployed with much needed skills that will help them to find suitable employment in the future.

Plans are also in place to introduce additional clauses on a phased basis for apprenticeships and student placements, and I updated Ministers on that. I also instructed officials to scope out how the social clause provisions could apply to supplies and services. At all times, the threshold at which a social clause will kick-in in the Department for Social Development (DSD) is much lower than the threshold in other Departments. That is done in an effort to ensure that the maximum number of people get work opportunities through DSD's spending on newbuilds and regeneration. No doubt, I will be asked about that subsequently, and I will be pleased to give Members much more detail.

Two presentations were made by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The first was entitled 'Housing: A West Belfast Context', and the second was on retro-fitting. The first presentation gave a context to our meeting by

showcasing how good housing can be a catalyst for regenerating communities and providing the building blocks to lift them out of poverty and deprivation. As we had many visitors and the meeting was in the heart of the West Belfast constituency on the Falls Road, I thought that it was appropriate to give an overview at the start of the meeting of where housing had travelled over the past 40 years in the entire constituency, from the Shankill to Twinbrook.

The second presentation on retro-fitting and energy efficiency looked at the challenges of adapting existing homes to make them more energy efficient. A passive house project from Newry was showcased in the presentation, and it provided Ministers with an opportunity to see how older housing can be repaired, improved and retained to modern standards of thermal comfort and sustainability. Housing stock and energy efficiency and how they relate to fuel poverty in Northern Ireland and across Britain occupied a great deal of the attention of those who were present.

Ministers agreed that the issue presented challenges and opportunities for their respective jurisdictions, particularly in the current economic climate. Officials will continue to share good practice as we take forward the actions that were agreed at our meeting last week. I have made the minutes from our first meeting in December 2009, together with a communiqué from our meeting last week, available to Members to see the range of issues that are being taken forward on their behalf.

We considered the meeting to be particularly useful. The exchange on housing need, models and funding is work that can be usefully developed in the future, and officials have been asked to gather and share information, including best or innovative practice, to inform how each jurisdiction plans for the future. It is anticipated that the sector will return quickly to the issue.

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge the president of St Mary's University College on the Falls Road, Professor Peter Finn, and his staff, including the harpist and those who prepared the Irish stew and wheaten bread. They were very good hosts. Given that the meeting dealt with housing, I deliberately took it away from a hotel into a community with historic and current housing needs. I congratulate all those in St Mary's and my own officials, who worked hard to put together a very productive day.

New ways of doing housing that at all times firmly embed the principle of community benefit are essential. Perhaps somewhat to my surprise, the BIC housing sector can be important in achieving that objective.

10.45 am

We concluded that the good models and good practice that were discussed during the meeting should be collated by officials and shared among officials and Ministers in the next two or three months. The issue of housing sector reform, housing financial models, housing generally and housing need in particular will preoccupy the Assembly in the next mandate. It will preoccupy all the jurisdictions in all their mandates, and the BIC will be critical in all that work.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton):

I thank the Minister for his statement and for the additional information that he provided to the House. I wholly support the comments that he made at the outset. I think that we all agree that the sharing of ideas across various jurisdictions in the British Isles on the complex issue of housing can only be to our mutual benefit.

The first paper presented at the meeting was on new forms of investment for affordable housing. The Minister will know that I have a very close interest in that issue. Will he give more detail on the types of models that were discussed? In these very difficult economic times enforced on us by Tory cuts, is there scope not just for us — in his belief — in Northern Ireland to seek out new ways of funding housing development, but also working on a collaborative basis with our partners in the British Isles to do something more?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his contribution. He touches on a vital point. The issue of housing need and housing finance is going to preoccupy and challenge us politically and operationally. Because of the setting up of the BIC housing sector, the leadership of Margaret Ritchie and the work of all the other Ministers responsible for housing, housing associations have been able to access additional sources of funding from the Housing Finance Corporation, the bond market and the European Investment Bank (EIB). The European Investment Bank has made £345 million available to housing associations, and the bond market has made available over

£70 million. Of that, £30 million of the EIB money and £21 million of the bond money has come to Northern Ireland housing associations.

Already the BIC housing sector, and Margaret Ritchie's input in particular, has demonstrated that one can draw down other sources of funding at lower interest rates in an effort to subsidise the public and affordable housing sector and maximise newbuild. That model — the bond market and the EIB — clearly needs to move forward. However, as the Member said, we need to stretch ourselves in scoping out other potential opportunities.

Beyond EIB and the bond market, the matter of what might be available in terms of pension funds making money available to the housing sector is going forward. The Scottish Government is scoping out a large number of pilot schemes to identify alternative funding opportunities and different tenure approaches modelled to suit local market conditions in the Scottish jurisdiction. We will interrogate those models, as will all the jurisdictions, to see whether anything appropriate comes across.

My view is that we do not exclude any possibilities and that we exhaust all possibilities, but we caution ourselves. My sense is that there are some predatory instincts that think that there is easy money to be made off housing stock in the short term, and I caution against that. Yes, we must exhaustively look at all funding options. However, we must not be casual, opportunistic or short-sighted in looking at those options and thinking that, just because the Housing Executive has 90,000 units, there is easy and quick money to be had to fund newbuild.

Subject to that caveat, and to the principle that it falls to government to be responsible for the provision of public and social housing, we need to get to the bottom of the models developed over the past couple of years and other alternative finance models, and where there are reasonable opportunities, exploit them.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I also welcome the Minister's statement and that he took the event from a hotel in a leafy suburb into a working class community. Those are all good signals to send to the people living in the area. The areas surrounding that location have some of the worst social deprivation but

also contain some of the better social housing that has been built —

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question somewhere?

Mr F McCann: I am sorry; I lost the run of myself.

The Minister mentioned social clauses. I remember a debate a number of months ago in which someone from the Welsh Assembly said that the Welsh Assembly Government had successfully used social clauses in social housing. Has the Minister set any time limits for when the objective of obtaining jobs and apprenticeships through social clauses can be met?

The Minister for Social Development: It was not the case that I removed the meeting from a hotel in a leafy suburb. The proposed location was a hotel in the heart of east Belfast, rather than in a leafy suburb. Nonetheless I thought that a non-hotel venue, and one in west Belfast, was appropriate.

The issue of social clauses is not speculation; it is already in place. From 1 January, housing associations must have the new social clause in place for newbuilds. In addition, regeneration contracts, through the urban side of DSD, must also have it in place. The consequence is that for every £500,000 spent on labour, a contractor is obliged to employ a long-term unemployed person for 26 weeks, or two long-term unemployed people for 13 weeks. So, this is not a matter of speculation; it is something that I instructed the Department to put in place late last year and it became live on 1 January.

The Member might be interested to know that, if he were to visit the newbuild by Clanmil Housing on the Bass (Ireland) site on the Glen Road, he would see that the new social clause is in place there. Clanmil Housing is applying it on a voluntary basis, because contracts were signed before 1 January. However, I hope that all other organisations will follow the lead given by Clanmil Housing and adopt a social clause voluntarily in contracts that are already live.

The social clause went live on 1 January 2011 on the newbuild and regeneration sides and is a requirement in contracts since then. However, it is only a requirement in contracts at that threshold under the DSD. I want to acknowledge the assistance of the Construction Employers Federation, and that of Ministers Empey and Kennedy, in making those schemes available. People are coming from the register and are

being employed under various Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) schemes.

Across the rest of government, and under every other Department, the old thresholds are still in place; namely that the main contractor has to employ one long-term unemployed person for each £5 million of project value, and one apprentice for each £2 million of project value. My view is that those thresholds are far too high. So, last autumn I brought in officials and began to interrogate them, if that is not too immoderate a word, on how we could lower the thresholds.

I was told that we could not get it down lower, until, one day, my deputy secretary said to me that he thought we had found the nugget. When you interrogate officials about what has been the prevailing rule and say that you want a different rule, consistent with evidence and good process, you can get things over the line. That is why today I am writing to all my ministerial colleagues, saying that, in my view, the social clauses provision, which is different in DSD from that in any other Department, should be deployed in every other Department.

For every £500,000 of labour spend, we are obliged to employ somebody who is long-term unemployed. I think that we should go further. I instructed officials to tell the Housing Executive that, as with the new maintenance contracts, which will be awarded, as Members know, in late autumn, given that I suspended the process a number of weeks ago, future Egan contracts must contain similar social clauses. The Housing Executive has agreed to that. I also instructed officials to identify how we will deploy social clauses for supplies and services in the Department. That is a bit difficult, because a lot of supplies and services are provided under government frameworks and are not going to fall to DSD. Nonetheless, I asked my officials to identify how we can do that.

The bottom line is that, if the social clause provision in DSD were to be deployed across government, upwards of 1,850 people over four years would have the opportunity for work. That is not many, compared with the scale of our unemployment figures, but, having upwards of 2,000 people in work during the lifetime of the next Assembly as a result of government spend seems to me self-evidently the way to go. I hope that other Ministers will go there with me.

Mrs M Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on his leadership of the British-Irish Council, and, indeed, that of his predecessor, and for introducing social clauses into public procurement. What does he think is the full potential for social clauses, if introduced by all Departments? Has he had any discussions with the Finance Minister or any other Minister?

The Minister for Social Development: My permanent secretary raised —

Mr F McCann: I am sure you were surprised at that question.

The Minister for Social Development: I was shocked, not just surprised. I was overwhelmed and impressed. I did not write it myself. That last bit is true.

I instructed my permanent secretary to raise the model that we have now adopted with the Central Procurement Directorate. I have some serious issues with government procurement in general, which I raised at Executive level. I asked that we have a review of procurement going forward, because there are issues around, not just social clauses, but procurement generally and, in particular, about how procurement can be legitimately modelled to favour small indigenous and small to medium-sized indigenous employers and organisations. We can, quite legitimately, consistent with European procurement rules, remodel procurement in Northern Ireland in order to advantage, quite properly, the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector.

My permanent secretary raised the issue with the Central Procurement Directorate, from which some of the more radical advice was forthcoming. However, when I was initially told that we could not go in that direction, one or two officials on the procurement side, somewhat to my surprise, said that I could go further. The social clauses initiative came out of that process. As I said earlier, I will be writing to all my ministerial colleagues today, telling them that the model is a live one, it is a start, not an end, and that everybody should follow in that direction.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's comprehensive statement and report of the British-Irish Council meeting. It seems that there is a lot of interest in social clauses in government contracts. Have any of the other jurisdictions represented at the meeting introduced similar social clause initiatives?

11.00 am

The Minister for Social Development: It is fair to say that the model that DSD now has is a more advanced one, in respect of not just our own Government but other Governments. Yes, social clauses are part of the picture as regards contractual requirements in other jurisdictions. However, my sense from other Ministers is that Northern Ireland — or, least, DSD in Northern Ireland — is ahead of the game. They all agreed that the principle of embedding social clauses in procurement and scoping social clauses as far and as wide as possible is the way to go in respect of not just newbuild projects and regeneration but consultancy.

There is no reason why we cannot work up a model that escalates what DSD has done and extends it beyond those who are long-term unemployed to include graduates who are out of work and apprentices who are not able to fulfil their apprenticeship. Whether it is newbuild, services, supplies, consultancy, human resources or finance, social clauses — in respect of the unemployed and/or apprentices and/or graduates — should be part of this Government's narrative going forward. We in DSD have taken some useful steps, but we have not finished our journey. I hope that everyone will go down that path.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. There is great value in representatives from across the UK and the Irish Republic meeting in this way. I am interested in a number of issues that were dealt with at the meeting. One issue that was raised is mobility in social housing, which can be a problem. Can the Minister provide any more detail on how he intends to further explore the home swap scheme in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for that question. As I said, there was useful discussion on social mobility.

As the Member is probably aware, the London Government have various views on social mobility, some of which I do not necessarily agree with. An example of social mobility that I would not advocate anywhere in these islands is the notion of managing and capping housing benefit, which, in London, for instance, forces people to live beyond greater London. Due to the pressures that are put on people in respect of their housing budget, they are obliged to move out of somewhere where they may have lived for generations or for

a long period and go outside greater London to find affordable housing. We need to be careful about social mobility.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that it is a voluntary thing. To be fair, the representative of the London Government — the director of housing standards, Mr McDonald — said that it was a voluntary approach. People should not be required, through financial pressures or any other mechanism, to move from one part of the country to another part. It has to be voluntary.

Thirdly, we have to acknowledge that Northern Ireland might be a little different. Given the history of this part of the world and the fact that people in Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland have tended to live in single identity areas, through no fault of their own but as a consequence of conflict, social upheaval and all the other factors with which we are all too familiar. We have to be mindful that social mobility models, which we should exploit and explore, need to be fit for purpose when it comes to one or other jurisdiction. That is certainly the case in respect of Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland.

Fourthly, officials are gathering information on social mobility models. There are house swap schemes, but they seem to be somewhat fragmented. They seem to be web-based, fragmented and not co-ordinated. If there are opportunities for people to move from one part of the city to a different part of the city or from one part of the country to a different part of the country, those opportunities do not seem to have been developed in a very cohesive way. As I recall — I am subject to correction — officials are collating all the house swap models and opportunities, in order to identify whether that approach can be explored and developed further. There is no doubt that that model would have some role to play if it could create better housing opportunities either through people downsizing to free up a larger property or moving from one part of the country to another for reasons of personal choice, employment or other good grounds. We shall certainly explore and exploit that. However, we are mindful that local jurisdictions would have to model that to suit their circumstances.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I understand that social clauses were successfully introduced in Wales. The

Minister mentioned that a Passive House project in Newry was showcased, and that is a welcome and innovative project. An energy efficiency audit was also done in the same area. Based on the projected success of the Passive House project, is there an intention to extend that even further?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I confirm that a retrofitting scheme involving a block of five houses in Newry will take place. One of the properties will be a Passive House development, and the other four will be upgraded to various energy efficiency standards. Arising from that exercise will be a robust analysis of the energy efficiency advantage and the cost consequences. It is only when we have a sufficient evidence base on the value of energy efficiency interventions and on the cost comparisons with other energy interventions that we will be able to draw a conclusion about whether that model can be rolled out. This is the first time that that will be done in Northern Ireland. Clearly, it would be easier to do it with newbuilds than existing stock; however, using existing stock will enable us to gain some useful learning that will determine whether we should take the model further.

The principle behind this is that we should bear down on the three causes of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland: low income; high energy costs; and poor energy efficiency. It has previously been the case that government tended to concentrate on the latter, and we should continue to concentrate on that. However, following representations from various Members, I confirm that the budget for the warm homes scheme will be increased over each of the next four years in recognition of the fact that the problems of energy efficiency and fuel poverty are acute and growing. If there is some learning to be gained from that model, I have no doubt that the future Minister for Social Development will try to apply that positively.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am interested in the work being carried out by the Scottish Government on alternative financing opportunities for housing. Does the Minister wish to outline or expand on some of those ideas? That matter is of great interest to the House.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for that. The Scottish Government

have made some useful interventions and innovations. However, the Northern Ireland Government still have work to do on financing options that we need to get over the line. Since July 2010, I have been trying to get a consultation on developer contributions out the door. Without prejudice to what model might be used and when that might be deployed, given the economic circumstances of Northern Ireland, the issue of developer contributions needs to be addressed now. Similarly, I am awaiting a PWC report on a leasing model. That model will provide an opportunity to explore alternative financial models that are very consistent with what the Scottish Government are doing.

In summary, the Scottish Government are throwing the net very wide, just as we did during the years of Margaret Ritchie's leadership of the Department, and trying to turn over as many stones as possible to see whether any models of tenure or funding are appropriate. The scale of what they are suggesting is that they have 22 pilot schemes, 11 of which are already live and 11 of which they intend to roll out. Working with local councils, housing associations and the private sector, they scope out ways of financing housing with various tenures with government, state and non-state assistance. Interestingly, they are trying to identify what models work best, whether particular innovative models will work in an urban or rural location and new ways to work with the private sector in bringing forward funding. We will see where all that goes. However, it is my sense that Alex Neil is one of the more innovative and thoughtful Ministers I have come across, and the Scottish Government are engaged in a very interesting project.

A lot of that work is paralleled by the work of DSD. We now have three procurement groups for housing associations, which, through all their activities, are meant to procure collectively. That is work in progress that will drive down costs and make housing associations much more efficient in their internal costs and building costs. The fact that we are now building a third of our properties on government land drives down cost. The fact that Margaret Ritchie launched an initiative to draw down money from the bond market and the European Investment Bank is also an example of that. Margaret Ritchie reduced the level of housing association grant going to housing associations, and we will push that further over the next short while. When it comes to innovation in the housing

sector, all that work demonstrates that DSD is the co-leader with Scotland, if not ahead of it, in that business.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle Conallach. I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned details of the proposed home swap scheme. He and other Members will be aware that much of the movement in social housing at the minute is not necessarily a matter of choice but is driven by economic factors, such as joblessness, family and other factors. Will the Minister expand on what cross-jurisdictional dimensions there may be to any proposals that are afloat at the minute around the home swap scheme, such as people having to move from the North to other parts of the island, to the neighbouring island or back home again? Furthermore, given the devastation of the capital housing budget, will the Minister tell us what efforts are being made to expand on the high performance of himself and his predecessor in developing the number of newbuilds that are available for anyone who wants to come back here?

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

Mr Callaghan: I had nearly finished, Mr Speaker. That was the end of my question.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for that question. That was not in the script. I genuinely mean that. Therefore, I may struggle to answer the first part of it. However, I certainly agree with the second part of the question.

Mr F McCann: Can you remember it?

The Minister for Social Development: Yes.

On a daily basis, it preoccupies me that under the draft Budget, whatever way it is cut or shaped, DSD, in going forward, will be fortunate to build 1,200 or 1,300 houses a year. The Housing Executive, on good authority, confirms that there is a need for 2,500 houses a year, in the context that Margaret Ritchie was able to get more than 1,800 newbuild starts over the line last year, a figure that may well be exceeded this year. That is all happening in an environment in which we are going to have increasing housing stress and need going forward. That does not work. It is inconceivable that we should build 1,300 houses when the

demand is 2,500 and will increase as people lose their home, which is what is happening.

11.15 am

People in Ardoyne have, over the past number of days and at the weekend, received letters from their bank saying that orders for possession were now going to be enforced through the Enforcement of Judgments Office. I know that because people from Ardoyne talked to me yesterday and, in passing, mentioned that a significant number of families received those letters over the weekend, including the sister of one of the people who was in to see me. As I understand it, the banks have been sitting on orders for repossession granted by the High Court and not moving to enforce them because of the economic circumstances. However, the high street lenders and sub-prime lenders have now decided to enforce those judgements because they need to get the capital. Even though house prices continue to decline in Northern Ireland, unlike in other parts of these islands, high street lenders and sub-prime lenders have decided to go in that direction. The consequence is that mortgage stress, mortgage debt and the loss of homes will increase.

In that context — never mind all the other factors that I have outlined — how can we reduce newbuild by at least one third compared with recent years when we need to build more than in recent years? It does not add up. It will be measured in family stress and human misery. That matter needs to be corrected in the draft Budget, and mechanisms need to be put in place to correct it over the next four years. I continue to discuss that matter with the Minister of Finance and Personnel; I did so yesterday afternoon. I hope that, some way or other and without prejudice to the view that I may take on the draft Budget, those matters can become more fully acknowledged and recognised in the Budget.

The Member asked about interjurisdictional opportunities in the house swap scheme. That is a very interesting point that we did not touch on at the BIC. House swap schemes clearly work that way in Britain, but I am not aware of how the schemes work between the jurisdictions in Britain and Northern Ireland or, even more particularly, how they work on this island. The Dublin Government have a model house swap. I think that Minister Finneran referred to that at the meeting, although I stand to be corrected.

How it might work on the island of Ireland never mind between the islands is something that we did not touch on in any great detail. Given mobility on this island and given family and other ties in these islands, it could govern how house swap schemes might work in future. I will ask officials to raise that with officials from the other jurisdictions and identify whether there is something further that we can work up.

Executive Committee Business

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister for Social Development to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Housing (Amendment) Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister of the Environment to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill: Final Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA 5/09] do now pass.

I do not intend to outline in detail the clauses of the Bill. Instead, I simply remind Members that its purpose is to ensure better conservation and protection of Northern Ireland's valuable wildlife and habitats, which will ensure that they remain diverse, healthy and resilient so that we and future generations can derive important benefits from them. As well as benefiting Northern Ireland's environment, those are important steps towards ensuring that we meet our national and international obligations.

The Bill also changes some existing legislation. Changes to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 will give it greater scope to meet current and future challenges and will provide added protection to a wider range of birds, plants and animals. The Bill includes important provisions aimed at deterring wildlife crime, including providing greater evidence-gathering powers for police and, for the first time, the powers for courts to impose custodial sentences for severe and persistent wildlife crime. The Bill also makes important changes to the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to enhance protection for our areas of special scientific interest, many of which contain our highest value habitats, species and other special features.

Although hare coursing was not part of the original proposals, as a result of the Assembly process, the Bill will ban hare coursing. The Bill also makes important changes to our game laws. For example, we will abolish antiquated systems for licensing the hunting of game that date back to the nineteenth century. I firmly believe that the Bill achieves a balanced approach from the viewpoints of conservation and country sports.

The Bill was introduced on 30 November 2009 and completed its comprehensive scrutiny in Committee on 15 April 2010. I thank the Committee for its detailed scrutiny of the Bill. The recommendations in the Committee's report led to positive amendments at Consideration Stage. I also thank Members for their helpful contributions in debates on the Bill throughout its passage. The Bill is testament to the positive

Assembly process and to the importance that we in Northern Ireland place on ensuring the welfare of our environment. The conviction with which Members spoke on both sides of the issues reflects their continuing dedication to making that happen. I appreciate that not everyone achieved everything that they sought from the Bill. However, I believe that, overall, it provides a sound, balanced and practical approach for the future.

In summary, the Bill will have a positive and practical impact on the conservation and protection of our wildlife and natural habitats, which are vital to our well-being. It provides the authorities with the responsibility for and suitable powers to enforce the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The Bill also provides an appropriate level of deterrent to those involved in wildlife crime. I commend the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Final Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill — at last. It is evident from the Committee's consideration of the legislation that there are not many issues on which opinions are more tightly held than those related to the management of wildlife and the natural environment. Therefore, it was extremely important that the Committee closely scrutinised this legislation and dealt in facts to underpin its objective consideration and that prejudice and bias were not introduced to our discussions. I believe that the Committee achieved the right balance in its approach.

The key issues ranged from those related to animal, bird and plant species, through the definition of terms to the discharge of firearms — a wide range of issues indeed. It was necessary to consider all those issues in the round to produce coherent, up-to-date and workable legislation. The Committee, in collaboration with the Department and taking into account the views of stakeholders, did just that.

The Committee published its report on the Bill almost a year ago. Anyone who has read that report will have seen that the Committee made a number of recommendations to the Department. To its credit, the Department reacted positively to the majority of those recommendations. In respect of others, it

provided clarification that the Committee considered and ultimately accepted.

A range of organisations responded to the Committee's call for evidence. Through their written and oral submissions, the Committee was informed on key issues, which helped develop the Committee's thinking on the detail of this legislation. I put on record the Committee's appreciation of the time and effort taken by those individuals and organisations to contribute to the process. Inevitably, some groups will feel that the legislation does not go far enough, while others may feel that it goes too far. However, many of the issues covered by the Bill are the subject of views that people hold passionately. We were never going to please everyone. In such instances, not pleasing everybody usually signals that we have got the balance about right.

In developing legislation, rather than achieving what we may perceive to be the perfect outcome, compromises often have to be made to achieve something better. I do not think that any legislation passed in the House has been without its critics, and this Bill is no different. Nevertheless, the Bill provides a sound footing for greater emphasis on the maintenance and protection of wildlife and the natural environment. The Bill simply provides a sound footing and an enhanced framework for the duty to maintain and protect wildlife and the natural environment. The real challenge will come with its implementation, enforcement and monitoring. What advances will the Bill bring to wildlife when in operation? What benefits will it bring to our natural environment? That remains to be seen.

It should be said that, with the anticipated budget cuts for the Department of the Environment and, in particular, the Environment Agency, there are concerns that the legislation could turn out to be a paper exercise. The Committee, those who took part in the consultation and I trust that the Minister will endeavour properly to resource the areas of the Department charged with the implementation of the Bill to see that it is properly enforced.

I finish by thanking my colleagues on the Committee for their commitment to their scrutiny role. Occasionally, members do not see eye to eye, but we maintain a dignified and professional approach to our duties and adhere to established procedures to ensure a balanced outcome, hopefully for the good of those who

put us here in the first place. Here in the North, many organisations and individuals care deeply about wildlife and the natural environment. The Committee is grateful, therefore, for the insight and opinions given by those who responded to our consultation. I hope that they feel that the legislation does them justice. On behalf of the Committee, I thank departmental officials, the Minister and, in particular, Committee staff for their support throughout the process.

Mr B Wilson: I welcome the Bill, which is long overdue. It is time that we had an update to the protection of wildlife. As the Chairperson said, perhaps it does not go far enough. Nevertheless, there is much in the legislation to welcome.

It is important that the Bill will introduce a statutory duty on government and public bodies to take action to conserve biodiversity. In particular, I am pleased with clause 2, which will place a duty on the Department of the Environment to designate and publish a biodiversity strategy, and I welcome the fact that the clause has been strengthened to require the production of a progress report every five years, although we suggested that that should happen every three years.

I welcome the strengthening of controls on the use of snares, particularly the outright ban on the use of self-locking snares to prevent unnecessary suffering. However, in that regard, the Bill does not go far enough. If the Department is serious about preventing unnecessary suffering, the only option is a complete ban on the use of snares. I am more disappointed that the Bill will not give full protection to the Irish hare; nevertheless, clause 38, which will ban hare coursing, is extremely welcome. I have campaigned for that for 40 years, so I am delighted to see that it is finally in legislation.

I also welcome the two new offences that will be created as part of measures to protect areas of special scientific interest, which are an important part of our environmental heritage. Reckless and unnecessary damage to those sites damages the whole community, so it is important that that will now be recognised in legislation. The Bill will increase the powers available to the Department's wildlife inspectors, and enforcement was one of the main considerations in developing the legislation. However, I am concerned that, if cuts have to be made, the Department may

think that it is easier to cut enforcement rather than its general day-to-day business. Therefore, although the legislation will give the Department additional powers, I am concerned about whether, in the longer term, they will be enforced properly.

Nevertheless, with those reservations, I support the Bill, as it will protect —

11.30 am

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: Yes, sure.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. He highlighted various aspects of the Bill. I may have missed a reference to it, but I am sure that he will join me in welcoming the fact that, when the Bill becomes law, it will also mean that the practice of hare coursing will be made illegal. Everyone in the Chamber should embrace that.

Mr B Wilson: Very much so. Thank you for the intervention. The Bill will protect biodiversity, enhance conservation and prevent unnecessary suffering of animals. So, I welcome the Bill.

Mr Dallat: I begin by thanking the officers of the Environment Committee for the enormous amount of work that they put into the Bill. The Bill certainly required in-depth scrutiny, and we got a lot of co-operation from the Department. I am sure the Minister will be pleased that I am praising his Department; I am absolutely genuine about doing so. The report is well worth while and is firm evidence that our local Assembly works.

The environment is, of course, a partnership between different people. We were successful in acknowledging that, while people are very emotive about particular aspects of the environment, there are others, particularly in the rural community, who believe that their way of life has to be protected as well. So, we have achieved a balance. However, much more importantly, we now have in legislation rules and regulations that bind the Department and the public.

I will give an illustration of how diverse the study was. We considered the protection of basking sharks. In recent times, apart from in Australia, there are not too many of them about. However, they do exist and have to be protected. Snakes and the protection of nests also got a mention, as did snares, which, of course, is a

very emotive issue. The protection of the Irish hare was given prominence. Not only do we have a report that is good for today, we have one that will be good for a long time to come. It is a worthwhile piece of work that has been carried out by the Environment Committee and taken seriously by all sides. In a sense, it is a genuine partnership of all sides.

All the people who gave evidence were given a fair hearing, and, by and large, they have accepted the need for compromise on many of the issues that all of us hold dear and have views on. Out of that, there is a better understanding of the need for education, which, of course, begins in the home and is carried successfully through our schools and into adult life. Whoever is in the Assembly in the future will inherit legislation that will do the Assembly proud for many years to come.

The Minister of the Environment: I welcome the participation of the Members who spoke in the debate today. I note that some people — I am not sure whether they think they are in government or in opposition — did not see fit to turn up today for the debate. Perhaps they can answer for themselves as to why that was the case.

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill was long overdue. That is one of the reasons why DOE has driven it forward. My predecessors identified it as an important Bill. The Department of the Environment has put forward one third of all Bills in this Assembly session. We have been vigorous in dealing with issues related to the environment and have been working very hard. I pay tribute to my officials, who have worked on a series of Bills and have been under quite a lot of pressure as a result. However, the Assembly is about delivering for people, and we needed to make important and necessary changes in that area.

The Bill will enhance and help to protect wildlife and habitats. That is absolutely critical. Some people may think that the environment is not very important, but it is very, very important. If we do not have a good environment, it will have major health implications and result in a huge additional cost for Northern Ireland.

Not meeting the obligations set by the European Union will cost the Government in Northern Ireland tens of millions of pounds annually, which will be wasted and paid in fines. I want a system to be set up whereby we can have proper regulation

in place to meet the requirements of European Union directives, while not overburdening people with regulation

The Bill has been widely welcomed not only by groups from the environmental side but by groups that engage in country sports. Many people who take part in country sports have an awful lot in common with environmentalists. Those two groups are not diametrically opposed, and, when people get their teeth into the issues, they have lots in common.

As you well know, Mr Speaker, I am a country boy and am proud of the fact that I was raised in the country. I do not care very much where I am, I am proud of my country roots. I can be taken out of the country, but the country will never be taken out of me. As I was taking my breakfast this morning, several hundred starlings landed in my garden. It was a fabulous sight as they took off into the trees and came down again. A couple of days ago, a beautiful cock pheasant arrived in our garden to look for wheat. We have those pheasants because people from neighbouring properties engage in country sports. Pheasants that avoided being shot made their own life, and, as a result of people breeding them, we have the privilege of enjoying those animals.

There is a tremendous opportunity for us in Northern Ireland to look after our environment in a better and more structured manner and in a way that all of us can enjoy from different perspectives. The Bill will make a considerable contribution to that.

I will comment briefly on the enhanced police powers. People who engage in wildlife crime often engage in other types of crime. The gougiers with their spades and lurchers who are out badger-baiting are often engaged in other nefarious activities. The police would do well to identify people who engage in wildlife crime and go after them. I suspect that, if they can put them behind bars for those activities, they may find that there is a downturn in other types of crime in the area in which those people live. I have no time for people who engage in badger-baiting, dog fighting or cock fighting, and I am absolutely disgusted and repelled by all of those. I welcome the fact that we have introduced a ban on hare coursing, which Mr Weir mentioned. We should move on from that, and I am glad that Northern Ireland is doing so.

All in all, this is a good news day for Northern Ireland: we have a Bill that can properly manage our wildlife and natural environment. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA 5/09] do now pass.

Sunbeds Bill: Final Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Sunbeds Bill [NIA 18/09] do now pass.

I am pleased that this important Bill has reached Final Stage. I introduced it to the Assembly on 11 May 2010, and the subsequent process of discussion and debate has been extremely productive. I thank the Health Committee and other Members for their careful and detailed scrutiny of the Bill, which resulted in various amendments to strengthen its provisions.

I will remind Members of the main purpose and aims of the Bill. Its key aim is to regulate the sunbed industry to reduce the number of cases of skin cancer and deaths from skin cancer caused by sunbed use. The Bill will eliminate, as far as possible, the use of sunbeds by children and young people under 18 years of age. It will also ensure that adults who intend to use sunbeds are more aware of the risks. The measures in the Bill go further than the legislation for Scotland, Wales and England. I have also included provisions on compulsory training, technical standards for sunbeds and the introduction of a licensing or registration scheme.

In Northern Ireland, skin cancer is a serious health issue. It is now the most common form of cancer, accounting for 28% of all individuals diagnosed. Skin cancer cases have increased, and that is linked to greater exposure of the skin to ultraviolet radiation (UVR) through natural sunlight but also through a substantial increase in the use of sunbeds in recent years.

Many UK, European and global public health organisations have expressed concern about the increase in the use of sunbeds, particularly among young people, because of the associated increased risk of skin cancer and other health problems. The other health effects of UVR damage include sunburn, premature ageing, immunosuppression and eye damage. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has designated sunbeds as a category 1 carcinogen. That puts sunbeds in the same category as tobacco. Approximately 400 outlets in Northern Ireland offer sunbed sessions and, in addition, many people rent or buy sunbeds to use in their own home.

A survey of sunbed premises across Northern Ireland revealed a wide variation in operating practices and poor standards among some providers. The survey also showed that only 16% of sunbed operators in Northern Ireland were members of the Sunbed Association. That fact undermined the option of using any form of voluntary self-regulation as a means of protecting public health.

I am encouraged by the consensus that the Bill has enjoyed in the Health Committee and in the House. In addition to the widespread acceptance of the principles of the Bill, there has been detailed and rigorous scrutiny of its clauses. I thank the Chairperson and members of the Health Committee for their extensive and considered evidence-taking, and I thank those who provided written and oral evidence to the Committee. That evidence resulted in helpful suggestions for amendments and a comprehensive report, which was published by the Committee in October 2010. I also thank Members for their valuable input and comments during the Bill's Assembly stages.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Wells):

We seldom pass legislation in this Chamber that we can say with confidence will have saved people's lives in 10 years' time. As a result of the legislation that will be passed by this House, I am certain that young people in particular will no longer be exposed to the unlicensed, uncontrolled use of sunbeds. That has to be a good thing.

The whole procedure has been a pleasant experience for the Committee, in the sense that its members, the Minister and the officials worked closely together to produce what, in my opinion, will be some of the strongest legislation controlling sunbeds in western Europe. That has to be a good thing. I also think that it is a good indication of what the Assembly can achieve. There are people out there who are quick to criticise us as simply a talking shop and, sometimes, for wasting time, but I have found this a very interesting procedure and one that has borne fruit.

I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. It is timely and welcome. Having looked closely at what the Bill has to offer, I am confident that it will take us a significant step forward in protecting our young people against the dangers of sunbeds and providing robust legislation to regulate

the use of sunbeds by people over 18 who choose to use them. The Bill will ensure that we have a clear legislative framework within which all sunbed premises will be required to work. Young people in particular are at risk from sunbed sessions. Not only has there been a sharp increase in usage by younger people and older folk, but there is a link between the prevalence of commercial sunbed outlets and deprivation. Indeed, as the Bill has been making its way through the House, I have become much more conscious of the prevalence of sunbed establishments in Northern Ireland. Invariably, one sees them in run-down inner city areas or in parts of our towns beside video stores, hot food takeaways etc, which are clearly linked to areas of deprivation. That is a concern. Here in Northern Ireland, there are too many health issues linked to deprivation, and the Committee is fully supportive of anything that tackles health inequalities.

11.45 am

Young people who use sunbeds endanger their life. Skin cancer is a terrible disease from which to die. Anyone in the Chamber who has had a friend or relative who has died from skin cancer will know exactly what I am talking about. It is dreadful. In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that two or three young people die each year from melanomas directly related to sunbed usage. That is how serious the issue is.

The Bill has been significantly improved and strengthened because of the amendments that the Health Committee persuaded the Department to accept. However, I have to say that the Department did not require too much persuasion; we were pushing at an open door. It was clear that the Department was committed to protecting young people's health through the legislation. The Committee's detailed scrutiny led to it recommending to the Department the amendment of 12 of the 20 clauses. Again, I thank the Minister for his co-operation in that regard and for taking on board the Committee's recommendations. If I were you, Minister, I would bottle that; it does not often happen.

A number of amendments that have been made deserve particular mention because of the importance of the Bill. There was a key amendment to allow for the introduction of licensing. The possibility of a licensing scheme was a major issue that was discussed in Committee. The Bill, as introduced, did not allow

for licensing; it allowed for registration only. Initially, the Department believed that there was not enough time to consult and deliberate on that issue. However, the feeling from members and stakeholders was that, without licensing, the Bill would lack teeth. The Committee, therefore, welcomed the amendment that the Minister has made to the Bill to allow for licensing. The amendment provides for licensing to be introduced by secondary legislation under the affirmative procedure at a later date. That will provide a means by which the Department can properly consult on the details of a licensing scheme with those potentially affected by such a scheme before bringing it to the Committee and, hence, to the Assembly for approval.

An amendment was made to clause 1 to introduce the idea of a restricted zone. Enforcement of the Bill will be carried out by local authorities. The Committee received evidence from Belfast City Council and from the Chief Environmental Health Officers Group on the difficulty associated with enforcing clause 1, as originally drafted. Again, we found that there was a high level of co-operation from the local authorities. Our 26 district councils have to license a huge range of establishments, and they did not see the requirement on them to look after businesses that provide sunbeds as a particularly heavy burden. They suggested the introduction of the concept of a restricted zone in premises where sunbeds are in use. Persons under 18 years of age would be prohibited from entering such a restricted zone. The Committee agreed with that position and welcomed the amendment made to that clause.

Amendments relating to the level of fines and fixed penalties were made. Originally, the Bill allowed up to what is known as a level 4 fine, which carries a maximum fine of £2,500. The Committee felt that that was insufficient to act as a deterrent. Therefore, we were pleased that amendments were made to bring the majority of the fines up to what is known as level 5, where the maximum fine is £5,000.

Other important amendments were made in relation to the information that has to be displayed in sunbed premises. For instance, the information to be given to people hiring sunbeds for home use will state that it is illegal for under-18s to use a sunbed. Every sunbed hired must have a sticker advising people of the health risks and stating that it is illegal for people aged under 18 to use it.

The Committee is delighted to see the Bill coming to its Final Stage. It is a vital issue on the public health agenda. I thank the Assembly; it can congratulate itself on getting the legislation onto the statute book before the end of the current mandate.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin welcomes the Final Stage of the Sunbeds Bill. As I said at previous stages, the Committee and the Department have worked together constructively in ensuring that the final result is a Bill that improves public health by highlighting the dangers of sunbeds and providing a robust legislative framework for the use of sunbeds.

The Bill makes sure that there is no ambiguity about the age at which individuals can use a sunbed, what information can be displayed and who can be in the premises or in the restricted zones, as they are now known. Furthermore, as the Chairperson said, there is no ambiguity around the level of fines that will, hopefully, act as a deterrent to those in breach of the legislation. The Committee felt strongly about the fines, and we welcome the fact that the Department has taken that on board.

I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. It is very relevant legislation that will save lives.

Mr McCallister: Like others, I welcome the Final Stage of the Sunbeds Bill. As the Chairperson of the Committee said, it has been a pleasant experience, because it has been an example of fine work between the Committee, the Minister and departmental officials. It will certainly give us some of the most robust legislation, and it sends out an important message about the seriousness of the risks to public health associated with sunbeds.

We have worked hard on the legislation as a Committee, scrutinising it and working with the Department to amend parts that we felt needed to be strengthened. With the Department, we found that we were pushing at an open door. It has been beneficial, and we have some of the most robust legislation to deal with the problem.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member probably has the ear of the Minister on many issues, so I ask him to use his influence to drive forward what I see as the final piece of the jigsaw of cancer prevention, which is the display of tobacco products and vending machines.

We have now finished the consultation period on that important subordinate legislation, and, having protected young people from sunbeds, as the Bill will clearly do, we must also now protect them from being exposed to the advertising of tobacco products and from the ready access they gain to tobacco through vending machines.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Committee for that intervention. I am sure that it will not have been lost on the Minister. I know that there was some dissension in the Chairperson's party on some of those issues but certainly not from him. I know that his commitment to the public health agenda is as strong as my own and that of my party colleague the Minister. We now have robust legislation on sunbeds, and the Assembly and the Minister can take pride in their role in promoting public health, particularly when it comes to the prevention of cancer.

Dr Deeny: I rise to welcome the Final Stage of the Sunbeds Bill and to repeat what Members have said. It has been a great example of working with the Department. The Bill is very important, and we have been very pleased about the way it has gone through Committee Stage and is now at Final Stage. It is a good example to the public that things can be done that will actually benefit the people of Northern Ireland. As a health professional, I am delighted that the Bill has gone through, and it will save lives.

The Minister of Health, Social Services

and Public Safety: I thank those who have contributed today. The progress of the Bill has been greatly assisted by the informed and constructive input in the House and in Committee. The Bill will stop under-18s using, hiring or buying sunbeds; ban unsupervised sunbed premises; warn sunbed users, hirers and buyers about the health risks through signs and documents; stop spurious claims about health benefits; ensure that protective eyewear is worn; ensure that staff are trained; ensure that sunbeds comply with certain standards; and make provision for a registration and licensing scheme to be introduced. Regulations will cover the detail of the registration and licensing scheme; the health information that must be provided; the details of staff training; and the details of sunbed standards.

Mr Wells raised the issue of legislation on tobacco display and vending machines. Like him, I am anxious to bring that forward. Out of

courtesy, I took it to the Executive for clearance before consultation, and it sat in the office of the First Minister for month after month. That is the reason it has been delayed. It is a bit like my adoption Bill, which fell for exactly the same reason. However, I assure the Member that legislation to ban tobacco vending machines and displays is moving forward.

The Bill as it stands to be voted on by the Assembly is a clear example of a Minister and a Committee working together successfully, with a shared aim of improving the health of our population. It is important now to make speedy progress with the subordinate legislation that will bring into effect the key provisions of the Bill.

I thank Members who debated the Bill, whether in Committee or in the House, for their helpful contributions, considered advice and constructive approach to this important legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Sunbeds Bill [NIA 18/09] do now pass.

Budget Bill: Final Stage

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson):** I beg to move

That the Budget Bill [NIA 11/10] do now pass.

We have had long-into-the-middle-of-the-night discussions and debates on the Bill, and I hope that the lack of attendance in the House today maybe means that we will not get a repeat of the previous two debates. The Final Stage signals the end not only of this financial year but of the Executive's first Budget 2008-2011.

I do not want to take up too much of the Assembly's time. The Supply resolutions debate, especially the 10-hour Budget Bill Second Stage debate two weeks ago, thoroughly explored the issues. That debate focused on the draft Budget for 2011-15 rather than on the principles of this Bill. Let me remind Members that we are approving final departmental spending plans for 2010-11 and providing an advance for the first four months of 2011-12 until the Budget of 2011-15 is debated and approved through the subsequent Budget Bill that will be brought before the Assembly. The 2011-12 Budget has already been well and truly kicked around this Chamber in previous debates that, perhaps, went a little beyond what the Bill was about. The Vote on Account is not based on or connected to the Budget for 2011-12 as detailed in the Budget 2011-15.

I want to spend just a few moments looking back on 2010-11. Very often when we read the press or hear some comments on radio phone-in programmes, we would think that the money spent from the public purse in Northern Ireland has had little or no effect on the lives of people in Northern Ireland over the past year. I take the time, at least once a week, to go out and see the impact of some of the spending that we undertake. I want to highlight some of the achievements of the past year.

The year commenced with the devolution of policing and justice and related budgets to the Assembly. The Bill makes provision for the final 2010-11 expenditure plans for the new Department of Justice and the Public Prosecution Service. We were told that the parties in the Assembly could and would never agree to that, yet completing the devolution process and getting the devolution of policing and justice and subsequent budgets for that is one of the achievements.

I want to recall other achievements financed during 2010-11, if not wholly then at least partly by the Budget Bill. More than £230 million was paid out under the common agricultural policy in single farm payments to farmers in December and January. To reduce the potential of disallowance in future years, the land parcel identification system was funded under the Executive's invest-to-save programme. Hopefully, that should avoid EU fines in future. In addition, £1 million of DARD funding will match funding from BT. That has been invested to deliver increased access to the next generation of broadband services in rural areas.

That will be extremely important in helping small businesses that operate from rural areas with their communications and business plans.

12.00 noon

A new fisheries protection vessel was delivered in December to continue the enforcement of the fisheries regulations in the Irish Sea, and a £2.5 million vessel modernisation and selectivity measure of the European Fisheries Fund has opened for applications from local fishing fleets. That will please Mr McNarry and those in his Strangford constituency as well, of course, as the Member from South Down, whose constituency also has fishing fleets. I will give way should Mr McNarry wish to thank me for the money that is being spent in his constituency, and I hope that I will hear no more nonsense about Strangford getting nothing from the Executive.

The construction of the Titanic signature project building, which is expected to attract up to 400,000 visitors a year, is progressing well. The new Public Record Office building in Titanic Quarter has provided much-needed work for the construction industry and is planned to open shortly. Anyone crossing the bridge over the River Lagan cannot fail to be pleased with the progress of the building and its impact on the landscape. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that on your way in each morning, you see the progress being made on the site.

The development of museums continued with the commencement of a £3 million refurbishment of Cultra Manor at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. In August, the first sod was cut on the site of Northern Ireland's first 50-metre pool in Bangor, and work commenced on the visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway in November.

In August, the Education Minister announced, as a result of the allocation from the June monitoring round, the commencement of work on 13 new schools and the acquisition of a site for another. In addition, £10 million was identified for the maintenance backlog. All of that is good news for the construction sector, for schools and for the modernisation of the school estate in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I had the joy of attending the opening of new buildings at Grosvenor Grammar School. I lamented the fact that the mobile classroom in which I taught for many a year had disappeared and was probably matchwood somewhere. However, the new school has opened on that site. The new Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School in Newry and the accommodation for St Dominic's High School in Belfast have been completed this year. The Bill's provision for education is mainly for the delivery of superb education and youth services.

In the field of further and higher education, funding of more than £250 million was made available to the two universities to cover teaching, learning and research. About £380 million was provided for further education to enhance skills and aid employment, with a view to bolstering the local economic recovery. On that note, DETI and Invest Northern Ireland continue to work proactively with local companies and entrepreneurs to help to minimise the impact of the economic downturn and to seek new foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland. I welcome the recent announcement that the law firm Allen and Overy is to set up an office in Belfast. The SAP UK and Intel Corporation's unique joint research initiative reflects their confidence in the IT skills available here and the high value that they place on the opportunity to work closely with our universities.

The party on my right has been critical, in the flimsy document that it produced on the Budget, about the ability to deliver some of the high-skill jobs that were promised. However, the projects that I outlined indicate that the Budget's promise is being delivered on. Many young people now have the opportunity to go to university here before moving on to highly paid jobs for which the rate of pay is well above the average that would normally be available in Northern Ireland. That is part of the economic strategy contained in the four-year Budget to the end of this year.

On the health front, initiatives such as the rolling programme of unannounced hygiene inspections by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority has resulted in significant improvements in patient care, where improvements were needed, as well as in the valued daily delivery of health and social care across the country.

In 2011, a number of plans came to fruition. A £53 million critical care building was opened at the Ulster Hospital. Lagan Valley Hospital opened two new gold-standard operating theatres and a midwifery-led unit. A new £15.6 million regional child and adolescent mental health inpatient facility opened at Foster Green, while the Bamford Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing opened at Magee campus. The latest development at Altnagelvin Area Hospital opened in July and will treat cardiac and stroke patients, while the new Enniskillen acute hospital has continued to progress towards completion in the spring of 2012. Just before Christmas, the first sod was cut at the £4.9 million purpose-built neurology unit at Musgrave Park Hospital.

That is only a short list of some of the things that have been done under the Health Service budget. It puts into perspective some of the comments have been made about the Health Service being starved of funds and not having new facilities, new opportunities and new chances to deliver care to people in Northern Ireland. I could have given a much longer list. It is important to inject that into the debate, especially given the very contentious discussion that there has been on the money that is available for the Health Service over the past year.

Do not forget that the debate over what happens to the Health Service budget next year is not new; we have heard some of the same comments for years. However, I have listed some of the new projects that have been facilitated by the budgetary allocations so far this year.

Turning to roads, no matter where we turn in Northern Ireland, we can witness investment in our roads, not to mention the maintenance and treatment of our roads during the winter.

Mr McNarry: *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have looked around the roads in Strangford and they are no worse than roads elsewhere. Even at the end of this difficult financial year, when, as a result of the activities of the friends of the party to my right, we had £127 million taken

out of our budget in the middle of the year, we still found about £11 million extra for the maintenance of our roads. I am sure that the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry has already made his bid to have some of that money spent by Roads Service on his constituency.

We have had a maintenance budget, and additional money was made available for the treatment of our roads during the winter, particularly during the severe weather around Christmas.

I must mention the completion of the much-needed £146 million Dungannon to Ballygawley dual carriageway in December, which will benefit the local and regional economy through improved journey times in the movement of goods and services across Northern Ireland and enhance safety on the route. Anyone who has used that route, as I have on a number of occasions to go to engagements, will know that the dual carriageway has made a vast improvement to journey times and safety, because drivers do not have to sit behind slow-moving traffic and take chances overtaking at some of the windier parts of the road. We hear critical comments time and again in the Assembly, but that project shows the commitment of the Executive to ensure that all parts of Northern Ireland benefit from the spend and that the west of Northern Ireland is not left out of the infrastructure improvements that we do.

Finally, some 2,000 social homes and over 450 affordable homes will be delivered in 2010-11. That is in addition to schemes to improve four of our towns, namely Lurgan, Portadown, Downpatrick — I am sure that the Member for South Down Ms Ritchie will be pleased to acknowledge that — and Kilkeel. I am unsure whether Kilkeel is also in her constituency. My geography on these matters is not very good, but I am sure that she will tell me that that was all down to her hard work.

Ms Ritchie: I am pleased that the Minister has given way. Does he agree that I initiated some of those projects when I was at the Department for Social Development?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will not tell the current Minister for Social Development that his party leader tried to steal some of his glory. He claims that those projects are all his successes, and that he had to take over from the honourable lady and pick up the pieces — well, he did not said that, but he might have.

The building of 2,000 social houses through the house-building programme is quite an achievement for the Department for Social Development. It will also help to reduce the waiting lists for housing, which are on the increase.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member for South Down is determined to have her moment of glory. I will not hold her back, and I will give way.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I am sure that the Minister will agree with me that being able to achieve such targets for social house-building this year is due, in no small measure, to the good work of the current Minister for Social Development and the fact that he was able to carry on, use transfer sites and make the best use of the available money.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It was the result of a collective effort by the Executive, which sought to ensure that the available resources are spent to meet the priorities in Northern Ireland. I am sure that when the honourable lady was the Minister for Social Development, she played an important role, as has her successor. However, that success is due to the work of an Executive in which her party, my party, the party opposite, the party to my right, and the Alliance Party collaborate on a regular basis to ensure that we deliver the programme.

As well as the headline-hitting outcomes of the plans that were laid some years ago, the delivery of public services, which are financed by the Bill that is under consideration today, continues day by day. Those services include health, social services, education, policing and justice, environment, transport, culture, social development and the administration of non-contributory benefits, agriculture, and much more.

The financial year 2010-11 was difficult. However, as I outlined in my speech during the debate at Second Stage, we managed the in-year pressures through the monitoring rounds, and even made some allocations to Departments. Mr McNarry has been critical of the way in which we manage some of the in-year pressures, and there have been discussions about whether we should have contingency funds. However, the pressures that emerged during the year — and a significant pressure came as the result of the

£127 million that was suddenly demanded from us in June —

Mr Humphrey: By his friends.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes; by his friends, as I have been informed from behind. Those and other pressures were met through the monitoring rounds.

We now turn our minds to the end of the financial year. I must stress to Departments and Ministers the importance of achieving maximum spend — this is the balance — and yet not overspending and placing the Northern Ireland Executive at risk of an excess, with the resultant damage to our credibility as an Administration. I appreciate that that is extremely challenging for all Departments, especially in the current constrained fiscal environment, but that balance must be achieved. If we underspend because the end-year flexibility arrangement was taken away from us by the Government, that money will go back to Westminster and will be lost to our Budget, but there will also be penalties if we overspend.

12.15 pm

Looking forward, I turn now to the early months of the next financial year and the many challenges that lie ahead for the next Assembly. As Members are well aware, we enter 2011-12 with a very constrained financial position, both in current and capital spend. I remind Members that that is not as a result of mismanagement on our part; it is not as a result of bad decisions on our part; and it is not as a result of things that we neglected to do. It is the result of the fact that 90% of the money that is spent in Northern Ireland comes in the form of a block grant from Westminster, and that block grant has been cut by £4 billion over the next four years. We must administer that cut. I want to emphasise this again, and I know that I will be accused of making a party political point, but the party that complained most about it was the party that campaigned most for the Government that imposed that cut on us. We must live within those financial constraints, and I am sure that we will hear much — *[Interruption.]*

Maybe Mr McNarry's memory — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister must be heard.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Maybe Mr McNarry's memory is very short. However, I remember UCAMP, or UCUNF, or whatever it was

called — the Conservative and Ulster Unionist Party alliance. Mr McNarry campaigned on the streets of Northern Ireland for Conservative Party candidates, and he indicated that had he won the seat in Strangford he would have taken the Whip for the Conservative Party and voted for the Budget that we now have to work with. That is the financial constraint that we face.

Furthermore, his party has compounded the situation. After an unsuccessful election campaign with the Conservative Party, his party has now decided that it would like to be the political McDonald's of Northern Ireland politics. It wants to be the franchise for the Conservative Party, the very party that has brought us those cuts. To a certain extent, I suppose that we could almost call the financial constraints that we are facing next year the Ulster Unionists' financial constraints.

Mr McNarry: Go ahead.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I just have. Those are the constraints that we will face next year.

On the other hand, we also face inflation and contractual pay pressures that will be difficult to manage, while the much-reduced capital budget — a 40% reduction — will impact on the local construction industry and, hence, on the local economy. Given those constraints, there are a number of things that we must do. First, we must address inefficiency, and there is inefficiency in the public sector. Secondly, we must address waste, and there is waste. During the Budget process, many people came forward to identify where that waste might be. Those things must be done before we consider reducing the level of service that is delivered to people in Northern Ireland.

That is why I asked Departments last April to commence work on savings plans in preparation for such a scenario, and I am sure that it will be raised during the debate. I am sure that the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel will raise the issue in his speech. One of the disappointments is that some Departments still appear not to have produced comprehensive saving plans, even though we were well aware a year in advance that some of those things had to be done.

The revised Budget is in its final stages. I call on all Ministers, Departments and parties to put aside past arguments and differences and

put their shoulders to the wheel to deliver for the people, businesses and communities as we move into the next Assembly and next Budget period.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McKay): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his speech. Members will know that the Budget Bill provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2010-11, as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which take account of what happened during the year's monitoring rounds. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year until the Main Estimates for 2011-12 are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended that the Bill be granted accelerated passage following an evidence session with the Department's officials on 2 February. That evidence session was the culmination of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of in-year monitoring rounds in 2009-2010, which, in addition to a discussion of the Department's position, included briefings on the strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to public expenditure following the outcome of each monitoring round.

Given that the Vote on Account dimension of the Bill relates to the first year of the next Budget period, I will take a few moments to refer to the detailed work that the Committee has undertaken over recent months in respect of the Budget for 2011-15. The Committee has heard from a wide range of witnesses, including representatives of the business and voluntary sectors, economists, academics and trade unions on strategic and cross-cutting public finance issues. In addition, submissions were received from each of the applicable Assembly Committees on the spending and savings plans for their respective Departments.

The key issues considered by the Committee included the basis for proposed departmental allocations; the potential for achieving longer-term efficiency savings; possible areas for new or increased revenue generation; and preventative spending. The Committee's substantive report on the Executive's draft Budget 2011-15, which it agreed and submitted to DFP on 16 February, includes some 45 key findings and recommendations, in addition to

numerous observations and proposals at both strategic and departmental level. The typescript report was laid in the Business Office on 17 February, and printed and online versions will, I hope, be available to all Members from tomorrow.

The Committee expects that the Executive will take on board the report's recommendations in developing the final Budget 2011-15 proposals, and it also expects that the Finance Minister will outline the Executive's response to the report when presenting the final Budget proposals to the Assembly.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Chairperson for giving way. Will he confirm that the Committee's report will express some serious concerns about very many aspects of the Budget? Will he also confirm that the business community representatives, the construction industry representatives, the trade union representatives, the academic representatives, the community and voluntary organisations' representatives — all of whom the Committee heard from — expressed grave and serious reservations about the quality of this Budget and its ability to deliver for this region?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his intervention.

I will now speak in a personal capacity. The work of the Committee on this report was lengthy. The report itself was over 200 pages long. There is a lot of good in it, but there is also a lot of constructive criticism. I have not seen any report from a Committee that has come through this House that has been free of constructive criticism. That is the way the Committee should move forward in carrying out its work.

I am opposed to Committee work that has been agreed by all parties being used for party political purposes. This report was referred to at an earlier stage in the debate, when the report was not even agreed or finalised by the Committee. The Committee's work should not be abused in that way.

The report makes a number of positive recommendations. The Committee very much welcomed the joint declaration and work carried out by the Executive, the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in conjunction with the Scottish and Welsh Governments, which called on the British Government to reverse its decision to write off

the accumulated EYF stocks. That was raised with departmental officials and the Minister when he was before the Committee. The Committee is also concerned about the British Government trying to renege on the £4.4 billion in capital funding which remains to be paid, and it encourages the Executive to continue to press for a firmer commitment from the British Government.

The Committee supported the Executive's proposal to transfer money from current to capital within the Budget period, as that would help to relieve some of the pressure on the construction industry. In a finalised Budget, I would like to see more money going to capital in the education budget, for example, because there are many schools that desperately need new buildings.

The Committee also welcomed the proposals in the draft Budget to identify alternative means of raising additional revenue, such as the plastic bag levy. The Committee encourages the Executive to explore novel approaches to raising new revenue in order to support public service delivery.

Reference was also made to the issue of preventative spending. There was broad agreement in the Committee that that is a very interesting area of work that needs more research and should be embraced by the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Preventative spending has many positive social benefits as well as providing cost savings in the longer term, particularly in areas such as justice.

The Committee recognises the fact that the devolution of corporation tax will itself act as an incentive for potential foreign direct investment companies. When it is deployed, it should be done in conjunction with other DFP strategies. The Committee also welcomed the Executive's engagement in the green new deal initiative, which will have benefits for householders, people on the poverty line and, of course, the construction sector.

The Budget review group has done a lot of work in recent months. All the parties at the Executive table should have been bringing proposals to the review group from day one. It was interesting that the Minister of Finance and Personnel referred to the Ulster Unionist Party's support for the Conservatives in the most recent Westminster election campaign.

During the debate at a previous stage of the Bill, I recall that, when Basil McCrea was challenged about whether he would have voted to implement the cuts, he could not answer the question. The Ulster Unionist Party must clarify whether it would have voted for the cuts if it had had representation at Westminster. I am willing to give way to an intervention on that issue.

Mr Callaghan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is the Member speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel or as an individual Member?

Mr Speaker: The Member has already clarified his position. I often say to Members who are Chairpersons of Committees that it is important to clarify whether they are speaking as a Chairperson or as a Member of this House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am willing to take an intervention from the Ulster Unionist Party's MLAs if they want to clarify whether they would have voted for the cuts. To date, they have failed to answer that question when it has been put to them. The £4 billion in Budget cuts will have a serious effect on all members of our community, as the Minister has already pointed out, and the massive cut in the capital budget will hit the construction sector hard. There is a duty on the Ulster Unionist Party to clarify that for members of the community.

The plastic bag levy is an environmental initiative that will raise funds. Of course, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party have already stated that they are opposed to that positive environmental initiative, probably because it is in the draft Budget.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Member, whether he or she is speaking as a Chairperson of a Committee or as an individual MLA, to knowingly misrepresent the policy position of another party in this House? The SDLP is not opposed to a plastic bag levy; the SDLP happens to have issues with the accelerated passage of the Single Use Plastic Bags Bill, which is an entirely different thing.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. He has now put it on the record.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is just a case of the SDLP

saying white when we say black, which is a totally disingenuous approach to some of the initiatives that we bring to the House. If the SDLP had brought a similar Bill to the Assembly, we would have had no problem supporting it. The fact of the matter was that, until now, the SDLP supported a plastic bag levy, but now it does not.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a matter of record in the House. I do not know whether it is appropriate, or in order, for a Member to continually and knowingly misrepresent the position of another party.

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I have to say to the Chairperson of the Committee once again that he has expressed his party view. It is on the record once again.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I remind the Member that I am speaking in a personal capacity as a member of Sinn Féin. I am sure that the Member has a variety of views that I disagree with, but he is free to express those in the House. I will not try to stymie him or gag him in any way. Every Member should be afforded that courtesy. It is not only about the draft Budget: there is an election around the corner. The SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party oppose the draft Budget. They are coming out with all this opposition and their alternative proposals, which seem to be neither costed nor thought out, because there is an election in less than 10 weeks' time.

Mr O'Loan: I am surprised at the Member's remark that our proposals are not costed. May I make a remark about the style of the speech that the Member is giving? When a Member is elected as a Chairperson of a Committee, that is a significant duty for any Member. When a Member makes a speech as Chairperson, there is an expectation that that Member will carry the dignity of the position of Chairperson with him through the rest of the speech. To misrepresent repeatedly the position of this party damages the quality of debate in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the Final Stage of any Bill is about its contents, not about what Members hope or think could or should be in the Bill. The Final Stage is about what is in the Bill now, and that is what we should be discussing.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Finance and Personnel: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What I find disgraceful and disingenuous is a party, a Member or whoever taking a draft report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel — a report that has not been finalised or agreed in Committee — and a Member then speaking to it in the House as if it has been finalised. That undermines the Committee's work. Those sorts of actions need to be brought to an end, because that was simply disgraceful.

Mr O'Loan: Since his previous remarks were directed at the SDLP and he then moved on to that point, it is likely that his imputation is intended for, and directed at, me. I, therefore, want to put it on the record that I deny utterly that I disclosed any matter that had not been agreed by the Committee and was still in draft.

Mr Speaker: I encourage Members to get back to the Final Stage. That is important.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have clearly touched a nerve with some Members today.

In conclusion, the draft Budget for the four years ahead is very important, and we need to approach it in a constructive way. The Budget review group is looking at a number of proposals to generate revenue to offset the revenue shortfall that has resulted from the Tory cuts. That important work must continue. In their papers and economic documents, Members and parties should come forward with proposals on how we can mitigate the impact that the Westminster Budget and the comprehensive spending review will have on our society and community. They have a responsibility not only to publish those documents but to cost their ideas and proposals, bring them to the Budget review group and let us see whether we can implement them and try to mitigate the impact that the Tory cuts will have.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business after lunch will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: North-west

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she intends to facilitate a cross-departmental plan to maximise the tourism potential of the north-west region, arising from the status of the Derry-Londonderry City of Culture 2013. (AQO 1135/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster):

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has been working with the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Derry City Council, Ilex, Tourism Ireland and VisitBritain to develop a marketing and events programme for the UK City of Culture 2013, to promote the cultural experience on offer in the city and to maximise the tourism opportunity presented by the award. In addition, a Northern Ireland 2012-13 steering group chaired by my Department has been set up to look at the tourism potential of 2012 and the UK City of Culture in 2013. The 2013 award, in particular, offers a major opportunity to change perceptions of Northern Ireland. My officials, along with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and key partners in central and local government, are working on a number of high-profile events to maximise the tourism potential.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response and acknowledge her contribution over recent years in profiling and developing the Walled City projects. It is important that we maximise the potential of what will be the most important event in Northern Ireland in 2013, and I welcome the important cross-departmental approach that has been taken. However, will the Minister tell the House whether any programme money has been set aside to develop the potential of that event for everyone in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for his comments.

As I indicated, the Department chairs a cross-departmental group on 2012-13. He is right that 2013 will be a key year for the north-west. However, he will acknowledge that the Clipper race that is coming in 2012 will also be hugely important to the city and to the wider north-west. I am getting increasingly excited about what could happen in the city in 2012, given that there is a very firm proposition to bring the opening of the Cultural Olympiad, which is a huge event, to the north-west. There is also potential for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award to go to the city on the back of its UK City of Culture status. As I said yesterday, the fact that the Turner Prize is coming to the city in 2013 is an absolutely huge achievement, especially given that it has been based in the Tate since 1984 and has never left Great Britain, and we should all be proud of that. So, there will be a huge amount of activity in the north-west.

During 2012, there will also be a lot of activity around the Titanic story and the visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway, which are big events that we call tier 1 events. There will, of course, also be tier 2 and tier 3 events. So, a huge amount is going on. As I told the House yesterday, the next Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have a very exciting time in 2012-13, and I wish whoever it is well.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her comments about ensuring that projects such as the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre benefit from the UK City of Culture 2013 award. Will the Minister update us on the Apprentice Boys memorial hall project? If the UK City of Culture is to progress, it is vital that it does so on an inclusive basis so that no community in the city of Londonderry feels excluded or isolated.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for his question and comments. Events right across Northern Ireland should, indeed, be as inclusive as possible. The Tourist Board has now received the first draft of the BDO business plan, which highlights the Apprentice Boys of Derry memorial hall as a key project under what is called the western perspective initiative. The Tourist Board met the CPD and the Apprentice Boys on the 11 February to discuss the next steps and how to drive forward the project.

It is expected that the project will be complete by 2013 and therefore form part of the UK City

of Culture celebrations. I am keen that everyone in the city sees the benefit of that designation. I have no doubt that we will work towards that in conjunction with the partners whom I mentioned in the substantive answer.

Mr Cree: The Minister knows the importance of increasing revenue from visitors. Will she tell us what plans are in place to achieve more revenue from visitors attracted by Londonderry's winning the UK City of Culture challenge?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I absolutely recognise the need to increase tourism spending in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, we are bottom of the regions in that league table for the UK and Ireland. To increase tourism spending, we first need to bring tourists to Northern Ireland. Our biggest market is Great Britain, and, as the Member knows from comments that I made yesterday, I intend to increase our marketing in Great Britain so that we can get the most potential out of those tourists. Secondly, when those visitors come to Northern Ireland, they have to have opportunities to spend their money. Therefore, we need to be able to give them product and goods to purchase when they are here. As a Government, we have spent a lot of money in capital expenditure over the past three years, and we now need to see the return from that capital expenditure. We will do that through marketing plans, principally in Great Britain, but also in Germany, which is now a key market for us.

Investment: Belfast

2. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much funding her Department has allocated to each of the Belfast constituencies in the last five years.

(AQO 1136/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I recently answered Assembly questions detailing the assistance offered to business and tourism projects for each of the four Belfast parliamentary constituencies. I refer the Member to AQW 3938/11 and AQW 4093/11. In addition, over the past five years, under EU structural fund programmes, my Department has funded local economic development projects in the Belfast City Council area. It has also funded telecoms and energy investment projects across Belfast. However, it is not feasible to provide a breakdown of

the associated expenditure by parliamentary constituency without undertaking significant work.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for her reply. I appreciate that information has been provided in the past on this question. However, given the historical imbalances, will the Minister give an assessment of the benefit of that expenditure? In other words, have the outcomes improved and is there an equitable performance in the various constituencies?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Members are often misled when they look at spending in the constituency of South Belfast, for example, because they automatically think that it can be compared to other Belfast constituencies, such as West Belfast or North Belfast. However, South Belfast covers the city centre in which people from across Northern Ireland work. I think that only two wards in Northern Ireland do not have people working in South Belfast. People travel from across Northern Ireland to work in that constituency. Therefore, it is unfair to say that, because, based on the strict figures, West Belfast does not have the same amount of spend as some of the other constituencies it is therefore disadvantaged.

People travel to work, and it is a very short distance from West Belfast to South Belfast — in other words, to the city centre. I urge Members from constituencies in which it may, on the face of it, look as though there is a spending imbalance to think about the fact that it is a very short distance to work in other areas. I live in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, yet I work every day in East Belfast. Quite a number of people who live in that constituency come into the city of Belfast for work.

My job is to bring more investment into Northern Ireland so that we can all benefit from it. Today, I announced another 130 jobs at Schrader Electronics in Antrim. Those high-tech jobs will be welcomed across Northern Ireland, because they are another acknowledgement of the skills that we have in Northern Ireland. I hope that Members will recognise that although we are a small region, we punch above our weight.

Mr A Maginness: I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said. I understand that Belfast is different in some respects from other parts of Northern Ireland in so far as jobs are more accessible in parts of the city. However,

for the past number of months, there has been a significant increase in unemployment in my constituency of North Belfast, and that is compounded by historical unemployment and a low level of economic activity. I ask the Minister to reassure the people of North Belfast that she will look at such areas to see what more she can do to alleviate the situation.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for his question. He is the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, so he will know that we set aside £18.8 million in the draft Budget precisely to deal with some of the issues that he raised. I am fully aware of the fact that we are now at 8% unemployment. It is not something about which I rejoice. It is precisely to deal with that level of unemployment, which is principally from the construction sector, that we need to look at retraining, at very localised job schemes — perhaps through the social economy — at whether we can do more in the agrifood sector and at whether we can do more with jobs that perhaps would not traditionally be supported by Invest Northern Ireland. That is what the £18.8 million is there to do. I look forward to working with the Member and others in trying to find ways in which we can use that £18.8 million, because I do not want to be handing back any of it. I want it all used.

Ms Lo: I very much agree with the Minister: it is not about sharing investment funding among all the constituencies in Belfast but about having a skilled workforce and making it mobile. What measures has the Minister taken to improve our labour mobility in Belfast?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: As the Member will know, South Belfast has gained a lot of employment over the past number of years as a result of Queen's University's very strong links. We have been able to bring some global names, such as NYSE, into the city centre. That then feeds into other financial services and businesses so that they can come to Belfast and wider Northern Ireland.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) ran a campaign some time ago called 'C'Mon Over' to try to encourage people who had left here for whatever reason over the past 30 years to come back and look at Northern Ireland as a place in which to work and live. I very much hope that people will do that in

a very meaningful way, because there are job opportunities, particularly in the financial services, the technology sector and the life sciences sector. If we manage to bring some of those people to Northern Ireland, some of whom left in the past for pretty obvious reasons, they will have those opportunities. I rejoice when we bring in global companies, because it sends out a very strong, positive and confident message about the Northern Ireland workforce.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her reply, particularly her mention of the new jobs in south-east Antrim at Schrader, which is a very good company. I am delighted that it is still expanding. I will not detain the Minister by extolling the benefits and delights of Newtownabbey, which is a growing area on the fringes of Belfast. Or is it the other way around? Are there any plans to extend the convention and exhibition facilities in Belfast to exploit further the potential of business tourism?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for his question. I was very pleased to be with Schrader this morning to announce those jobs for Antrim and for Carrickfergus, which is in the Member's constituency. We have been trying to attract people from the business tourism sector for some time, but our facilities probably need to undergo a step change if we are to attract the sort of business tourism to which the Member referred. We need to take a serious look at whether we need a convention centre — clearly not the size of the one in Dublin but something that will attract conferences into Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland so that the tourism spend can rise. After all, it is business tourists who spend the most money when they come to visit us here in Northern Ireland. We would love to see more business tourists coming into Northern Ireland.

Energy: ETI Committee Report

3. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of recommendation 8 in the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee's 'Report on the Committee's Inquiry into Barriers to the Development of Renewable Energy Production and its Associated Contribution to the Northern Ireland Economy', which suggests the creation of a single organisation to deal with energy issues. (AQO 1137/11)

2.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I welcome the Committee's report and commend its members for all the effort that has gone into its production. However, I received the document only recently, and detailed consideration is required to do it justice. Therefore, I have not yet reached a final view on any of the recommendations. Recommendation 8 relates to the structures and mechanisms around the provision of advice and support on energy, which will require consideration by a number of Departments currently involved in energy matters and, possibly, by the Executive. From preliminary considerations, it appears that much of the recommendation is ultra vires for DETI, as the Department does not have any authority over a number of the external delivery agencies cited in the report.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response. What assistance is available for community partnerships and organisations to bring forward renewable energy projects, such as biomass district heating schemes?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: In relation to the biomass schemes and the anaerobic digesters, we have increased the renewables obligation certificate (ROC) incentives available to anaerobic digesters. A large number of farmers and co-operatives are now looking at whether they can avail themselves of anaerobic digesters to help solve their waste problem and to create renewable energy in areas around Northern Ireland.

On the other matter that he mentioned, it is important and absolutely right that we continue to reach out to communities which want to do something about renewable energy, and my officials always stand ready to help in any way that they can. However, one of the most fundamental issues surrounding community infrastructure is the grid. We need to strengthen the grid. The Committee looked at the need for infrastructure investment. I hope that, right across the House, the need for such infrastructure investment is recognised and we realise that we need to invest in it for the future. For competitiveness, sustainability and all of the environmental reasons, that is the right thing to do, and I hope to get support from across the House when we come to look at strengthening the grid.

Mr Craig: How does the lignite moratorium affect recent planning applications for the extraction of lignite near Crumlin?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: There has been some press speculation about that matter. The Member knows that I intend to extend the moratorium on prospecting for a further three years. Although nothing has yet been received in my Department, I note that reports of the application describe it as a mining application. It would be difficult to grant a mining licence without any prospecting having been carried out. Mining follows prospecting, so it is difficult to see circumstances in which a licence would be granted for mining in a lignite area if prospecting had not been previously carried out. I know that there are a lot of concerns in and around the area about this matter. I am happy for my officials to meet Members who have specific concerns about those issues, but the matter may have been blown out of proportion a little. I do not think that a licence for mining can be granted unless some prospecting has been done to prove that there is something to mine.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that, in keeping with the principles and practice of partnership government, no matter who is in the next Assembly, it will be critical to ensure that Departments collaborate closely to overcome barriers to creating jobs?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That is absolutely right. Indeed, the Member may recall that the independent review of economic policy stated clearly that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning should come together to try to overcome such barriers. It will come as no surprise to the Member that I support a reduction in the number of Departments. I think that that would make for better government. It was heartening to see independent economic advice support that as the right thing to do. However, that will be a matter for the new Executive and Assembly. I hope that we move in that direction because, and I think that this is the kernel of the Member's question, it would lead to better government and, therefore, help all our people.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that it is inefficient for at least six Departments to be involved in energy savings?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Again, there is a need to streamline Departments, and my party and I are very much up for that in the next Assembly. We want a reduction in the number of Departments. The Member said that six Departments are involved in energy, which is absolutely right. We have tried to overcome that difficulty with the cross-sectoral advisory group, which is chaired by my Department. However, it would be much more beneficial and a better way to proceed if one Department dealt with all energy issues.

Companies: EU Funding

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential of companies to exploit EU framework 7 funding. (AQO 1138/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The EU seventh framework programme (FP7) is the world's largest research funding programme. To date, Northern Ireland companies and universities have drawn down almost €25 million, and, as funding ramps up towards the end of the programme, we are on target to reach and potentially exceed our €50 million target. Investment in research and development is central to growing the economy, and, therefore, more companies need to be encouraged to invest in R&D. The framework programme provides an excellent opportunity for companies in that regard, which is why Invest Northern Ireland is working hard to encourage companies to apply for framework funding.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister consider creating and allocating adequate resources to a special task force — perhaps there already is one in Invest Northern Ireland, in which case it needs to be much more robust — to ensure that we have the capacity to increase local uptake of the seventh framework programme R&D funding, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am aware that the Member has carried out significant work in that area, for which I commend him. Recently, he met Invest NI and other organisations to discuss how we can make the most of the framework programme. He will know that, late last year, we had a successful visit from Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn. Our meeting was very positive, and we were able to build on

relationships with her staff. Rather than setting up a structure, we need to build on that relationship. Nevertheless, I take the Member's point that we need to forge ahead with drawing down money from the European Union. As national budgets get tighter, we need to look at drawing down more funding from Europe.

As part of our strategy to increase awareness of the importance of the framework programme, we will be organising a conference with the European Commission in Belfast in June, and I hope that that will be an important step in involving some of our SMEs in the FP7 process. I know that the process is daunting and that bureaucracy sometimes puts people off from applying, but I hope to tackle some of those issues during the conference.

Mr S Anderson: Will the Minister give us some examples of seventh framework programme successes to date?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am pleased to say that an increasing number of Northern Ireland companies have been able to secure funding from the framework programme. One of those companies, Cherry Pipes Ltd, is from Dungannon, and the Member to my left will be very pleased about that. That project, involving several European partners, aims to improve processes for recycling plastic waste, allowing the production of higher-grade recycled materials, so it ticks the boxes on environmental issues and on research and development. Hamilton Erskine Ltd, from Newtownards, is involved with a number of European partners in a collaborative project in the construction sector, a sector that we want to help in any way possible, so it is good and positive that an organisation from that sector is drawing down FP7 moneys, because that is the way to go.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer on framework 7. What work is under way through the Northern Ireland European office to influence and ensure that we are part of the development of framework 8 before it is published?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Member may not be aware, but it is one of my hobby horses to make sure that we structure FP8 to suit the Northern Ireland SME community and the economy. We are working very closely with colleagues across government to ensure that our businesses

and, importantly, our universities are best placed to take advantage of the opportunities that become available under FP8 when it commences in 2014. I am particularly anxious to see increased collaboration between universities and local SMEs. We have seen some very good examples of universities working with some of our larger companies such as Wrightbus and Bombardier. So, I very much want local small and medium-sized enterprises to work with the universities, and I am working very closely with the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that we put support mechanisms in place to make that happen. FP7 is very important, and FP8 will be very important as well. We need to be in right from the beginning.

Regional Tourism Partnerships

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on future plans for regional tourism partnerships.

(AQO 1139/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The draft tourism strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020 advocates tourism delivery to be focused at two levels, national and local, with NITB taking the lead at a national level and the local authorities at a local level. In addition, it proposes examples of key tourism areas or destinations. It is recommended that tourism area plans are developed for each key tourism area. It is for the local authorities to lead in the development of those plans and to define the most suitable mechanism or structure to deliver and to engage with the private sector. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and NITB officials have begun a series of meetings with each key tourism area to discuss their plans and how each area can link into the arrangements for delivery of the tourism strategy.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for the answer. I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council and as a retiring director of Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism. Given the potential for larger local government clusters to emerge through the ongoing work of the review of public administration (RPA), does the Minister consider that delivery may become unwieldy or may even be duplicated?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Duplication is the one thing that I

do not want to happen, because that would be a waste of government funds. Frankly, I wanted the tourism strategy to address duplication and the fact that so many people at different levels are trying to deliver a tourism product. So, through RPA, there is an opportunity in the future to try to get different clusters together to deliver in their particular areas. However, I do not want to be prescriptive and say that what works in the Causeway Coast and glens area will work in the Fermanagh lakelands area. So, there needs to be a coming together and a discussion about how best to deliver for the local areas.

Mr McDevitt: Given my concern and that of others, which I am sure that the Minister will share, about the potential impact of an increase in air passenger duty on our tourism sector at a regional level, I want to ask the Minister specifically about the proposal to re-cluster tourism partnerships. Will she be open-minded about seeing the opportunity to do that on a cross-border basis where it is common sense to do so?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am sorry that the Member did not hear what I said originally, which was that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will look after the national level, which is Northern Ireland, and other areas will look forward at a local area. If those local areas feel that they need to have relationships with bodies across the border, it is quite open to them to do so. However, I do not think that we should create more bodies for the sake of it. We should have a good tourism strategy and deliver it well at a local level. If there is a need for cross-border workings, that should happen, but not with an overarching “ugly scaffolding”, to use a term that the Member’s former party leader used at one time. We need to see delivery for tourism.

2.30 pm

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 5, 9 and 11 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Business Rates

1. **Ms M Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues about protecting retailing and town centres

by introducing a rates deferment scheme for businesses affected by the economic downturn.
(AQO 1150/11)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

Although rates deferment is a matter for the Finance Minister, I understand that the Executive have no plans to introduce such a measure. In addition, new primary legislation would be required to give effect to such a policy.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that brief answer. As he will know, such a scheme is in place for pensioners so a precedent exists. Will he agree that, particularly given the economic downturn, it does not make sense to force businesses to go under by forcing them to pay a rates bill when that could be deferred until they have recovered?

The Minister of the Environment: When Nigel Dodds was Finance Minister, he introduced a small business rates relief scheme, so there is an existing model for us to work from. Some businesses are calling for the scheme to be broadened and expanded, and the Executive could look at that in the Budget. One potential mechanism for funding such a scheme would be the introduction of a differential rate for out-of-town shopping centres so that such centres, which have free parking and so on, would pay higher rates. That money could be used for the benefit of city centre and town centre traders, who are suffering as a result of the economic downturn and the movement of shoppers to out-of-town shopping centres.

Mr Dallat: The Minister has hit the nail on the head. Out-of-town shopping centres have an inbuilt advantage, beginning with the planning fees and, of course, the rates that they pay. Will the Minister accept that, not only in Northern Ireland but in different parts of the world, there are real problems for small businesses in town centres? We need to look radically at how we can renew and keep alive those businesses, particularly in the times of economic depression that we are experiencing now.

The Minister of the Environment: We are changing the planning fees. People who wish to develop large shopping centres will pay considerably more and will not be subsidised from the public purse as has been the case heretofore. We can also look at the potential for opening up bids on a statutory basis. Minister Attwood has gone out to consultation on that.

I have said that I support the introduction of bids, through which we can provide better town centres and better opportunities in them at a very modest cost to the ratepayers.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Revenue

2. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he has given to additional revenue-raising options for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQO 1151/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency currently raises £6.8 million revenue from environmental regulation and licensing regimes and through admissions and retail sales at state-care monuments, café franchises at country parks, grazing rent, site leases and other miscellaneous commercial activities. To examine the potential for further revenue-raising options, the agency has established a commercial opportunities group, which is currently assessing options.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the difficult budget situation, does he believe that his Department could be exposed to any EU environmental infraction fines because of the cutbacks?

The Minister of the Environment: There is always that issue and difficulty, so it is imperative that the Department of the Environment's budget has a decent baseline. Therefore, when other Members and Ministers say that £400 million should be taken away from all other Departments and put into the Department that their party holds, they could put Northern Ireland at risk of losing tens of millions of pounds in EU fines in order to, perhaps, fund the Health Service when they have not taken the difficult decisions that others have had to take.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister explained that the Environment Agency generates £6.8 million. Will he detail the impact that the Tory/Unionist Party cuts might have on any future possibility for the Environment Agency?

The Minister of the Environment: I see Mr McCarthy waving his Order Paper, but it should not be forgotten that the Alliance/Liberal Democrats are in on the cuts as well. Mr McCarthy should not wave his papers; his party is equally guilty, as it is the sister party of the franchisee.

The reality is that we will lose £4 billion over the next four years. That has left us in a very difficult situation, and every area in Northern Ireland will be impacted on as a result. We must seek to minimise that impact by reducing bureaucracy and costs. This place is a good place to start, by reducing the number of MLAs and the number of Departments. Are other parties prepared to come with us to reduce the costs, to give the lead from this House, to reduce the number of Departments and MLAs and to step up to the mark?

Mr McDevitt: I hope that the Minister for the Environment will answer my question and not the Minister for Finance in waiting. What conversations has the Minister for the Environment had with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment about the possibility of generating extra revenue for the Environmental Protection Agency through tourism activity?

The Minister of the Environment: I must correct Mr McDevitt: I am actually the Minister of the Environment, not Minister for the Environment. We are in discussions with other bodies about opportunities around facilities such as Carrickfergus Castle and Hillsborough Fort to ensure that those facilities are appropriately used and marketed and to see if we can join others and demonstrate real savings and introduce additional income streams. Those are the types of area that we need to look at. That work is ongoing.

Local Government Reform

3. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's response to the local government modernisation consultation. (AQO 1152/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The closing date for responses to the policy consultation on local government reform that I launched in this House on 30 November 2010 is 11 March 2011. Therefore, it would be presumptuous of me to outline a response before I have considered the views expressed by the consultees.

Dr Farry: I remind the Minister that one of the key areas where we could reduce cost is in the delivery of the review of public administration. In the interests of moving things forward, will the Minister accept that, as has been outlined as one of the key aspects of the consultation

document, there is a need for a proper compact between the Assembly and local government to ensure that they work in partnership, rather than create needless tensions around funding, for example?

The Minister of the Environment: It is critical that we work in partnership with local government. There is complementarity between the work of Belfast City Council's regeneration office and the work of DSD's urban regeneration team, but there may be overlap in some of those circumstances, and there may be opportunities for the councils to carry out more of that work. In the work that the rural development teams do in the local action groups through the councils and the work that DARD is doing with its thousands of employees, is there an opportunity to demonstrate efficiencies? While we do what we are doing in local government, given the additional time that we have, should we look again at some departmental responsibilities to see whether councils could deliver some of them more efficiently?

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On a specific issue to do with a particular local government authority, namely Omagh District Council, will the Minister comment on the fact that the council has decided to lease lands in Carrickmore to Éire Óg hurling and camogie club, which is a local sports club? Will the Minister sign off on that without further delay? For months, his delay has prevented that club from applying for sports grants. That is a local government matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That has nothing whatsoever to do with the question at hand.

Mr McElduff: It is a local government matter.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fheagra, agus ba mhaith liom an méid seo a leanas a fhiafraí de. Will the Minister ensure that equality safeguard mechanisms are in place in statute before any local government modernisation legislation is brought forward?

The Minister of the Environment: That is, of course, what this is about. The consultation is about introducing to councils an ethical standards regime and codes of conduct for councillors. It is about sharing responsibility. The document has looked across a range of issues. I am not sure whether the Member has had an opportunity to read the document, but,

when he does, he will, perhaps, fully understand that that is the nature of the document.

Mr Kinahan: Following in the line of the RPA and the ongoing changes, has the Minister had consultations with other Ministers to get a cumulative picture of all the work that is being passed to councils and the resources that are needed?

The Minister of the Environment: I have always maintained that, whatever functions are transferred to councils, finance must follow function. Therefore, the money that Departments spend on a particular function is what should be allocated to local government, and it is for local government to do that job with the funding that is made available to it. It is up to local government whether it wishes to invest more. It is also up to local government whether it can deliver the function more efficiently and achieve savings from it. We need to work from what the government budgets are before we transfer them to councils, and we need to allow councils to carry out their jobs thereafter.

DOE: Capital Budget

4. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of whether his capital budget for the next four years will be sufficient to meet the demands placed upon his Department. [R] (AQO 1153/11)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has been allocated total capital funding of £23.6 million over the four Budget years. Almost 50% of that funding, £11.6 million, is for the strategic waste infrastructure fund and the Rethink Waste fund. I can confirm that the £2.3 million to be allocated to the strategic waste infrastructure fund will provide a significant proportion of the necessary funds to enable the waste projects to reach financial close. Furthermore, the £9.3 million to be allocated to the Rethink Waste fund will provide funding to councils for initiatives that will help to boost waste recycling and reuse.

Some £4.2 million of the total capital funding proposed for my Department will be used to further develop the Northern Ireland driver licensing scheme to ensure compliance with the new measures to be introduced by the third EU directive on driver licensing by January 2013. My Department has also been provided with £1.5 million from the Executive's invest-to-save

fund for the Roe Valley hydroelectric scheme. The remainder of the proposed capital funding is necessary for a range of internal business-critical capital projects.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the great reduction in the capital budget, can the Minister detail how local councils will be affected?

The Minister of the Environment: Previously, £200 million was set aside for the capital waste infrastructure fund. We have looked at and addressed the issue and have had discussions with waste management groups, and it was established that it would be better if that funding were made available on a recurrent basis, because most of them are involved in PPPs. The requirement for recurrent funding will not kick in during this financial year, and it will probably not kick in in the next financial year either. In the third financial year of the Budget period and thereafter, we will, potentially, be in a position in which recurrent funding will be required. In that sense, the £200 million was not the right model for delivering the waste infrastructure programme, and we are currently in negotiations with DFP to seek a way forward on recurrent funding.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware that, in its Budget response, PWC suggested that the Department would no longer be in a position to fund site purchases or to finance projects and that that would create potential cost implications for local government. Further to the answer that the Minister has just given to the House, can he outline any discussions that he has had with local government about ways to mitigate any such potential impacts of the current draft Budget?

2.45pm

The Minister of the Environment: We have been engaged with the three waste management groups in particular, because that is what the large capital budget had been set aside for. As I indicated, it was identified that the best way forward was through recurrent funding for the PPPs. There may be a requirement for a small figure, in government terms, of some millions of pounds to acquire a site for one of the waste management projects, but we certainly do not need a £200 million capital budget to deliver the waste infrastructure programme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Plastic Bag Levy

6. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of the Environment what contingency measures are in place if the plastic bag levy does not raise the revenue anticipated. (AQO 1155/11)

The Minister of the Environment: A plastic bag levy can only be implemented once the relevant legislative powers are in place. It will also be necessary to establish a means of collecting the revenue, which will inevitably give rise to implementation and administration costs. The Executive's draft Budget 2010 allocation for my Department includes a receipt of £4 million, based on the potential income that would arise from the introduction of the plastic bag levy. The Department's proposed budget has, therefore, been reduced in each of the Budget years by that amount, and that amount has been reallocated to the green new deal.

As the timing quantum of the revenue that may be raised from the plastic bag levy is still uncertain, the range of environmental programmes that have been identified in respect of river restoration, environmental noise, marine resources, mineral mapping, fly-tipping and repatriation of waste may have to be suspended or postponed pending revenue from the plastic bag levy. My officials will continue to explore alternative funding or delivery options for those programmes, but it may be necessary to postpone some of the environmental projects while monitoring the risk of potential EU infraction. Should the risk of infraction increase, my officials will seek to reprioritise work from across the wider Department and ensure that elements of the environmental projects are taken forward, to minimise that risk.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. He will know that my party has severe reservations about the Single Use Plastic Bags Bill as it stands. Given that he has already committed to spending the money that he hopes will be raised, will he detail how he will prioritise the areas for expenditure if the worst case scenario happens and the money that they hope to generate falls short of expectations?

The Minister of the Environment: I have no doubt that, if we introduce the plastic bag levy, it will bring forward a fairly significant revenue

stream. Currently, 190 million plastic bags are used in Northern Ireland. Even if there were a 75% reduction at 10p a plastic bag, that would still raise just short of £5 million. There is a significant opportunity to raise revenue through that. The green new deal is to the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. It will benefit people who are living in fuel poverty, and it will benefit our environment by reducing the amount of carbon going into the atmosphere. The aspiration of having an environmental levy that is reinvested into measures that can be of benefit to the environment is a good one.

Mr P Ramsey: Has the Minister made any formal bids to the Executive to find the necessary funding to break the funding link between important environmental projects and the plastic bag levy?

The Minister of the Environment: I have been in discussions with the Department of Finance in relation to the next financial year, as I do not believe that there will be any revenue raised through a plastic bag levy in 2011-12. I am hopeful that we will get some funding to cover that period.

River Basins

7. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of the Environment when the river basin management plans will be published. (AQO 1156/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Executive approved the publication of the river basin management plans for the north-western, Neagh Bann and north-eastern river basin districts at their meeting on 5 November 2009, and those plans were published on 21 November 2009. Publication of the river basin management plans is a requirement of the water framework directive, and all 27 EU states were required to publish similar plans by that date. The river basin management plans were formally launched at a reception in the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' office, Corporation Square, Belfast, on 21 January 2010.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for that information. Perhaps the Minister will outline the next steps that are required not only to protect habitats but to meet EU directives.

The Minister of the Environment: Nine local area management plans are being developed and will be operational in 2010-11. They cover Ballinderry, Burndennet and Foyle, Bush, Lagan,

Lough Neagh, Lower Lough Erne, Owenkillew, south Down and Strangford, and Lecale. We are producing a local management area plan for the upper Bann that will be developed and made operational in 2012-13, and it is planned to make it available on the NIEA website in the autumn of 2012.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister take on board the fact that river basins are also in urban areas? Many urban streams and rivers are beginning to be regenerated by angling clubs etc and are subject to pressure from extensive housing developments. Will the Minister take that into consideration when dealing with river basins?

The Minister of the Environment: Of course; it has been taken into consideration for many years. When a developer comes forward with a proposal and Water Service says that it does not have the sewage capacity to deal with it, the development cannot proceed or the developer has to take alternative steps to deal with that sewage, if he wishes to proceed, to ensure that rivers are maintained in a clean way. I mentioned that the River Lagan was a local management area. Of course, the River Lagan runs through Lisburn on its way to Belfast, which is the largest conurbation in our country.

Climate Change

8. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment what initiatives his Department will propose to address the concerns of the public in relation to climate change as highlighted in the environmental statistics report. (AQO 1157/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Climate change presents a challenge for Governments and citizens across the world, and the UK is in the lead in facing that challenge. The Climate Change Act 2008 introduced the world's first long-term binding framework to tackle climate change. My Department and I work closely with the UK Government and with the other devolved Administrations on developing domestic, European and wider international policies and strategies to address the threat posed by climate change.

In Northern Ireland climate change is the responsibility of all Departments. To co-ordinate that effort and to ensure full participation across government, a cross-departmental working group on greenhouse gas emissions was established in 2010 under my chairmanship as Environment

Minister. The principal objective of the group was to agree a cross-departmental action plan setting out the strategic approach and actions to be taken to meet the greenhouse gas reduction target in the Programme for Government. The group concluded that the Executive's Programme for Government target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025 will be met and possibly exceeded. Northern Ireland is also preparing for our changing climate through three main work streams: the provision of evidence relating to climate change; raising awareness about climate change while helping others to take action; and ensuring and measuring progress on climate change adaption.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that response. He spoke about people helping themselves. What resources will be made available to local authorities to enable them to mitigate the impact of climate change?

The Minister of the Environment: We are not making resources available to local authorities other than assisting them with expertise and expert advice. Like everyone else, local authorities have a contribution to make to ensuring that we meet the requirements of the Climate Change Act 2008. In their work, whether in transportation or facilities management, local authorities need to reduce the carbon that they produce. It will be the role of local authorities to reduce the carbon that they produce. That is not necessarily punitive. Dungannon and South Tyrone is a fine example of a local authority that has a landfill facility from which it catches methane and uses it to produce electricity. That demonstrates how a local authority can reduce the amount of carbon going into the environment while generating an income for the council. That is a logical way forward.

Mr O'Loan: The environmental statistics report also showed growing public concern about the impact of household waste disposal. What further does the Minister feel that he and his Department need to do to allay that growing concern?

The Minister of the Environment: Our target is to divert 50% of waste from landfill by 2020. That target will, I believe, be not merely met but exceeded. The current level is about 36.5%, which is significant given that we started some nine years ago at 5%. We are making real

progress. A number of councils are leading the way, and I trust that others will follow. I am prepared to look at rewarding councils who do well and punishing those who do less well, so that Northern Ireland is not dragged down by councils who do not step up to the plate. My intention is to revisit the targets. I do not think that the 50% target set by the EU is testing enough for Northern Ireland. We should aim for a higher target of 60% of waste or more going for recycling or composting. That would be financially beneficial.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn, Paul Givan is not in his place to ask question 10, and question 11 has been withdrawn.

Companies: Environmental Practice

12. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department has taken to encourage good environmental practice in companies. (AQO 1161/11)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has carried out various activities aimed at encouraging good environmental practice in companies: sponsorship of WRAP to work with business in various sectors to deliver increases in recycled materials; development of a better regulation programme that has as its key aim helping the Northern Ireland economy through modernising and simplifying the regulation of business through guidance; sponsorship of NetRegs, a trusted free source of guidance on environmental legislation for UK business; supporting the UK-wide voluntary agreement with the major supermarkets to work towards a 50% cut in the number of single-use carrier bags given to customers; the Rethink Waste communications campaign, which aims to raise awareness, encourage best practice and achieve behavioural change, with dedicated sections for households, businesses and the community and education sectors in Northern Ireland, to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill; the aggregates levy scheme; the EU emissions trading system; the carbon reduction commitment; the energy efficiency scheme; sponsorship of the Northern Ireland environmental benchmarking survey carried out by Business in the Community's ARENA network; and delivery of a series of seminars to raise awareness in businesses of environmental regulations.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Will he include in that list Michelin, in my North Antrim constituency, which has been one of the leaders in encouraging good environmental practice? The message that must go out is that, in many respects, following good environmental practice is not an impediment to business but something that should be encouraged. Michelin is a prime example of that.

The Minister of the Environment: I could not agree more with the Member. Michelin's environmental manager is one of our key advisers and sits on the team that looks at these issues. Michelin is a worldwide brand and, as an organisation, now recycles something like 98.5% of its waste. As a consequence, the large bill that it used to have for sending that material to landfill has been replaced by a large cheque that runs into hundreds of thousands of pounds. These things do not have to be a punishment to business. Rather, good business practice arises from good environmental practice, and Michelin leads the way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of the Environment. We now return to —

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have no desire to question your authority. However, is it in order for me to request that you read Hansard and reflect on the relevance of the question that I asked as a supplementary to question 3?

My question was a natural follow-on from Dr Farry's substantive question and subsequent supplementary question, and gave a specific example of tensions between local government and the Department. So, although it was described as not being relevant, I ask the Deputy Speaker and the Speaker's Office to reflect on the relevance of the question, which was about the tension between local government in Omagh, which wants to sign off on a lease to a local hurling club, and the Minister's refusal to facilitate that, for reasons best known to himself.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I will reflect on it, look at the Hansard report and respond accordingly.

3.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

*That the Budget Bill [NIA 11/10] do now pass —
[The Minister of Finance and Personnel
(Mr S Wilson).]*

Mr Frew: We face challenging times and a challenging Budget to go with them in the days ahead. The economic landscape has changed dramatically over the past number of years. Many people in the private sector have found themselves unemployed. The construction sector has suffered greatly, as have the manufacturing, business and finance sectors. Those who are fortunate enough to have a job in the private sector will have faced possible pay cuts of up to 15%. Therefore, it is very important that we, as politicians, get the Budget right.

With the type of government that we have, with five parties involved, it was always going to be difficult to get everything that we wanted in the Budget. There will be bits and pieces in it that we do not like and will be hard to swallow, and there will be risks and dangers ahead. However, the people whom we represent are looking to us to show leadership, to make decisions on their behalf and to push the Budget through after it has been agreed by as many Members and parties as possible.

I have concerns for the construction industry and the manufacturing, business and finance end of things. I am very concerned for the retail sector in our towns and cities over the coming years. As I come from and represent North Antrim, I am particularly concerned about the towns of Ballymena, Ballymoney, Bushmills and Ballycastle, and every village the length and breadth of North Antrim. I know the fears and concerns of the independent retailers in those towns for the year ahead, so it is very important that we try to alleviate those concerns as far as possible.

The level of unemployment in Northern Ireland has more than doubled since 2008, and many in the private sector have lost their jobs. That can clearly be seen in the construction

industry, which has lost an incredible amount of manpower. It is clear that our form of government has not helped the Budget process. We need to get to a position as quickly as possible where we have a voluntary coalition in place whereby government would be much more focused in policy, decisions and direction. I would welcome a meaningful debate on that in the new mandate to get to that position as quickly as possible.

We are where we are. It is very important that, while the current structures are in place, we try to work them as positively as possible, because that is what our people expect. Having talked to many people who work in the public sector, they are prepared for this Budget, what it means for them and what it means for society as a whole. People in the public sector recognise the hurt that there has been in the private sector over the past number of years, and they are ready for pay freezes and other such measures.

I welcome the transfer of resources from current to capital expenditure. That will relieve some of the pressure on the construction industry, and the industry will very much welcome that.

I also welcome the proposed social investment fund, which will provide £20 million each year to spend on revitalising our marginalised and most deprived communities, and the proposed social protection fund, which will be funded to the tune of £20 million in the first year and will then rely on additional receipts. Those funds are badly needed to counter the negative effects and outcomes of the welfare reform agenda and to provide assistance and support to those families and communities that will suffer most as a consequence of that agenda.

I have spoken before about how I yearn to see the day when Departments think more about preventative spending. Therefore, I was not filled with confidence when I saw how long it took Departments to develop and publish their savings plans and spending plans. That is a shame, and it has hurt the confidence and credibility of the House and the Executive. It was important that Departments took the consultation period seriously and understood what it meant to the public to be able to respond meaningfully to their plans. From an early stage, the Minister of Finance and Personnel urged Departments to do just that. He stressed how important that was and has been proactive in doing so himself. Departments were asked last May to start work on their savings delivery

plans. The Executive met at Greenmount College on 6 July last year, and Departments were asked to plan on the basis of a 5% cut per annum last May. Therefore, it should have been easy for Departments to publish their plans sooner, and again the character, reputation and credibility of the Executive and the Assembly were damaged by their failure to do so.

It seems that we have tried to protect the most vulnerable in our society in the Budget, while trying to enhance the economy. I stressed that I wanted to see that throughout the process, and I feel that we are as close to that as we possibly could be. We try to be as positive as we can, but we know that the Budget will have impacts on our society, our communities and in the home. We cannot be flippant about that at any stage of the process or as we move into the budgetary term.

The Budget gives a degree of protection to the Department for Regional Development's capital expenditure. That Department has the largest capital budget, at around £500 million, which is 34% of the overall capital spend. However, it is responsible for the transportation networks that are the veins and the arteries of the body that is Northern Ireland and our economy.

We must actively seek and implement efficiencies across the public sector, while rebalancing the local economy and creating the circumstances for private sector growth. This is our opportunity as an Assembly and an Executive to do that. To do that with the form of government that we have, it is vital that there be a joined-up approach and partnership in the House and the Executive, and between the public sector and the private sector, to deliver for our people and for Northern Ireland. We must create a Northern Ireland that is sustainable, successful and socially responsible.

Importantly, the Budget is for a four-year term. The business community, the construction industry and everyone else involved pleaded with the Assembly to publish a four-year Budget, and it gives the local economy and businesses the possibility to forward-plan. Householders up and down our Province know that they are in a bad place, but they are prepared to work at it. They can see the future through the forward planning that is the four-year Budget. We do not need to talk about how bad the situation is, because householders live it day in and day out.

I believe that the Budget will protect the vulnerable in our society and help to grow the

economy so that it starts creating wealth again for all our society to enjoy.

It is clear that the Executive have made it a priority to continue to invest in Northern Ireland's infrastructure and to do as much as possible within the constraints of the Budget and the money that is available as the result of Tory cuts. The contribution that the construction industry makes to the local economy has been well documented and has been proven with many lobbies and debates in the Chamber. Every pound spent in the construction industry realises a wider benefit to the economy of £2·84.

Throughout the Budget process, decisions have been made by individual Ministers and Departments, one of which was to cut £75,000 from Young Farmers' Clubs. I welcome the fact that the Minister has looked at that matter again and has provided funding for the Young Farmers' Clubs. There was deep concern in the rural community about the effect that the cut would have in the countryside while not making a dent in the Minister's budget. It is important that Young Farmers' Clubs continue to receive that level of funding and, if possible, that it is enhanced when things are brighter.

These are challenging times, and this is a challenging Budget. However, we should not shy away from making hard decisions or, even worse, making no decisions at all. We have been placed in the House to represent our people, to work for them, to stand up for them and to make decisions that affect them and their families on a daily basis.

There should be decisive political leadership to create economic stability to instil confidence and provide hope for the future, despite the backdrop of the recession. We need to reduce barriers to private-sector growth and job creation. I believe that the draft Budget does that in the best way that it can. There are things in the draft Budget that we could be concerned about, and there may be pitfalls and dangers. However, if there is a sense of construction in the Assembly, and if we can go forward in a positive manner, the draft Budget will benefit the people in our country.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Bell: Basil.

Mr B McCrea: It is good to see that I got started with the comments from stage left.

We have talked about this matter for a considerable time, and a number of issues have been raised that are worth teasing out. I am disappointed that, although I have been quite generous in taking interventions in some of the other debates, that has not been reciprocated. When people have made statements, they have not sought to argue the point. I have read the Hansard Report and have found that the Minister of Finance and Personnel did not give way on a number of issues. I was surprised at him, as I know him to be an excellent orator and in full command of the detail. I am sure that, under normal circumstances, he would be happy to engage.

One thing that is particularly disappointing is the challenge that comes from Sinn Féin. I notice that the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel is not in his place. However, he threw out comments about Tory cuts and that this was a heinous crime visited on us by other folk. He does not seem to realise that, if it were not for our place in the Union, we would not have the money to run Northern Ireland. He does not seem to realise that for every pound that we raise in tax, we spend £2, or that Northern Ireland is part of an economic union that takes its place in the world economy, and that it is constructed in that way. Like many other regions of the United Kingdom — the north-east, Scotland, Wales, the Midlands, and the south-west — we draw money from the Exchequer because that is the benefit of having an economic union. It is pretty rich for a party that refuses to take its seats to castigate the money that comes from the taxpayers of the United Kingdom and allege that we are not able to challenge those things. That party has seats and is in a position to influence those matters, but it does not take those seats.

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way, and I agree with his point. I will continue the point: when we accept the fact that we are part of the United Kingdom and that the money allocated to us comes from Westminster, he will then accept the fact that our Budget difficulties are due to the party for which he advocated that people should vote. That is why we face difficulties in our Budget.

3.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: That is a somewhat strange argument. I agree with the sentiment that our money comes from the block grant and with

points that were made in the past about the Barnett consequentials. I simply wonder why anyone would have any argument. Members on the Benches to my left have continually chanted about Tory cuts. Is this somehow irresponsible?

I cannot understand how people who have fiscal knowledge and know the challenges that face our economy fail to understand that, at the moment in the United Kingdom, for every £4 that we spend, we borrow £1. That is simply unsustainable and cannot go on. Action must be taken to deal with that.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will in just a minute.

I do not particularly like it, but I realise that tough choices have to be made. Burying our heads in the sand will not get us anywhere. What my party wants is a responsible, inclusive, democratic working out of what is in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland. We do that not by throwing brickbats at one another but by having a mature and open debate.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I listened carefully to what he said, and clearly he takes a more pragmatic view on the cuts than some of his party colleagues. Some realism is being introduced from those Benches. Nevertheless, the leader of the Conservative Party, who is now the Prime Minister, in the run-up to the last general election, very clearly indicated —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The debate is about the Budget Bill and what is in it. It is not about why cuts were made or who is responsible for them. I ask Members to return to the subject matter: the Budget Bill and what is in it.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the Deputy Speaker's direction on the matter. He will understand that there are certain elements that overrule that, but I understand his point. Will the Deputy Speaker allow me just a little bit of latitude? He may not do that, of course. He is in the Chair, and I respect his position.

We are debating the Budget and how we go forward. There is an issue here about being financially responsible. My party wants to make an argument about why the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is the priority and why it should receive more funding. We want to say to the Assembly and to people at large that that is an

issue for all of us. Each and every one of us is affected by health issues. I do not say that we cannot find efficiencies or that we cannot work together to find out those things. The trouble with the Health Department is that it is so all-embracing. I doubt whether there is anyone in the House who has not been affected himself or herself or had parents, children or known others affected by health issues. Many people have visited Members' constituency offices and spoken about the importance of health issues. Each and every one of those cases is a tragedy.

Within the overall envelope of the funding available to the Assembly, we make the case for why there should be more money for health. People say that there are two options if we are to do that: we either get more money from the block grant, which is why Mr Givan's comments are relevant, or we take money from one Department and give it to another.

Mr McLaughlin: I will offer this comment just to help the Member. He said, accurately enough, that we borrow £1 for every £4 that is spent. However, will he consider that there is an alternative, being explored in the United States and in Germany, which is to stimulate recovery in the economy and broaden the tax take? That would result in a different Barnett consequential in this region. The fact of the matter is that we are left with a £4 billion hole in the economy which was caused by the approach of the Tory-led coalition in Westminster.

Mr B McCrea: I am happy to take the point. People talk about reflating economies, but we must face the fact that the public sector is approximately 70% of Northern Ireland's economy. We are actually looking for the other 30% to take the strain. A significant amount of that 30% was based in construction, which, as we know, and as Mr Frew pointed out, is one of the hardest-hit sectors. Given the available options, I do not see how we can find additional funds in the short term. We do not have the tools or the infrastructure to do it — nor, potentially, do we have the right to do it, because that probably rests with Westminster.

I am happy to engage on the issue of drilling down and making efficiencies and savings. People talk about working together and removing the silo mentality. However, there is a strange perversity about things like hospitals being closed because we all accept that we have to make savings, but then everybody standing

outside with placards that read "Save our hospital". Somewhere along the line, we will either have to find more money or make savings.

The most distressing issue is the issue of silo mentalities. We are not in a position to work out collectively our Programme for Government, or to have a real, frank discussion about working together with a bit of mutual respect and understanding. That is the issue that has to come forward.

Mr Bell: I appreciate the responsible approach that the Member is taking. He will find a lot of support on these Benches in respect of the wrongness of silo mentalities. What advice would he give to his own Health Minister, who, at an awayday that was set up to consider how we could constructively advance his arguments, arrived late and left early?

Mr B McCrea: The Speaker has previously given advice that, even though interventions may drift off the main point of the business, it is not necessary for the person who has the Floor to follow. In this case, I will leave that debate for another day.

Mr McCallister: Was that not in the Bill?

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure that that particular point was in the Bill.

There is an issue; Members have talked about having a responsible attitude. Many Members will have looked at the election results across the border. I was struck by the way in which they dealt with Budget challenges that are similar to the ones that we face in the Budget Bill. They promised nothing but austerity and the fact that they were going to have to take tough decisions. They promised nothing but the fact that they were going to have to share their frustrations and concerns with the general population. They put forward a determination that they would try to make things better. We should be doing that in the Assembly.

Part of the problem that we have with the Budget Bill is that it is long on rhetoric but somewhat short on detail. The devil is always in the detail, and we have to look at where we will have to make really hard choices.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not know what the Member is talking about. He says that the Budget Bill is long on rhetoric and short on detail. Has he not read what this debate is about? This debate is about a Bill that

authorises the spending of money for the next four months.

It does not contain, it is not designed to contain, it is not meant to contain and it could not contain any spending proposals, because we have not agreed it yet.

Mr B McCrea: It is good that I have provoked the Minister's interest in the matter. All that I can say is that I understand that he was scathing about Tory cuts and various other issues before lunch. Those matters are not in the Bill, yet he felt obliged to comment on them.

The debate should be a proper, open, frank and responsible discussion in which we try to inform one other and the watching electorate about the proper way forward. We make it clear that health issues affect us all. DHSSPS is one of the Ministries that the UUP looks after, so it is right and proper to make the case for all to hear why we should get more money, different money or different funding. We will try to come forward with solutions for where additional funds might be found. However, we cannot take people coming along and saying that what they are doing is merely because people in another place voted for cuts. This affects all of us.

I return to the challenge that I raised with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I actually agree with the comments that he made in the Grand Committee and that it is not a particularly good or bad deal but the kind of deal that we would have expected to get, given the settlements that have been made for other Departments across the United Kingdom. That is fair enough. He also said that neither he nor his party would join the chant against Tory cuts. That is a responsible position.

There is a realisation, and the people understand this, that we are in a financial mess and are spending more money than we have incoming. Whether one looks at it in a Northern Ireland context, a United Kingdom context or, frankly, in another place, tough and informed decisions must be taken that are best for the people of Northern Ireland. It does not do anyone any good when Members attack the messenger when we argue our case. Instead, they should be making an argument themselves. That is point that I am trying to put across.

When the DUP voted with the Government on 6 June 2010 and voted to oppose the Opposition amendment to The Queen's Speech debate, all

of that was defensible and responsible. Parties come along and do what they think is best at the time. However, it is not right to do that in Westminster and come back over here and tell other people that they are doing wrong. I am sorry, gentlemen and ladies, but that is not the right way in which to do business.

At the risk of going on too long, I will conclude —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Sorry, I am coming to a close. It is not often that I do not allow an intervention, but sometimes people do not allow me to intervene. I am quite happy to have the debate, but fair is fair.

We will be hit by some real challenges that have not hit us yet. There will be a real crisis when NAMA really gets going. There will be real financial pain. I fully accept that the risks that Mr Frew talked about exist. We have to look forward and see what we can do. When it comes to the Budget Bill, we feel that it is incumbent on us, as a party, to say that this is the way that we would do it. We may want to do it in a different way to that in which the DUP and Sinn Féin are doing it, but we do it against a backdrop of reality and with good intent towards everyone in Northern Ireland. I will not hear a word said against that approach.

3.30 pm

Mr O'Loan: I am pleased to speak in the debate on the Budget Bill's Final Stage. We all know that the Bill's purpose is to allocate the first tranche of spending for the forthcoming financial year. My party and I will not oppose that, but we will take this opportunity to critique the draft Budget, of which the Bill is the first legal manifestation. We still hope for a better Budget when the final Budget emerges shortly and is brought before the Assembly. Quite simply, the draft Budget does not do the job that it needs to.

I wish to say something about the context in which the Budget is being created. Up to 2007, we had what economists referred to as the "NICE decade". NICE is an acronym for non-inflationary, continuous expansion, which was a very fortunate set of circumstances. However, Northern Ireland still had very considerable economic problems during that period. Its productivity and economic activity seriously underperformed, and we failed to fix the roof

while the sun was shining. Of course, a lot of the responsibility for that rests with direct rule Governments. However, we were all in our various ways part of that failure.

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

It is not NICE anymore. The present times might be better described as a RUDE — rising unemployment and declining economic activity — awakening that could readily become a downwards spiral unless we find a way of breaking out of it. Quite remarkably, this is our first recession since the early 1980s. Of course, we recognised that two years ago when we called for the Assembly to adjust its Budget, produced our document 'New Priorities in Difficult Times' and called for a revised annual process to look again at the Budget in order to see what could be done differently.

Let us consider where we are with the economy now: we still have no growth; we lag behind the UK in that regard; and we will continue to be seriously affected by the downturn in the South of Ireland. The South is our biggest export market, taking 28% of our exports. It is, of course, intimately connected to us economically in other ways, as it is where many of our workers went to get jobs and is a source of substantial tourism investment. So, we are presented with an absolutely enormous challenge, and we need a Budget that matches that. However, the Minister's draft Budget does not do so. So, what do we have? We have a Budget made in Whitehall, and the Minister has described it as such, with almost a sense of pride or at least a sense of reality. I find it incongruous that the Minister repeatedly criticises his fellow unionists in the Chamber for their association with the Budget yet presents the same Budget here without doing what can be done to adjust it.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member even more surprised that the present Minister and his colleagues actually supported the Programme for Government at Westminster but do not apparently wish to support its outworking?

Mr O'Loan: I think that I will let the unionist parties debate that between themselves and not get involved. What we have are Whitehall cuts that are being distributed across the Departments in a way that remains largely unexplained. I wondered about that and about how the Minister views his job. I view him as a man sitting at a table putting coins into piles of

differing heights and then sliding them across the table to the different Departments while trying to ensure that the accounts are kept accurate. That is the narrow way in which the Minister sees his role, when what we need from a Minister of Finance and Personnel is wider thinking.

I was moved to wonder why this Minister should be a corporation tax denier, taking quite a different and very sceptical view, against that of his own party, of a reduction in corporation tax. It is because of his narrowness of perspective on corporation tax that he sees only the cost — there would be a cost to the Northern Ireland block — and not the potential benefits that many of the rest of us see. Although we recognise that a reduction in corporation tax has to be part of a wider framework of adjustment for our economy and is not the single thing to be done, many of us believe that it is critical.

Rather than “made in Whitehall”, remember the phrase “made in Ulster”, which was used with a sense of pride by Peter Robinson about the four-year Budget four years ago. That sense of pride was legitimate, because we are a devolved Assembly in charge of our own affairs. What is the point of being a devolved Assembly unless we can do things differently, not just for the sake of it but for a purpose? I do not see that purpose.

Where have we come to after four years? As I have remarked in a previous debate, we should be much more bedded down, much more in charge of our own affairs, much clearer in what our objectives are and much clearer about how we are going to get to the place that we have decided that we want to get to. All that should be implicit in a Budget, and all that is missing from the draft Budget.

This Budget has failed. It is not obvious why it has failed. The question is why this Assembly so continuously underachieves. I draw Members' attention to the Community Relations Council's (CRC) critique of the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy, which all Members will have received in recent days and which may seem a surprising document. That is a very important document, which was, I presume, written some time ago and has just been produced in 100-page booklet form. I hope that the CRC is not abolished for its pains in daring to criticise its paymasters.

The CRC has done us a very useful service in critiquing the CSI strategy. However, I see it as something wider: it is a criticism of how this Assembly is operating and how this Assembly is not being the model that was created in the Good Friday Agreement. The structures created may be there, but this is not being conducted in the spirit of that agreement. That is the fundamental reason why this is not the Budget that we need at the present time. For all the claims that this is an Executive draft Budget, the reality is different. It is not a real partnership document. If it were a partnership document, with the SDLP intimately involved in that partnership, this would not be the draft Budget that we would be debating.

It increasingly looks as though the Budget review group, which is often pointed to as the mechanism for the future as well as for the process to date, is nothing more than a fig leaf to give respectability to the real process, which was conducted behind closed doors between the two parties in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That draft Budget was dropped in front of the Executive at nearly the last minute.

Fundamental to the weakness of the draft Budget is its lack of rootedness in any fundamental principles. What is it for at all? What is it trying to achieve? What is the long-term vision? Those are the critical questions to ask when looking at the draft Budget. However, people will look in vain for answers.

In an earlier debate, Peter Robinson intervened to tell us that it was absolutely presumptuous for this Assembly to attempt to write a Programme for Government for the future Assembly. Evidently, it is not at all presumptuous to write a four-year Budget for the incoming Assembly. The absurdity of that position should be fairly obvious and is, I imagine, fairly obvious to all in the Chamber.

We have heard some reference made to an emerging Programme for Government. If some document of that nature is cobbled together in the next week or two out of some sense of embarrassment, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will add a contradiction to the previous absurdity.

The degree of public criticism of the draft Budget to date has been very striking indeed. A good place to start is with the Institute of Directors (IOD), which states:

"the initial excitement of seeing a four year Budget ... has given way to disappointment."

I have referred before to the great sense of euphoria that there was when a draft Budget emerged. It showed what people invest in their minds in the Assembly. The people want to see the Assembly working, and they were delighted that a draft Budget emerged. The IOD also states:

"The severity of the funding cuts was not unexpected but we had hoped to see the Executive's alleged commitment to prioritising economic growth evidenced in the budget allocations. Close inspection revealed otherwise."

It then details what that means for the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and so on.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) speaks in very similar terms. It states:

"The Executive's commitment to the economy is not fully reflected within departmental budgets, especially in DETI and DEL where current proposals will undermine economic development and job creation".

Coming from the CBI, that is a pretty strong statement. It adds:

"Public sector reform does not go far enough ... there is a lack of structural reform and re-engineering."

Furthermore, it states:

"Revenue raising does not go far enough".

I will mention the Construction Employers Federation. I have been careful, because we received comments on the draft Budget from many bodies. I think that the Minister received 9,000 submissions. Incidentally, I do not know how he has managed to absorb those meaningfully for a final Budget that is to be presented in a few days. He might like to tell us how. I do not want to mention particular sectoral interests. I will not even mention the trade unions, although they have a legitimate voice, because it could be argued that they have only a narrow perspective to present. I mention the Construction Employers Federation because construction is so critical to our economy and is a way of breaking out of the potential downward spiral. Assisting our construction industry is absolutely of the essence.

The Construction Employers Federation (CEF) presents five fundamental questions, which I will

not read out. Suffice it to say that they are the tests that it sets against the Budget. The CEF states:

"It is CEF's belief that the answer to all of these questions is 'no'."

In other words, the draft Budget does not do the things that the CEF would expect it to do. The CEF also states that it is:

"disappointed with the level of information that has been provided".

It adds:

"The commentary in the budget document does not fully appreciate the magnitude of the recent downturn in the construction industry, particularly with regard to employment and the consequences for the wider economy."

I quote the Construction Employers Federation for that reason, because the success of the construction industry is intimately tied to our getting out of this recession.

NICVA, in a report that was done on its behalf by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), describes the draft Budget as a patch and mend approach and says that it is not balanced. It calls for:

"more imaginative funding mechanisms, savings and revenue raising programmes and projects".

It also states that the Budget was:

"conducted on a piecemeal Department by Department basis and fails to provide fundamental reform of the structure of Government and the public sector."

PwC uses some quite remarkable language. It states:

"In overall terms, we conclude that the draft Budget ... does not balance."

When newspaper articles say that the Budget does not balance, we take them with a pinch of salt. However, when PwC, which is one of the serious management consultant firms in Northern Ireland, makes a statement such as that, it means what it says. It states:

"A calculation based on a standard formula ... suggests that, in the absence of information not currently available to consultees, there is a cumulative shortfall that could exceed £2.0bn by 2014-15."

When PwC's chief economist was interviewed on 'Good Morning Ulster', he said that because it

is happening back to front, there is no plan for government for 2011 going forward. In other words, a draft Budget was being created without having a Programme for Government in place, rather than the other way around. He said:

"No stating of the goals and objectives and a lack of coherence exists for the plans of the various departments. There's no overlapping or umbrella strategy ... we simply do not know what the objectives are for the next four years."

3.45 pm

He went on to give an important example of the lack of joined-upness between Departments, particularly the economic Departments, by stating:

"the resources allocated to DEL is likely to mean that it may not fulfil the objectives previously stated for the number of PhDs or research students in universities. That will have a knock-on effect for the work of DETI because each department has gone away separately with the pot of money and worked out what it can manage but there's no over-all view of what the NI Executive should be attempting to achieve over the next four years."

I would add that that is true as part of a longer plan for where we want to be over 10 or 20 years.

The head of the UK infrastructure projects team at McGrigors, one of our major firms of solicitors here, who, talking about infrastructure, said:

"the overall number of schemes locally has steadily declined. There has been no repeat of the pipeline announced in 2002 when the Strategic Investment Board brought forward major projects in the roads, water, IT, health and justice sectors. A new kick-start is needed".

Most of McGrigors's article is about the mechanisms to do that. When the Minister asks how on earth we do that, the answer given is, in summary:

"A number of new funding mechanisms are available",

and McGrigors details them all. These are serious players in the action whose advice we can treat with respect.

One of the most interesting documents comes from a body called the Economic Advisory Group. Had that document been written by the SDLP, it would be dismissed as partisan and a document drawn up merely to advance our own political position. From front to back, its nine pages are a deep critique of the draft Budget.

What is this body? It is a body that was set up by the ETI Minister to advise her; a group of our best experts on the economy. I will read simply its conclusion:

"This Budget process provides the opportunity, albeit in difficult circumstances, for the Northern Ireland Executive to set the tone for the progression of the local economy over the next four year period and beyond. It is imperative that the Executive grasps this chance to demonstrate the priority it holds for the economy through its actions. This should be reflected in a focused Budget intent on rebuilding and rebalancing the local economy toward a private sector-led high value economy, with the necessary resources in place to enable this transition to take place."

We may take it that, when it says that that is the kind of Budget that should be in place, the clear inference is that the draft Budget that we have does not do those things, and that is from the Minister's own appointed advisers.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Surely the key phrase in the section that he read from that document is:

"the necessary resources in place to enable this transition to take place."

The point that the Minister has consistently made to the House is that because of the Tory cuts of £4 billion and the black hole in our economy, the resources are not there for that to happen.

Mr O'Loan: The Member is saying that there is no point in having a devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland. He is saying that we should simply take what we are given and do the same job as direct rule Ministers. Well, I happen to think more highly of the potential of this place.

If the draft Budget goes through as it is, we will have no plan for rebalancing the economy or for economic development. We will have potentially 9,000 public service job losses. We will see a pay freeze for almost 7,400 civil servants who earn below the average industrial wage. There will be inadequate responses and assistance to hundreds of vulnerable people who will face benefit cuts by 2012. There will be the potential for hospital closures. There will be the prospect of new medicines and medical facilities, such as the Altnagelvin Area Hospital cancer unit, not being available to patients. There will be no robust strategy for job creation. There will be less independent scrutiny of government,

through this Assembly and through the Comptroller and Auditor General's office. There will be a massive drop in the building of social housing, with the consequential construction job losses.

More than 100 schools will go without repairs or new buildings, and there is the potential introduction of student fees at —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to resume his seat. I wish to bring all Members back to today's Budget debate. The Executive will bring forward a revised draft Budget in the next few weeks. Today, what we are really talking about is the content of the Budget for today and for the end of term, if you like. Obviously, that will run in to the next Executive, but the Executive will actually be coming forward with another Budget. At this stage of the debate, it is very important that we concentrate on what is in the Budget proposal today.

Mr O'Loan: I take your point, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I will soon conclude. As I was saying, there will be —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Hear, hear.

Mr O'Loan: The Minister seems to be getting somewhat riled, and it is always quite indicative when that happens.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not riled; I am bored out of my skull by the SDLP.

Mr O'Loan: As I was saying, there is the potential introduction of student fees at £5,750 a year and the scrapping of the education maintenance allowance.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He has talked across the spectrum of government, from Education to DETI and Social Development. Which pot would he take from in order to achieve even one of the things that he listed?

Mr O'Loan: Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be glad to know that I am going to finish shortly, so I will not take up the Member's challenge to go through the SDLP's document, 'Partnership and Economic Recovery', in its entirety.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Nor would I allow that to happen.

Mr O'Loan: Nevertheless, I assure the Member that the answers are there. I am concerned and distressed to hear the Minister telling us from a seated position that he is bored with what I

am saying. I have to say that the public, who are looking for the Assembly to address —

Ms Ritchie: Very sad. Shame.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: The public, who are looking for the Assembly to address the economic position and protect those who are vulnerable in society, might be discomfited by the Minister's reported boredom.

I referred to a number of commentators who have critiqued the draft Budget seriously. In producing 'Partnership and Economic Recovery' we spoke in private to a number of serious commentators, and I can tell Members that the kinds of critiques that have been produced in public documents are also being produced in private.

In conclusion, the draft Budget —

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McKay): I thank the Member for giving way. He outlined a number of criticisms, one of which, from the CBI, was that revenue raising does not go far enough. I agree that we should look at more ways to raise revenue. Will the Member outline how many revenue-raising proposals the SDLP has brought to the Budget review group?

Mr O'Loan: Our document, which contains 57 separate proposals, was brought to the Budget review group. I am surprised that the Member has not familiarised himself with them.

As I was saying, the draft Budget is not a good document. It is not what we need to counter the recession or to address historic weaknesses in the economy and, equally, in our inefficient public sector. Therefore, although I will support the Final Stage of the Budget Bill, I issue a clear warning to the Assembly that it will take a better four-year Budget to win this party's support.

Dr Farry: I am tempted to ask the Business Committee for a different slot in Budget debates, because I always end up following the SDLP's lead spokesman. I shall do my best to be brief and, at the same time, to enliven proceedings.

I take the point that Declan O'Loan was trying to reflect the comments coming through from various sectors, particularly the business sector, and, later, I will have quite a bit to say about the economy. We are all conscious of the extremely

difficult situation that we are in and of the fact that different organisations want to critique things from their own and, indeed, an overall perspective.

However, the overarching responsibility on us all is, first, to recognise the situation that we are in. It is not one of our making, but we have a firm obligation as an Executive and an Assembly to address it and to put in place a financial plan for Northern Ireland. Secondly, where there are criticisms, we must at least give some indication as to how things can be done differently and better while respecting that the resources available to us are finite. To be fair to some of the people who are making criticisms, they have gone down that route. Indeed, we are still in a process of discussion, and it is important that we are not only seen to be listening to the advice that is coming through but that we take it on board.

I am extremely conscious that this is a debate on the Final Stage of the Budget Bill, and the Alliance Party certainly supports that. We recognise that we have a responsibility to ensure that money is in place for the beginning of the incoming financial year and that we do our tidy-up of the financial decisions taken during this year. However, without transgressing into a discussion on the forthcoming four-year Budget, we should reflect on the current financial profile of Northern Ireland. What we are doing gives us an opportunity to highlight some of the wider financial and economic issues that are facing us as a society.

I certainly recognise that our financial settlement is largely determined by London, and I am equally concerned that the pace that has been adopted by the coalition Government towards the scale of reductions and the pace at which they are trying to rebalance the national deficit is contrary to the economic advice. However, that decision has essentially been taken, and we have our comprehensive spending review settlement, which we have to make the best of.

Mr B McCrea: Could the Member tell us how his party's MP voted in The Queen's Speech?

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party MP was very clearly opposed to the Budget, which is the issue in hand, and the Alliance Party MP sits as an Alliance MP in Westminster. I appreciate that the Ulster Unionists are slightly out of touch as to how things work over there. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: We are just out of touch with how she voted. How did she vote?

Dr Farry: She voted no. *[Interruption.]* She really did, yes. Given the interruptions from the left, all I can say is that, if the Ulster Unionist Party had been there, it would have seen how Naomi Long voted.

Mr B McCrea: She might have told you.

Dr Farry: She did.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farry: I will move back to the substance of the issue in hand. It is worth reflecting on the fact that what we do here in the Assembly and the Executive can make the application of what is handed to Northern Ireland by London better or worse. That is where we stand on our own discussions. It is important as well that we recognise the issue of the balance at a regional level across the United Kingdom. In that respect, I appreciate and understand the point that Basil McCrea made earlier in his contribution that we will always have a situation where some regions are more dependent on others and have a greater need for financial subsidy or subvention.

The problem is that the UK is one of the most unbalanced of the leading OECD economies. There is an over-concentration in the greater south-east of England and, in practice, only three out of 12 regions are net contributors to the Treasury. Of those regions, Northern Ireland is the most dependent. Of course, that relates to what are now quite deep structural programmes that go back many decades and are linked to deindustrialisation, the lack of a proper replacement and, indeed, the lack of an opportunity for a proper replacement because of the violence and all the financial and economic costs that arise from a divided society and that undermine our ability, as a society, to modernise our economy. So, we are still suffering from that legacy.

One of the outworkings of essentially being reliant on the block grant for our resources is that the level of that block grant settlement is essentially independent of the economic performance in Northern Ireland.

If we do not invest in the economy, we still get the same block grant. If we invest in the economy and have a lot of growth, essentially we still get the same block grant because it is

based on the Barnett formula. Therefore, there is not an inbuilt incentive for the Assembly to prioritise the economy to get greater resources to redistribute. That is a strong argument for tax-varying powers for the Assembly, and that argument is largely being channelled through the issue of corporation tax. Not for one minute am I suggesting that Northern Ireland goes it alone from financial support or that it is viable that we look to the all-island context for that financial support. We are where we are, and we have a huge degree of financial dependency. We are dependent on the UK, which has a much bigger spread of taxpayers than either Northern Ireland or the all-island context. We need to appreciate the fact that we challenge that at the margins if not more than at the margins. Tax-varying powers and corporation tax are the first avenue that we will go down in doing that.

4.00 pm

That said, there is a much bigger all-island agenda to how we are setting our Budget and to how we are looking at our economy. I made similar points in the past, and I welcome the responses that I received from the Finance Minister that, irrespective of politics, clear opportunities for shared services, economies of scale and efficiencies, either on a cross-border or all-island basis, can be followed up. In the potential context of a new Executive coming in after May and a new coalition Government in the Republic of Ireland, it is important, given the potential crises, that the Governments in both jurisdictions do not become inward-looking in trying to focus on their immediate problems but are outward-looking in trying to find common and shared solutions where those exist.

In considering the wider issue of how the forthcoming Budget relates to the economy, I will take on some of Declan O'Loan's points and try to be more concrete about what we need to do. We need to be honest that there is a tension concerning the demands that come out of the Assembly. On the one hand, we are saying that we are determined to protect public services, particularly the Health Service, and we all understand that there is a growing funding gap between the Health Service in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. On the other hand, we are saying that we want the economy to be the number one priority. We cannot do both of those at the same time; there can be only one number one priority. For better or worse, the decision that we have taken on the protection of the

health budget comes at the opportunity cost of further investment in the economy, and we need to be very clear about what we are doing. If we are making promises to the business sector, we need to understand that we are delivering only on making the economy the number one priority to a limited extent because of decisions that we have taken elsewhere.

Equally, it is important to make a couple of points on public services. First, we are not raising enough revenue in Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that virtually all the business representative organisations are saying that we need to be much more bold and realistic on raising revenue. I do not mean the £840 million from revenue raising that is set aside in the forthcoming Budget and the fact that there is the potential to raise £1.6 billion in additional moneys —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As usual, the Member has made a lot of interesting and honest points, and he is right that business organisations have been at the forefront of the arguments for raising revenue. Will he also accept, however, that, even in those arguments, sectional interests always come through? On most occasions, business organisations are pointing to revenue raising that will hit consumers and individuals. Indeed, they have lobbied hard for tax cuts, whether through a form of corporation tax, a cap on rates for manufacturing industries or on the allowances for retailers. They have epitomised the sectoral and sectional nature of the debate. So far in the discussions on the Budget, everyone has emphasised what is good for them, even though it is at the expense of others. For industrial organisations to simply say that revenues should be raised is not sufficient, especially if they are saying that such revenues should be raised from someone else and not from them.

Dr Farry: There is a lot in what the Minister has said, and it is worth making a few points in response. To be fair to the business sector, what they are arguing for can be seen to be somewhat self-serving. It points to a wider common interest for Northern Ireland as a whole, particularly if we are to grow our private sector and increase employment in the private

sector, which are wider strategic objectives of the Assembly.

There is a view that business taxes are probably the wrong ones to levy. The major distortions in Northern Ireland are in household taxation. It gives me no pleasure to say that, because I appreciate that a lot of householders are living on the margins. However, a lot of people with a middle-class lifestyle in Northern Ireland are not paying the same household tax as their counterparts in the rest of the UK. I will not go into water charges in great detail today, but we already have a situation in which the business sector is paying for its water and domestic customers are not, which is uneven.

We talk about the possibility of corporation tax being introduced and the need for it to be funded, but businesses already have a host of other tax breaks. I may not find favour with this comment, but it is something that our party has made clear. In the event of an opportunity to lower the rate of corporation tax, it may be instead of rather than additional to some of the existing forms of economic support.

Industrial derating, which I am prepared to concede at this stage may be an important safety valve for manufacturing, should be seen as a much more efficient form of economic support. You would shift the intervention from trying to address the cost pressures faced by business to incentivising profits. If we make that sort of step, we have a much more efficient way of supporting businesses by targeting those that have the greatest potential to grow, rather than simply subsidising the status quo. Therefore, there may be an argument for redirecting resources away from things such as industrial derating to fund the lower rate of corporation tax, if that comes along.

It is important to reflect that businesses are being realistic about the need to raise additional revenue in Northern Ireland, but political parties are continuing to be populist about the issue. When we look at the issue of the £1.6 billion and the additional £800 million that may be raised during the next four years, we see that there is almost an acceptance that we need to raise more revenue. However, a lot of those are untested and untried methods that are largely speculative. I wonder why we are so insistent on trying to base a budget on such figures while not being prepared to address the real tested methods available to us. For some reason,

because we have put ourselves on a political hook, we are not prepared to bite the bullet on those issues.

Social justice is an issue for parties, particularly those that claim to be on the political left and want to fund public services. Indeed, it is a challenge that I will give directly to the Health Minister, who seems to be positioning himself on the political left as well as the political right. I accept the argument that is made about our health sector investment falling behind that in the rest of the UK. Historically, we were ahead, and, when you factor in the higher levels of health inequality and ill health, those figures become even worse. I accept that. At the same time, the notion of simply protecting health or getting additional money to health runs the risk of avoiding the efficiencies that need to be driven through the health sector. There are areas where we are not doing things as well as we should be. If we do a proper benchmarking of the health sector, compared with other regions of the UK, we will see in the profile of our spending that we are spending far more than our counterparts in some areas and far less in other areas. There does, therefore, need to be a major reorientation of health spending.

I believe that there is, to an extent, a sound argument for additional resources. Making the argument that we need to spend at the same level on health as the rest of the UK, while running away from the argument that we need to raise revenue at the same levels as the rest of the UK, strikes me as being politically dishonest and is the road to ruin for our health sector. If we want to have proper, quality public services, as my party and I do, we cannot afford to fund them on the cheap, which seems to be the intent of virtually every party in the Chamber.

Let us treat health properly and with respect. If we are to give it the necessary resources, there are difficult decisions to be made elsewhere. Those decisions are largely around revenue raising, rather than simply raiding other important budgets, particularly the economy, in order to meet and face the challenges that we are not properly prepared to do through the levers available to us.

As I look at the economy, I want to use the construction sector as an example. This relates to public sector jobs. A lot of parties are making commitments about the level of wages and salaries in the public sector and about the need

to avoid redundancies. They are saying that they are going to defend the public sector at all costs. That may well be laudable, and I do not want to see anyone losing their job, but it is important that we regard employment not only in the public sector but across the entire economy. We have to bear it in mind that, when we make a decision to protect the public sector and public sector employment, that decision will come at an opportunity cost, with wider implications for the economy and aspects of private sector employment.

A clear example lies in the area of construction. We may make a decision to sustain public sector jobs and make the argument that the incomes from those public sector jobs support families and households and that the money is spent throughout the rest of the economy. That argument can also be made for jobs that we may well create in the private sector if we spend money differently, particularly if we invest further in construction and improvements to our infrastructure. There seems to be an economic argument being made that the multiplier effect in terms of employment in the private sector and with regard to wider service, retail and supporting of households will be greater if we emphasise the private sector. Therefore, when we are talking about employment and the unemployment of young males, in particular, since it is a sector that is particularly hard hit, the choices that we make will have an effect on that. Laudable attempts to protect things in the public sector may, inadvertently, have a much greater detrimental effect on the private sector. It is important, therefore, that we see what we are trying to do in respect of employment as an overall package.

Although employment is important, we should never lose sight of the fact that the real importance of investment and the economy is the creation of additional value-added productivity. Ultimately, that is how we measure success in our economic outcome, and the by-product of that is not just employment but better-paid jobs, which put more money back into the economy.

In the wider picture, it is important that we focus on how we use our economic and financial levers to best sustain the economic transformation of Northern Ireland. Although I respect the fact that that is almost the unanimous view of Members, we have to be realistic and honest with ourselves. The way in which we are going about it — the current

financial settlement or the forthcoming settlement — and the decisions that we are making may not necessarily maximise the ability to transform things, and we may end up inadvertently selling ourselves short in that regard. We need to face up to some of the difficult political taboos if we are to be genuine in taking things forward.

4.15 pm

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member who previously spoke for being brief. I have made this point before, but I want to start off by repeating it: the Budget process would be difficult anyway, given the structure of our political arrangements, and there has been some reference to that during the debate. The efforts that are being made, developed and evolved as we gain more experience of working with each other are a credible response in the circumstances. What was already a difficult task was made virtually impossible when £4 billion was removed from the block grant without any addressing of the needs.

I continually remind myself of the discussions among all parties that resulted in an all-party agreement that the Barnett settlement did not meet the needs of this region. In fact, an all-party delegation that included the SDLP and the Unionist Party went to meet the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, to make that very case and to argue for support and for a peace dividend. People remember all that. The important factor for me was that, at that early stage, an all-party position was arrived at. It reflected, for example, the current debate on corporation tax variation, which is also an issue that will continue to evolve and develop.

References such as we have heard in the debate about a carve-up or a Sinn Féin/DUP alliance really only emphasise the lack of consequence of the parties concerned, their lack of confidence in themselves or, indeed, their lack of support when it comes to looking for an electoral mandate. I am not gloating or making a party political point about that, because my party was there. I have been involved in efforts to establish this Assembly on a sustainable basis since the Good Friday Agreement, and I was here when the Unionist Party and the SDLP were the two predominant parties. But we fought our corner, as did the party opposite. We had particular perspectives.

I reject the notion of a carve-up, which is not even self-serving. All that it serves to do is to undermine the potential that exists in this place. That potential is reflected in the draft Budget document.

I will make one other point in passing. It was brought up by a DUP representative who referred to a mandatory coalition. If you want to be part of the Executive, you have to sign up for the power-sharing arrangements. In fact, the only mandatory requirement beyond that is that you get the necessary electoral or political support. After that, any party can decide whether it is going to be there. It can decide not to nominate. So it is, in fact, an entirely voluntary action. When parties come together on that basis, we must explore every avenue for a collaborative approach. That applies to this debate.

In a sense, in the motion, we are really only required to authorise or validate the consequences of the monitoring round of last year and ensure that that is reflected in support for the Supplementary Estimates. We are also required to give, on the Vote on Account, authority to spend money for a limited period, obviously on the assumption that we will eventually agree the Main Estimates, to be voted on some time later this year, in the next mandate. In approaching that, the draft Budget was actually successful.

The draft document was sent out for consultation. I have not seen the quality or depth of the submissions, but I am sure that many good ideas were contained therein, and I hope that they will inform the decision-making process that the Executive and, eventually, this Assembly will go through in supporting the Main Estimates.

I made the notes and will develop the point, but the Minister mentioned it directly: consultation often provides a lobby for a specific or desired outcome. That is fair enough. Some of the issues that will be addressed, perhaps through an organised round robin-type response to a consultation paper by, for example, a pressure group, trade union, business organisation or community and voluntary sector organisation, are legitimate in that context. However, we, of course, have a wider responsibility. We have to look at every Department and every spending line. We have to look at how we can sustain the delivery of the best public service that we can manage and protect the most vulnerable in our society. So, we cannot afford to be sectional.

The approach of some parties is less than constructive. If there are concerns about particular priorities as they affect different Departments — the silo mentality, as it is called — perhaps the best way to find a solution is to step away from that mentality and, in the first instance, talk to colleagues on the Executive and then, as a party, make the case on the Floor and let the public judge who is being constructive and mature and working their way through the challenges and problems.

All parties agreed that we did not have sufficient resource built into the Barnett settlement. As the Chairperson of the Finance Committee, I gave evidence to the House of Lords Committee that was reviewing Barnett. Its report supported many of the arguments that we made, particularly about the assessment of need or reflecting need. There are particular, special and, in some instances, unique issues that we have to deal with here. We may have to take that discussion further. We may need to revisit that discussion.

In the CSR announcement in October, £4 billion was removed because there was a particular approach taken at Westminster to deal with the deficit. That is their authority and right, but there is another way, and we should never forget that. In any event, because we do not have fiscal autonomy, we are left with no option but to deal with what is left in the block grant; to consider the revenues that we can get from the regional rate; to look at what we can do with efficiencies, which includes addressing the issue of quangos and arm's-length bodies; and then to look collectively for revenue-raising ideas, including those that came from all those who had the opportunity to contribute to the draft document that was out for consultation.

Four billion pounds is a lot of money to make up. We had an amendment to the motion that was before us a fortnight ago from the SDLP. Some of its speakers found it possible to talk for 90 minutes or more on that topic.

Mr McDevitt: For the record, it was not on that topic; it was at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr McLaughlin: Well, that is helpful. Thank you very much. I am glad you joined us. I did not even notice that the 90-minute marathon man was present. Anyway, just to —

Mr McDevitt: If I could run a marathon in 90 minutes, I would be laughing.

Mr McLaughlin: Well, keep practising. Now, let me make this point: they proposed amendments to the draft allocations that amounted to shifting around £22.1 million, when the issues that we are dealing with run into the billions. If they have submitted proposals to the Budget review group, of which their Minister is a member, do you think that the Executive will refuse to consider viable propositions?

We cannot meet our requirement, and all parties have that point of collectivity and collegiate approach. They recognise the need to preserve front line services. So, if there are propositions, from whatever party, they will not be cast aside if they are viable and will help the Executive to balance the Budget and deliver the level of service that they require. We may collectively come to a conclusion that we can do so much only incrementally. We may well get to the point when we reconstruct the type of block resource that we would need. That would be a mighty challenge. I do not want to be defeatist, but I must be realistic. We may have to cut the sail to suit the cloth. If the parties play as a team instead of trying to confuse, divert and demoralise, what we do in year 1 might be different from what we do in year 3 or year 4.

There is enough severe and, in my opinion, unfair criticism of the Assembly. As we come to the end of the mandate, we can be proud of much that has been achieved, but it is not perfect. The Budget process is not perfect, but we have to try to augment what we got from the CSR settlement. In doing so, we must protect the most vulnerable and not drive more and more people into poverty, not as a consequence of decisions taken elsewhere but as a result of our response to those decisions. Our response should be much more constructive, positive and confident. We should not be afraid to look at options. If an all-island approach produces better value for money and is of mutual benefit, parties must be prepared to consider it.

Mr McDevitt: I am listening to Mr McLaughlin with great interest, and there is a lot of truth in what he says. However, I wonder whether he will send the same message to his party's Oireachtas team, which, of course, is camping out —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must keep to the debate on the Budget Bill that is before the House today.

Mr McDevitt: His party is in opposition to the Irish Budget and the Irish Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I asked the Member to keep to the debate that is before the House.

Mr McLaughlin: The Member will have noted that at least we are in a position to put our view to the Oireachtas, and that is more than the SDLP will ever be able to say. I do not want to be diverted by such silly interventions. The point is that, if an all-island approach represents value for money and helps to deliver services, parties should be open-minded enough to look at that.

I hope that the Minister, when he responds to the debate, will tell us how much 1% efficiency in the health budget would amount to. I do not mean to challenge him, but it would be useful to know what that figure is, because we hear messages full of doom and gloom about the Health Service. We may be able to do more, but I argue that all other Ministers approach the Budget process on the basis of doing their best, and some are taking mighty hits on their budget to make that possible.

Dr Farry: I am encouraged by what Mitchel McLaughlin said about North/South co-operation and the sharing of services. Hopefully, he acknowledges that my party has openly said that that is a potential area that needs to be examined. Does he acknowledge that trying to find savings through addressing the cost of division in Northern Ireland is another area that must be put on the table and explored? I am perfectly happy to say that, from my party's perspective, we need to look at both areas. I hope that he will respect the fact that we are open to North/South co-operation, and I would like an assurance that Sinn Féin is open to tackling the cost of division.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member asked what impact 1% of efficiencies in the health budget would have. It would give us about £43 million each year. Even more interesting are the efficiencies identified in the McKinsey report, which indicate that the Health Minister could have saved £5 million every month. That would mean savings of £60 million a year. The identified efficiencies were only in certain areas, so other areas could be looked at on top of those. As the Member pointed out, the Minister has refused to review a range of charges that would have released tens of millions of pounds every year. The Member is

right to point to the issue that there are things that we can do now to try to alleviate some of the existing pressures.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for taking full advantage of the opportunity that I gave him. I was anxious that he should illustrate what could be achieved through adopting a more positive approach.

4.30 pm

Stephen Farry raised the issue of the cost of division. I know that the Alliance Party — I hope that he takes this comment in the spirit in which I offer it — regularly beats the drum on that issue. On a number of occasions, I have talked about people being realistic, being positive and believing in what is possible. I do not know whether it would be possible, but I would be very keen to go to a peace wall at an interface, suggest that it is taken down and take account of what people say. Those divisions did not develop overnight; they did not even develop over the past 30 years.

So, there are issues that cost us, which are linked to the cultural fabric of our society. Those tensions and divisions have existed for generations, but we should make a start at tackling them. We will be positive about tackling them and would like to work on a cross-party basis to identify where to begin, because we have to start sometime and we have to start somewhere. The existence of peace walls is testimony to political failure over a long period.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member, and other Members, to return to the Budget Bill.

Mr McLaughlin: I take your advice, but if something costs us money, it is relevant to the Budget. Division does cost us money daily. The point that I am making is that, rather than talking about these things, we should get round the table and start to do something about them.

Mr Bell: There are three priorities here. We are dealing with a Budget to take us through to 2012. We are also dealing with some £16 billion of public money. There are three things that anybody looking at the Budget Bill has to realise.

First, there are some difficult choices that have to be made. Let us not pretend that there will not be difficult choices; there will be difficult choices. We can either make them collectively by consensus, or we can pretend to be half-

pregnant, get one or two to vote for the Budget and get others not to, then tell somebody that we voted for it and went for the consensus and tell other people that we did not really vote for it and that we were against it. Those who take the latter approach to the Budget Bill would be well advised to consider the words of Abraham Lincoln:

"You can fool some of the people some of the time ... but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time."

The reality will be absolutely clear. There are those who will send their Ministers in to vote for something, while telling them to do it with their fingers crossed or saying that they will send the Back-Benchers out to say that they did not vote for it. That form of immature political schizophrenia will not fool the people who face losing their jobs; it will not fool people who are looking at cuts to necessary public services; and it will not help in any way.

I have called at several thousand homes since March last year. Without exception, the people whom I have met realise that we have difficult choices to make and that the cake has been made smaller. We know why that cake has been made smaller. The Ulster Unionist/Conservative, Liberal Democrat/Alliance coalition has made it smaller.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way to me before he does so to Mr Beggs.

Prior to the last general election, the leader of the Conservative Party, who is now the Prime Minister, made it clear that Scotland, the north-east of England and Northern Ireland were areas that he would target for cuts. Those cuts are not due to the legacy that the Labour Party left this nation with; they are premeditated cuts that Northern Ireland was singled out for, along with Scotland and the north-east of England, because of votes and seats. We have been dealt with harshly because of that.

Mr Bell: The Member for North Belfast makes his point very well. I will address it and then give way to Mr Beggs. These are difficult Budget choices, and they are difficult because the current Prime Minister and the Conservative-led coalition did not make any secret of the cuts. They went on to what is probably one of the top programmes and informed us of the Budget that

we would have to deal with and informed us that we would be singled out and targeted.

Mr G Robinson: No ifs or buts.

Mr Bell: There are, as Mr Robinson says, no ifs or buts; it was always going to be a question of cuts. As we deal with those cuts through the Budget Bill, David Cameron has been airbrushed out of the policy papers and manifestos. However, the proposed cuts have not been airbrushed out, nor have the difficulties for those who went to the doors and called for those cuts during a campaign when the current British Prime Minister stated exactly what he was going to do.

Mr Beggs: The Member is trying to airbrush out the background of where we are today. Let us be honest: there was over-expenditure by Governments throughout western Europe. The Labour Government spent beyond their credit limits even before the banking industry collapsed, and it was from that that many of our difficulties arose.

I am interested to learn the Member's view of the Budget, given that members of his party came together with the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats and voted against the amendments that were tabled by opposition parties to The Queen's Speech in the House of Commons. Is there not a contradiction with what the Member said today and the actions of the five MPs from his party who took the trouble to go to Westminster to vote against those amendments when many others were absent? Why did 100% of his party's MPs vote against those amendments if that is how they truly felt?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Member resumes, I should say that we have had a number of interventions. I asked Members to put their names down if they wanted to speak so that we would have fewer interventions and allow the debate to continue. The debate should continue on the Budget Bill, not go round the world.

Mr Bell: OK, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will follow your direction. We are dealing with difficult Budget choices and a smaller slice of the cake, and everyone knows why we are in that position.

People are fighting to keep their jobs, and the National Health Service, which is performing well, is under enormous strains because of the advances in medicine and our success in getting our population to live longer. People want to know how we will respond to those strains.

No one, certainly not in Strangford, has asked me to go to the Assembly to play silly games. Rather, they tell me that they want me to make the difficult choices that will help to bring Northern Ireland out of recession. We are in one of the most prolonged recessions ever, and people want to know how we will come out of it.

That brings me on to my second point. We can be successful only by prioritising the economy. It cannot be a time of here today, gone to borrow. The money was borrowed, we have seen where excess borrowing and the collapse of confidence in the markets led us, and we need look no further than Greece or across the border. I fully appreciate that Northern Ireland, as part of our United Kingdom, does more business with the Republic of Ireland than it does with Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC). I will always support working with the BRIC economies, but I also know where a large part of our business is; therefore it gives me no pleasure to see what happened in the Republic of Ireland. However, we should not be swayed by the argument of the need to borrow excessively, because we saw what happened in Ireland and Greece when the markets collapsed.

We have to prioritise that economy, which means seeing how we can have a jobs-led economy. Major advances are being made. The Budget has and will be successful.

The Budget gave the Department for Employment and Learning probably the second most generous allocation after the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Why is the Department for Employment and Learning important in the Budget? This is why: Queen's University revealed this morning that it has developed a minuscule gene transport system that can be used to address breast cancer. That minuscule gene transport system can effectively transport poison directly to cancerous breast cells and kill those cells before they have a chance to develop.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must ask the Member to come back to the Budget debate. I know that all these debates are interesting, but we are debating the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. There have been two days of long debates already, and it is important for Members to stick to the Final Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Bell: I was saying that because the Final Stage is critical. We have £16 billion, and the allocation to the Department for Employment

and Learning and for further and higher education has probably delivered the greatest success and breakthrough in cancer, which has the potential to be world leading and world beating. I will finish with that point and use only one example. That is why I underline the importance of the Department for Employment and Learning.

We have to reform our public services. People know that we have less money. There is an opportunity to try to be more strategic with less money and to deliver a better outcome and a better-quality service on a reduced budget. That will be the challenge for the House.

When people watch proceedings in the House, they want to see whether we will take the serious challenge laid down before us, run away from it, try to play games with it or try to point the finger at other people and say that it was all their fault. I disagree with the fact that there are 108 Members, but that is a debate for another day. Will we tell our Ministers to go into an Executive to vote for the Budget while telling our Back-Benchers to come out of the Executive and vote against it? That is the most deceitful and dishonest politics that we could imagine in the circumstances that we face. It will not fool the people who are clearly looking to us to provide a consensus to bring them out of the recession that the Ulster Unionists and Conservatives have placed us in.

Ms Ritchie: Although the Bill relates to only part of the proposed expenditure in year 1 of the Budget, it is nonetheless part of a flawed process around a flawed draft Budget. The SDLP remains strongly of the view that the Budget needs to be improved substantially before it can be regarded as fit for purpose. As the SDLP pointed out many times, public expenditure is the only lever available to the Executive as they seek to rebalance and stimulate the economy. We must use that lever to the best of our ability. Therefore, the Budget needs to be based on sound economic principles, as does the final Budget that covers the whole four years.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: I will give way a little later, if that is OK.

The truth is that there are no meaningful economic policy principles underpinning the Budget. As the SDLP finance spokesman Declan O'Loan asked on numerous occasions: where is the vision, where is the strategy, and what Programme

for Government is this Budget providing the resources for?

4.45 pm

The answer is that, as acknowledged by the Minister of Finance in a written answer to me, there is no Programme for Government. It is not just Declan O'Loan who has raised these questions, although he was the first to do so. His criticism has been echoed by all manner of stakeholder, from the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in the community sector, right through to economic consultants, such as PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), and the main representatives of business and industry, including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors (IOD) and the chambers of commerce. The Assembly Finance Committee, with its built-in DUP/Sinn Féin majority, has largely accepted Declan O'Loan's analysis. It has added its voice to the mounting criticism of the draft Budget.

No amount of lectures or assertions made about confusion or diversion will get away from the evidence base that tells us that this Budget, and even the draft Budget as it is currently being consulted on, is not fit for purpose.

Setting aside the party political hacks in the DUP and Sinn Féin, no one believes that this is a good Budget. Narrow, party political considerations aside, I do not believe that the DUP or Sinn Féin truly believe that this is a good budget, notwithstanding the assertions that have just been made by the Member for Strangford Mr Bell. It is not good enough on the part of those parties to expect support for a Budget just because they have managed to agree it. It has to be the right Budget in the interests of all of the population. My contention is that this Budget is a political accommodation between two parties, rather than a financial blueprint for the future.

I am happy to give way to Mr McLaughlin, and then to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr McLaughlin: I am grateful to the Member for giving way.

I have a question that the Member might address. No one argues that the Budget is perfect. Will she accept this simple point? There are four billion flaws in the Budget that we have to deal with.

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that the Member will agree with me that his party is prepared to accept £4 billion worth of cuts over the next four years. He should sup a little of the soup himself. I give way to the Minister of Finance because I was not ready to do so earlier. If he is not ready to intervene, perhaps I could continue?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I just wanted to express surprise at the lack of vision that the honourable lady has as to what the Assembly can do. She said that public expenditure is the only lever we have for rebalancing the economy. That is not what her party's document says. It talks about regulation, privatisation — a lot of privatisation — planning powers and many other things. Perhaps she is departing from that, or maybe the script she has in front of her forgot to mention that particular point.

All I ask is that, before the Member starts to talk about flawed Budget and flawed processes, she should perhaps think about some of the words she says and about the powers that rest with the Assembly to rebalance the economy. They go much wider than the Budget.

Ms Ritchie: Simply put, the Budget is not fit for purpose. The Minister of Finance knows that, and there may be a level of delusion in this Chamber. Members should examine what they think and say.

Even though the personalities and parties that hold the various Ministries are due to change in a number of weeks, the DUP could not resist the temptation to allocate the Budget in a way that makes life difficult for other unionist Ministers in DEL and Health. Party politics before people. That apart, they just passed the £4 billion of cuts without any real attempt to mitigate them.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: I would like to continue for a little bit.

You might have thought that, whatever the lack of dissent about the cuts in its own ranks, the DUP could not possibly get £4 billion worth of cuts past their partners in Sinn Féin.

You might think that a party that has spent months opposing spending cuts in the South of Ireland, where cuts are inevitable, could not possibly swallow £4 billion of cuts in the North, where they could be substantially avoided, but you would be wrong. After all, Sinn Féin goes through so many contortions; it is a green Tory

party in the North and a red revolutionary party in the South. It has accepted the cuts here without so much as a whimper. Sinn Féin will simply tell people that the Tories are to blame, and, if that does not work, it will tell them that new revenue streams and receipts are built into the Budget that will mitigate the cuts, but that is just not true. Less than 1% of the Budget could be described as new money or new receipts.

So, there we have it: a DUP/Sinn Féin Budget that does nothing for economic rebalancing and which imposes a mountain of misery on the least well-off in our community. It is a Budget that does nothing to create jobs or to protect front line services. That has been confirmed by most of our independent economic commentators. Setting to one side all the economic arguments, we have a draft Budget that does nothing to help build a shared future.

In all the hours of the debate on the draft Budget, I have heard few answers to the central economic and financial critique that was presented by the SDLP. Nearly all the responses to our constructive criticism have been party political in nature. There have been attacks on our past record. There have been accusations — we heard them again today — that we are not team players, and that our criticism is, in turn, politically motivated. I will come back to that point in a minute.

The truth is that all the yes-men and yes-women in the Chamber who are prepared to criticise the SDLP cannot answer us on any of the points of substance. They cannot tell us where the job creation is going to happen or how the allocation of £45 million in government spending over the next four years will help to rebalance and stimulate the economy. They do not explain why there is virtually no provision for new revenue streams or capital receipts from asset disposals, or why there are no anticipated cash releasing reforms. Even though many other commentators are now asking those questions, there are still no answers from any of the promoters of this flawed Budget.

The SDLP is not opposed to the Budget for narrow party political reasons. The Budget goes way beyond party politics. Our opposition is based around the simple fact that we want something better for our people. We know that we want a better outcome, and we know that that is attainable if the work is done properly. It is quite ridiculous to assume that, just because

something is cobbled together by the DUP and Sinn Féin and subsequently railroaded through the Executive, we are all obliged to support it. Incidentally, I have heard that more railroading lies ahead in the next couple of weeks.

Our bizarre rules may require Ministers to accept Executive decisions, even when they are railroaded through by two parties. However, our Assembly parties are not bound by such Executive decisions. As a party, we will always stand against Executive carve-ups that are against the best interests of our people throughout the North of Ireland. For example, we will never support the OFMDFM so-called cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, which is a blueprint for a permanent sectarian carve-up, nor will we lend credibility to the recently created social investment fund, which is designed to allow one party to dole out political patronage to its friends and to certain selected groups.

Our opposition on those issues is principled. Whatever some media commentators may write — commentators who, frankly, do not understand the detail of the draft Budget — it is not just opposition to annoy Peter and Martin.

Consider an issue such as student fees. Why was the DEL budget left so short in the first place that the Minister has to contemplate hiking fees? We oppose any hike in student fees, not because that might be popular but because it is right. Third level education must be accessible to people of all incomes and not just the well-off. Therefore, we cannot support a budget that envisages a hike in fees. For the same reason, we will not support any suggestion to cover the hole in the DEL budget by taking away the education maintenance allowance. Remember that we tried to amend the Vote on Account to that effect, but other parties did not support us.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That only covered half the bill for goodness' sake. Catch yourself on.

Ms Ritchie: I will take that point in a minute. The Minister of Finance knows full well that, on advice from the Business Office, that was the only device or technical mechanism available to do it.

We are deadly serious about the need for our Budget to drive job creation. This place in which we live will not progress economically or socially until we put people back into work. Job creation

is not just about loading up the Invest NI budget and hoping that it overachieves as it works hard to deliver foreign direct investment. We have to do more locally to generate employment and build indigenous business and industry. Although Invest NI has done well, we should not put all our job creation eggs in the Invest NI basket. Instead, we must prioritise programmes that will bring an immediate stimulus to our beleaguered construction sector. If that means postponing some projects that are low in jobs content in favour of those that are job rich, that is what we should do.

To be quite honest, there was no proper attempt to prioritise capital spending in this entire Budget process. Were handed a reduction in overall capital of 40%, which was pretty much passed on to Departments without any real attempt to identify priorities.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am glad that the Member has given way on this point. I do not know where to start with her speech, but let me take the last point. She said that, in order to create jobs in the construction industry, we should concentrate on certain projects that are job rich even if it means sacrificing other ones. However, in the last debate on the Bill, her party was vociferous in its support for one of the biggest capital spending projects in the Budget, namely the A5. Believe me, that project is not job rich, because most of the money will go on buying land, and the rest will go on a capital intensive project. Maybe she will make her mind up before she makes those claims. What kind of projects does she want to be cut if her party is going to continue supporting projects that are capital intensive and land intensive but certainly not job intensive?

Ms Ritchie: The Minister has made a point, but he fails to recognise —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McDevitt: It will make great reading for the people of Larne that the Minister of Finance is opposed to one of the major trans-European network investments, which are critical for the development of the Larne port. Is the Minister suggesting that we should turn our noses up at an international agreement to bring capital investment into this region? Is that what he is

suggesting to the House? It seems to be what he suggested to the SDLP leader.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way on this point?

I was simply asking the party leader whether that is what she supports. It is your party that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask everyone to take their seats and to not speak from sedentary positions. The Member has the right to give way. However, interventions should be made through the Chair so that we do not have multiple interventions at one time but, rather, one at a time.

5.00 pm

Ms Ritchie: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. There were several interventions, and I was shocked to hear the Minister of Finance, who is a Member for East Antrim, indicate his non-support for the Trans-European Network near Larne. On the other issue, I suggest that he examine the Budget with a view to quite quickly promoting job-rich investment such as housing, school maintenance —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Instead of what?

Mr O'Loan: Plus.

Ms Ritchie: Plus; they are in addition to the others.

I will continue, Mr Deputy Speaker. We were handed down an overall reduction in capital of some 40%, and as I said earlier, that was passed on to Departments without any real attempt to identify priorities. We believe that there should be a greater priority attached to investment in newbuild social housing, not simply because that happens to be a priority for the SDLP or our Minister but because such investment makes a major contribution to social stability and reducing human misery while providing a much-needed employment multiplier in the construction sector. In fact, independent analysis undertaken by a University of Ulster economist has already proved that point. I just wish that the Minister of Finance would pay heed to those economists when they undertake such reports and follow their advice.

Although it has little immediate effect on human suffering, there is a similar argument to be made for capital investment in the schools estate and maintenance. This Budget offers the

chance to create jobs and to improve our social and economic infrastructure, and I believe that we should take that chance. I hope that the Minister takes those opportunities, which are “plus”, as my colleague Mr O'Loan said from a sedentary position, or in addition to the others that I mentioned.

The green new deal affords an opportunity that the draft Budget also does not address. Although the business model for the green new deal may as yet be unproven, there is scope to embark on a major programme of home insulation that would protect thousands of low-income households against the cold — a fuel poverty measure — and create a very significant number of new jobs for those who have construction-related skills.

Some Members may not be persuaded of the merits of the green new deal's ability to reduce emissions, but they must surely acknowledge the potential that it offers for job creation, yet all the Budget offers for the green new deal is the possibility of funding some measures over four years to the tune of some £12 million, which is the estimated proceeds of a plastic bag levy. So, let us as a devolved Administration look at what we can do to make the best parts of the green new deal work not only for us but for the people in the wider community throughout the North of Ireland.

I must also refer to tourism. There is huge scope to develop the North's tourism offering in a way that generates thousands of new employment opportunities. The jobs plan published by the main business representative groups estimates that as many 15,000 could be created, but that will require investment. However, tourism investment is being cut in the Budget.

I have highlighted some of the areas that the SDLP has identified as needing additional investment, the prize for which would be a major boost to employment and economic growth. However, we are not just saying where we want the money to come from. In this document — I know that I cannot gesticulate too much — we have indicated where the money could come from and where it could go. I think that our financial paper, which we brought to the Budget review group and sent to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, if I recall correctly, the Minister of Finance, provides an adequate solution. It also sets out in quite unprecedented detail how literally billions of pounds can be

found over the next four years from new revenue streams, additional capital receipts and cash-releasing efficiency savings. I commend that paper to those Members who have not read it.

Today and in the past few weeks, some Members have attacked the SDLP for trying to change the Budget; however, that is not only our right but our duty, because we are doing it in the interests of the people. There is still time to get the Budget right. I appeal to the other parties: let us make this Budget fit for purpose; it is our duty and responsibility as elected representatives. Let us make the consultation exercise meaningful instead of a charade. Above all, four years into devolution, let us end the era of ostrich economics.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Whoever penned the SDLP leader's speech deserves a bonus, because before I came into the Chamber I did not have a speech, but after listening to the SDLP leader, I do. They have put together two speeches for the price of one.

What worries me slightly more is the point that the Finance Minister made when he challenged the leader of the SDLP on her comment that public expenditure is the only way out. If Members read the SDLP's speeches or its document in response to the Budget and how we move forward with the Budget Bill, they will see that the SDLP is not seeking public expenditure as the only way out; it is seeking a privatisation agenda as the only way out. Littered throughout its proposals are suggestions that we sell off public assets and, not only that, but that we sell off public assets that are bringing revenue into our much straitened coffers. For instance, selling off public car parks seems like a good idea. However, if we were to sell off public car parks in the current economic climate, I do not imagine that we would get value for money for them.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in a moment. If we sell off our public car parks, not only would we lose valuable assets at a lower price than we should get for them, but we would also lose some £11 million in revenue a year coming from those car parks into the public purse. That £11 million would go instead into a private developer's pocket for use in the private rather than the public sector.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr O'Dowd for giving way. He highlights the important difference between selling off an asset and selling off a going concern. If we were talking about flogging all the assets in a depressed market, we would have a problem. However, public car parks are going concerns; it is not an asset that is being sold but a business. It is in our interest to do that, because we would get a better return from the sale of that business than we would from running it inefficiently for the next decade and a half. That is the point at issue. If Mr O'Dowd is saying that it is the business of the state to run businesses that are better run in the private sector, we will have an ideological battle on our hands. My social democracy and my politics do not say that the state should do what the private sector does better.

Mr O'Dowd: That was another speech that I could start on. Car parks are only a small part of the privatisation issue but an important one to look at when talking about our future budgetary processes. The Member asks whether we are looking to hold on to the car parks so that they can be run inefficiently for the next decade and a half. Then he tells me that the reason that the SDLP wishes to sell off car parks is that they are a going concern. That suggests that the car parks are being run perfectly well. After all, it does not take a Bill Gates to run a car park. It appears that the car parks are being run well. *[Interruption.]*

In relation to future Budget proposals, the Member tells us that the SDLP wishes to sell off only going concerns, which is a matter of concern in itself. Why, then, does he wish to sell off Derry airport? Derry airport is not a going concern; it has just received £8 million of public funds to ensure that it is run as a valuable asset to the economy in the north-west. However, it is not a going concern.

The estimated funds that would be raised are nowhere near the SDLP's projection.

Mr McElduff: Does the Member accept that the airport is flying?

Mr O'Dowd: I accept that wholeheartedly.

I have no difficulty with any political party coming to the Chamber and challenging the draft Budget. In fact, I encourage it. I have no difficulty with any party coming to the Chamber and bringing forward amendments to either the spring Supplementary Estimates or the

Budget Bill. In fact, I encourage it. I am not here to defend the draft Budget as being the Holy Grail. However, if we are to make changes to it, they have to stack up and be viable and workable. Before someone from the SDLP wishes to intervene, the party has belatedly produced a document that contains revenue-raising proposals. Each and every one of those proposals deserves to be scrutinised and looked at from every angle. If they are workable, there is a duty on the Executive to use those revenue-raising measures or economic proposals in any document that is brought forward. However, I suspect that that is not the ambition of the SDLP. Its members have commented that the Assembly has failed, that the draft Budget is a failure and that the Budget process is flawed, so I suspect that they are involved in opposition for opposition's sake, which is not always good opposition.

There is a role in every democracy for a positive contribution from voices outside government. The difficulty that we have, which I accept, is that all the parties are involved in government, and there is an onus on them to provide good government. However, if people have alternative points of view, they should put them forward in a genuine frame of mind so that we move forward towards a more viable budgetary process and Budget than we currently have.

Sinn Féin is involved in a process of trying to construct a Budget and to ensure stable government, but I do not accept that in some way that reads across that our party has accepted Tory cuts. It does not in any way read across in that manner. I have challenged the SDLP and maybe some of its members will intervene on this point. I know that you are trying to cut down on interventions, a LeasCheann Comhairle, but I think that it is an important point. Members of the SDLP say that Sinn Féin is involved in implementing Tory cuts because we are involved in trying to create a good Budget out of a draft Budget and trying to create stable government. Is the SDLP suggesting that Sinn Féin should walk away from government? Is it suggesting that we should tear down the Executive, the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process and hand that all back to direct rule Ministers?

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the SDLP contested last year's Westminster elections almost exclusively on the basis that it needed to be

returned to take its seats in Westminster to stop the British Government planned cuts, which it said would be savage? It said that it needed to be in Westminster to stop those cuts. The cuts that we now face were imposed by either Sinn Féin or the British Government. Clearly, they were imposed by the British Government. That was stated in the SDLP's manifesto last year, and it failed to address or stop them.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in a moment. I fully agree with the Member. A lot of that was confirmed today in the SDLP leader's speech. She referred, on several occasions, to the cuts that we were handed down. Where were they handed down from? They were handed down from Westminster. If the SDLP is suggesting that to be involved in the Executive, in positive politics and in trying to make a better way forward is accepting Tory cuts, it is, quite simply, wrong.

I was surprised that the SDLP leader referred to the Oireachtas and the economic woes of the South because she recently told the 'Belfast Telegraph' that she would not interfere in the Irish elections. Her party colleague Mr McDevitt told me yesterday on air that he would not interfere in Southern politics. Those comments come from a party that claims to be nationalist.

Mr A Maskey: It is partitionist.

Mr O'Dowd: That could be correct.

5.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that we need to come back again to the Budget Bill debate.

Mr O'Dowd: My comments relate to the Budget in the sense that the Southern state now has limited control of its economic destiny. We here have not got control of our economic destiny. We have been handed down a block grant from Westminster, where the SDLP told us that they were going to affirm an oath of allegiance to the English Queen and stop the Budget cuts by doing that. The SDLP did not; it failed to do that and it has to accept that it failed. Those Budget cuts have now landed on the front doorstep of the Executive. The Executive have brought forward a draft Budget, and this Bill is about implementing the first year of that.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in a moment. Through that draft Budget, the Executive have sought suggestions on the way forward. That is the stage that we are at in the legislative process around the Budget. That is the stage that we are at around the draft Budget. As I said, if Members have positive contributions to make, they should do so.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that Mr McDevitt was looking in first.

Mr McDevitt: Will you give way to both of us?
[Laughter.]

Mr O'Loan: If I may make a remark, thank you. I have two points. The Member said that the Budget was not created by a bad process. I suggest that he reads the Finance Committee's report, in which he will find criticisms of the budgetary process that are as strong as any that the SDLP has put forward, and those criticisms were endorsed and totally agreed by his fellow party members on that Committee.

Secondly, is he suggesting that because cuts were imposed on the Northern Ireland block by the coalition Government at Westminster, we are saying that we should walk away? That is a non sequitur; I am sure that he understands what a non sequitur is. We are not asking for anyone to walk away; quite the opposite. We are asking for everybody to sit around the table in proper partnership fashion and forge a Budget that will address the challenges put in front of us.

Mr O'Dowd: Well, it may have been a non sequitur, but that is definitely horse manure.

Mr O'Loan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is that language acceptable to you?

Mr O'Dowd: I thought that Mr O'Loan came from a rural background, but perhaps I am mistaken. He will be aware —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Continue with the Budget Bill.

Mr O'Dowd: He will be aware that, if you plant enough horse manure around roses at this time of the year, you will get a beautiful flower in the summer.

The fact is that the SDLP Members have still not answered my question about the budgetary process. How are they opposing Tory cuts? What are they doing differently from what Sinn Féin —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in a moment. What are they doing differently from what Sinn Féin, the DUP and others are doing? They tell us that they brought forward proposals for revenue-raising measures. However, in this very Chamber yesterday, when the first proposal for raising revenue was brought forward and debated, the SDLP voted against it. If you are bringing forward revenue-raising measures in relation to the Budget, the Budget Bill and other matters, legislation is required around a multitude of such measures. If SDLP Members are going to vote against each piece of that legislation, the fact is that they will be imposing cuts on our Budget. It will not be the Tories, but the SDLP who will impose the cuts.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: This is the last time that I will give way.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr O'Dowd giving way. Mr O'Dowd makes great speeches, I will give him that. However, there is a credibility problem. When the comprehensive spending review was published in the United Kingdom in September last year, Mr O'Dowd and any number of Sinn Féin spokespersons lined up to tell us that they would reject the Tory cuts. They camped out for over two months in direct opposition, and I do not disagree with their right to do so. The SDLP MPs went through the Lobbies in Westminster every time they were asked to do so; having republicans beside them would have added credibility and weight.

Mr A Maskey: You made a big impact there, didn't you?

Mr McDevitt: It is good to see Mr Maskey out of retirement and making an intervention again. It would have added weight and credibility to that. The question, Mr Deputy Speaker, is this: having camped out in opposition and gone the media, what happened in private with the Chancellor that caused them to surrender to the Tory agenda? We are today debating the consequences of that. We are debating the consequences of the fact that, for one reason or another, between September and December last year, Sinn Féin went from opposing Tory cuts to the acceptance of a Tory reality.

Mr O'Dowd: That is the last intervention that I will allow, because I am coming to the end of my contribution, but I will answer those points.

From the period between George Osborne making his speech in Westminster and the draft Budget being published, one memory sticks in my mind: the constant barrage that Sinn Féin came under from many parties, particularly the SDLP. The message was simple: give us a Budget, any Budget. That was the SDLP's demand on the airwaves, in the Chamber, on the hustings and anywhere that it wished to be listened to. Sinn Féin's message was simple: no, we will get a Budget when we can get the best deal that we possibly can. That is what we have done. We brought forward a Budget that includes £800 million of additional spending and proposals for a further £800 million of spending. The SDLP has still not answered the question: how, on its agenda, does it propose that the parties in the Chamber should oppose the Tory cuts? In my mind, what they are saying remains simple: bring down the institutions —

Ms Ritchie: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

Bring down the institutions and hand the Departments back to the same Tory Ministers that they tell us they are opposed to.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is clear that the Member does not want to give way, and I have asked for fewer interventions as well.

Mr O'Dowd: In conclusion, as my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin said, there are four billion flaws in the draft Budget.

Ms Ritchie: And you have accepted them.

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way to the Member if she tells me how we should oppose them.

Ms Ritchie: Is the Member aware — he was probably one of the distributors — that while they endorsed Tory cuts in the Executive, he and his Upper Bann colleagues have been handing out brochures that, I am reliably informed, say “Stop the Tory Cuts”? At the same time, Mr O'Dowd and his colleagues have been fully supporting, endorsing and bringing forward Tory cuts, and they are doing nothing about it in the House of Commons, because they do not even

take their seats. They can cry all they like, but they are bringing in cuts.

Mr O'Dowd: I regret to say that I have never appeared in a brochure in my life, but I have appeared on the front of a newspaper —

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are talking about Tory cuts. Given that the Liberals and the Democratic Unionist Party voted along with the Conservative Party, are they not —

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. Resume your seat.

Mr O'Dowd: I regret that I have never appeared on a brochure in my life, but I have appeared on the front of a newspaper in Upper Bann, and the headline was “We are opposed to Tory cuts”. We are, and we are opposed to Tory rule in Ireland. I will tell the Member why we did not go to Westminster. There is a video nasty floating about the Internet that shows the Member and a couple of other Members from the same party affirming an oath of allegiance to the English Queen. That is one of the many reasons why we did not go to Westminster. Even though the Member told us and the electorate that the SDLP would go to Westminster to stop Tory cuts, the fact remains that they did not stop Tory cuts.

I will end on this point: we have a Budget Bill and a draft Budget before us, and, if any party or Member brings forward improvements to them, they will not find Sinn Féin wanting in that regard.

Mr Givan: I do not wish to detain the House for much longer, because I know that the Finance Minister is champing at the bit to respond to the excitement that he has been hearing all afternoon. Nevertheless, I will make a couple of comments on the issue. A lot of Members have been trying to rewrite history and their own positions, so it is only right that we correct the error of their ways in putting a case that misleads people.

First, I will make a point to my colleague in Lagan Valley Basil McCrea. He indicated that it was OK for the DUP to do something at Westminster and that that somehow passed on a right for the Ulster Unionists or the SDLP to oppose things. The difference is, and it is a fundamental difference, that we are part of a mandatory coalition in which the Ulster

Unionist Party and the SDLP are members of the Executive.

They are here to govern and are meant to govern and take that responsibility in a collective fashion. So, if they do not vote for the Budget, there is a natural consequence to their being part of the Executive. You cannot oppose something that is coming through and remain in the Executive if you hold that principal point of view. Members should at least be honest.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I have only started, but I will give way.

Mr B McCrea: I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we can have a few more interventions. Has the Member written some rule book himself that says what we can and cannot do? Who put Mr Givan in charge of what we are allowed to do? That is what is wrong in this Assembly: the DUP and its ally Sinn Féin think that they alone have a say. That is not the case. We are here to argue on behalf of the Ministry that we look after. People on the Benches beside us will agree that many of their constituents are worried about health and that many of their constituents will come in and say, "Can you please help?" It is incumbent on us to fight for that. We do that in the knowledge that we may not have the Ministry of Health in the years to come, but we do it because it is right. Finally, when the DUP was negotiating its deal at St Andrews, maybe it should have asked for more money.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the intervention, which was as useless as ever. Maybe if his political masters in London had honoured the agreements that were entered into on the £18 billion of capital investment, we would not be facing the difficulties that we are facing. David Cameron and the Conservatives reneged on commitments that were made to the people of Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party campaigned for the Tories at the last Westminster election, and David Cameron put Northern Ireland first on his list for cuts. They told the people — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We will have the Budget debate, not the cross-party debate. I remind Members of Standing Order 17(7), which deals with the persistent irrelevance and tedious debate. *[Laughter.]* That is what we have had today. So, I ask all — *[Interruption.]*

Order. I ask Members from all parties to take that into account, because that is the debate that we are having today. I ask the Member to continue.

Mr Givan: I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you will give me the same latitude that has been afforded to other Members of the House throughout the afternoon. It is fair to say that we must have honesty and consistency when this issue is being debated. There are those who are prepared to take responsibility and to take tough decisions that minimise the Tory cuts that have been passed on from London, which the party beside me advocated and asked the public to vote for. We are taking tough decisions that reduce the impact of those Tory cuts. The Ulster Unionist Party can pretend and can try to con the people outside that, somehow, it is not really part of that Tory Government but is just a franchisee. The public are not stupid; they recognise that that is a con job. Basil McCrea has been wheeled out as the cheerleader with pompoms, and he thinks that he will convince the public somehow. That will not happen; we will make sure that it will not happen.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat. I speak on behalf of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, as I am mandated to do.

Throughout the Budget Bill process, our Committee — we want to put this on the record — scrutinised and advised the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the management of its annual budget, both the capital and revenue parts, through the mechanism of the quarterly monitoring rounds and through briefing sessions from the Department and its various arm's-length bodies on the revised spending plans. During evidence sessions with the Department officials, the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments that affected spending profiles as the year progressed. On all occasions, the Committee challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and surrendering resources, and we were especially disappointed to learn that, in this time of economic hardship, the Department surrendered £897,000 to DFP in the past financial year.

5.30 pm

Given that the British Treasury has tightened the rules on end-year flexibility, the Committee urges the Department to have tighter control of its resources and to put in place steps to

address inefficiencies on the capital side. It continues to trouble the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that capital money is handed back when there are chances to create short window-of-opportunity programmes for sport to address the needs of sporting organisations at community level.

As the Final Stage of the Budget Bill makes provision for discussion on year 1 of the Budget, 2011-12, I ask that the House takes note that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has, proportionately, the smallest budget. In real terms, its budget accounts for only 1% of the Executive's total expenditure, but it is sustaining, proportionately, the second biggest cut, £14.5 million, in the current spending round.

Mrs D Kelly: I note that the concern that the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has expressed on the cuts facing the DCAL budget, but, in his scrutiny role, will he share my concern that £4 million has been set aside and earmarked for the Ulster-Scots Academy over the next four years? Given the losses that there will be too many small sporting organisations and, indeed, the arts sector because of the Budget, should the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure reconsider the priorities in the reduced budget for the next four years?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: As Chairperson of the Committee, I am not in a position to endorse that. Speaking personally, I might. Inside any Department, there is always a debate about the prioritisation of projects, and strong voices are speaking out on that matter.

In other opportunities to speak to the House on that matter, I said that small reductions to the Department's budget and even smaller changes to the baseline will have a disproportionate effect not only on major capital projects but on smaller projects that are designed to deliver projects across the spectrum of culture, arts, libraries and sport. Most of those bring grassroots services to the most disadvantaged communities of this region.

I invite the Minister to revisit the proposed closure of 10 rural libraries, on which consultation is under way. I am aware of a group of primary-school children from Draperstown, or Ballinascreen, in County Derry who plan to come to Stormont next week to hand over a petition to save their library, which has been earmarked for closure. The

closure of that library would save only £55,000 a year, which is a relatively small amount of money in budgetary terms. However, enormous educational, social and moral damage to the community will take place.

Similarly, other communities, including Moneymore, Moy and, not least, Fintona in County Tyrone, are disturbed by the prospect of the closure of their library. Later this week, there will be a public consultation on the future of Fintona library. I ask Minister Wilson to address the fact that, on World Book Day, which is this Thursday, hundreds of people will convene at Fintona Golf Club in an attempt to save the local library. Fintona is an area of high social deprivation, and it is well known to Minister Foster, who will drive through it sometimes.

Mrs Foster: Perhaps the Member would like to extend an invitation to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to attend.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am very grateful for that, Arlene. If you get the chance, maybe you could drop by.

I want the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to take note of the fact that, on World Book Day, hundreds of people in Fintona, County Tyrone, will be fighting for the retention of their library.

A small refurbishment of the physical infrastructure of Fintona library in Main Street, Fintona, will save it. In an area of high social deprivation, it is of huge importance. What I am really saying is that libraries in rural communities should not have to close to save a relatively small amount of money in this context.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Member realise that a new library opened in Dungiven, which is in my constituency, last Friday morning?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Yes, and I record my appreciation to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and to Libraries NI for presiding over the development of Dungiven library. I know that the Member felt strongly about the issue and lobbied for a library in Dungiven, and I am very grateful that he mentioned that. There is some good news and some bad news.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is quite difficult. Mr Deputy Speaker, you are urging me not to give way, but, since it is Basil McCrea, this might be my last endeavour.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We need to make some progress and maybe have fewer interventions.

Mr B McCrea: I will not detain you, but we have had some discussion on the matter. I recently went to a rhythm and rhyme class in Lisburn library, and I wonder whether it has extended to your library because it makes a great difference.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member makes a good point. There are excellent services being delivered to Sure Start projects, to primary school groups and to disadvantaged communities, and a relatively small amount of money could offset any potential threat or closure. I am particularly zoning in on libraries in this contribution because Libraries NI is an arm's-length body of the Department. It is a relatively young organisation, which is not yet two years old. The Committee feels that the organisation should have received some immunity from the budgetary cuts to allow it to develop. I ask the Minister to specifically address the uniqueness of our library provision, not least in rural areas, and how that can be saved.

The Committee also wishes to highlight to the House that in the area of the arts, culture and sports, lottery funding was never intended to fill the financial gaps that will be left by the Budget Bill. Lottery funding is not an alternative to governmental or departmental funding, but rather it was created to supplement it. The Committee is concerned that it has justified the higher than proportionate reduction in spend on the arts and sports, as it is anticipated that lottery funding for sports and the arts will increase over the next four years.

In light of the first year of the Budget, the Department's figures for relocation of expenditure and capital investment were provided to the Committee when DCAL officials briefed us on 13 January. Due to time constraints, I am unable to highlight all the Committee's concerns over the first year of the Budget allocations. However, suffice it to say that we are very concerned that the arts, culture, sport, and, particularly, libraries have not been given more protection, and the second phase of the review of libraries takes in those 10 rural areas.

Given that a society is as much judged by its culture as by its education and health systems, this is a very serious issue. The first year of the Budget sets a baseline from which other allocations are reduced. If the first year's allocations were to be raised even slightly, it would ensure that community arts and sports projects and libraries would not need to close. Once they have closed, it will be very difficult to secure their reopening in the future. However, our Committee also wants to welcome the fact that the arts will be given a £3.62 million capital expenditure allocation to meet its contractual obligations in light of the Lyric Theatre and the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC) projects. However, given the subsequent reduction on allocation for the other three years, members are concerned that, although we have state-of-the-art venues and theatres, we need programmes to fill them.

On a final note, our Committee remains of the view that the overall allocation to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is not sufficient. DCAL is still suffering from the legacy of the past, in which the Government have consistently undervalued the contribution that sport and the arts make to all sectors of society. Sport and arts are important for sport and arts' sake, but they are also very important for health, the economy, tourism and other related business areas of government.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, my contribution will be short, so I hope you will give me a little bit of flexibility. When the debate was taking place this morning, I wandered off to the Library to see what a Budget debate was like in the Stormont of 1972. In those days, the Minister was a Mr Kirk, and during the debate he explained how a farmer could modify his Land Rover to qualify for cheaper road tax. In 1972, this place was in turmoil. It is something that we want to remember, but, at the same time, forget.

Today, we are having a Budget debate, and a delegation of people who are concerned about their jobs gathered outside. One could say that we tend to fiddle while Rome burns, which is not good.

I was getting into Mr Kirk's speech, when John Hume interrupted him and asked whether it was Budget debate or a pantomime. Of course, it was meant to be a Budget debate, and I am sure that this is meant to be one too.

We are concerned about job losses and the reduced housing budget; the same things that were happening 40 years ago.

Mr McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: Wait a minute. Earlier, we were told by Jonathan Bell, who I am sorry to say has left the Chamber, that we are running away. Nineteen seventy-two was a bad year. I joined the SDLP in that year: I did not run away then, and I am not running away now. No member of my party will be running away, irrespective of what cosy little relationship is taking place across the Floor. We stood between two extremes, and we will continue to do so.

I want to move on to my specific topic, which is the environment. The first thing that struck me on a recent, short, easyJet trip to Slovenia, which is a new emerging European country that, for years, was behind the Iron Curtain, was the cleanliness of the environment there. The capital city, Ljubljana, is spotless. Here, we are agreeing to a Budget in which the money for the environment has to come from Daithí McKay's blue plastic bag tax. However, the Minister of the Environment openly and honestly admitted this morning that there is absolutely no way that we can collect the money for that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Was it not the SDLP who came to the House and proposed that a further £0.7 million be cut from the environment budget?

Mr Dallat: The SDLP has always taken a responsible approach to limited resources and we will always do that. We will not run away from it.

The Planning Service is dependent on planning fees, which are now diminishing. I represent an area on the north coast where planning decisions have been dreadful. We need proper enforcement. The Minister of the Environment recently granted approval for a second landfill site in the area that I represent, but there are no resources to police it or to ensure that the modern-day criminality that abused the environment laws cannot make their money.

This is a serious day. There have been times when we have laughed at jokes and when silly remarks have been shouted across the Floor. I assure both sides that the SDLP will be here at the end of the day, as it was in 1972 and during all the dreadful years in between. We will ensure that the people outside who have lost their jobs

or who are in danger of losing their jobs, and the 70 or 80 people in the Building whose jobs are under threat, are heard. Those who do not agree with that can have their fun and laughter, but, at the end of the day, we will be here, and we will ensure that the limited budget that we have is spent properly.

We do not want a repeat of people having to go out onto the streets to demand such basics as jobs, housing and the right to have their voices heard. One key element of the civil rights movement was the right of individuals to have their voices heard through the vote. In my experience in this Assembly, at times I have believed that I have gone through the tunnel of time and am back in 1972, when my voice was not heard and my party's voice was not heard.

5.45 pm

Mr Callaghan: I thank the Member for giving way. Obviously, I was but a twinkle in my daddy's eye in 1972, but what I know from our history is that in 1972 one of the issues that caused great consternation and distress was the lack of investment in the north-west, including in my colleague's constituency.

It seems to me that, although over a quarter of a century has passed since then, this Budget repeats and reflects the very same underinvestment in our part of this region that prevailed back then and caused so much understandable frustration and anger, in part over the uncertainty about the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin and the lack of specific provision for programme money for the City of Culture. Unless I missed something, I think the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, who is not currently here, mentioned that.

I know that an issue very close to my colleague Mr Dallat's heart is the pollution in the town of Dungiven in his constituency. We talk about the environment and the neglect of the north-west, but this Budget provides for not a sod to be turned in the four-year prospectus of its term for the Derry to Dungiven road upgrade project. That project is important for the environment in Dungiven and surrounding areas, not only in reducing the pollution affecting the residents of that much-harassed town but in providing the very jobs that the Member talks about, and not only giving employment in the construction phase but subsequently helping to stimulate employment in the north-west economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions should be short and to the point.

Mr Dallat: I am not complaining. I think the intervention was timely and covered many aspects that I intended to cover. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, I thought there was another intervention coming, but it was just Dolores leaving.

In conclusion and to recap, Mr Kirk may have spent his time in 1972 discussing the back end of a Land Rover; let us hope that we are not doing something equally silly today. Let us hope that our focus is clearly on creating jobs, not putting people out of jobs. Let us hope that we reflect on the reduced budget for social housing. Above all, let us recapture the partnership spirit of this Assembly, which was enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement but has now disgracefully evaporated and eroded.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think that we have had a rerun of previous debates on this issue. I am not so sure that anything has been learned from the previous debates; I think we have just had the same old prejudices and the same old phrases repeated time and time again. Nevertheless, there appear to be some Members who have actually stayed this time to hear replies to the points that they have made, and I hope that they will stay throughout.

I will take interventions from Mr McCrea. I notice that Mr McCrea started his speech by saying that he was greatly disappointed that I did not take interventions from him, but, of course, one of the reasons for that is that Mr McCrea never stays to listen to my speeches. He is in and out like a yo-yo. He comes in and makes his contribution, then leaves. However, he is here today, and I am glad that he is. I will give him every opportunity to make interventions if he wishes to.

As you have pointed out to Members on a number of occasions, we are not actually debating the Budget today. We are debating the Budget Bill, which enables Departments to spend moneys for the next four months, in the new financial year, until the Budget is finally agreed by the Assembly sometime in June, and also authorises the spending that has taken place and that has varied during 2010-11.

That is why I find it very odd when people like Mr McCrea talk about proposals being long on rhetoric and short on detail. That shows what preparation he did before he came into

the Chamber to talk about the Budget. Indeed, once I come to his comments, we will see just how little preparation he did, and what little contribution he made during his speech. That is fairly typical of what we have come to expect from some Members on his side of the House when it comes to any reference to the Budget. Indeed, you have only to mention the word "Budget", and it is like the immediate responses of Pavlov's dogs. I can tell you what those responses are: the Budget is a DUP/Sinn Féin carve-up; it shows lack of vision; and there is no Programme for Government attached to it. I know them all off by heart. All those points have been repeated time and again, and been answered time and again, but that does not stop Pavlov's dogs in the Assembly reaching for their favourite catchphrases.

I thank Members for taking the opportunity to raise some points. Mr McKay, Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, raised the Committee report. He rightly pointed out that the job of the Committee is to scrutinise the Department's proposals and to collate the proposals from other Departments. In doing that, I would not have expected anything other than for the Committee to raise some of the concerns that it raised.

It is one thing to say that concerns were raised and issues were highlighted about the way in which the money was spent. By and large, however, the Committee report simply reflects the special pleading that has come from each Committee for more money to be spent, without any answer to the following question: if you want to spend more money on one thing, what do you not spend it on? That is a constant theme that I will come back to. We have a finite amount of money available to us, and we have to deal with that.

Mr Frew raised the issue of the challenging times in which the Budget comes. These are challenging times, but not of our making. They are challenging times not because the Assembly has mismanaged public finances or because we have made mistakes, but because 90% of the Budget that is available to us comes from Westminster. The Westminster Government have decided that, as part of their deficit reduction programme, they will reduce spending in the United Kingdom. As a result of the Barnett consequential, we have taken our reductions, and on top of that are all the other discretionary things that the Government have imposed on us.

Mr McCrea claimed in his speech that I said that this was probably the kind of deal that we expected. With regard to the Budget allocation and the Barnett consequential, yes it is. It is exactly what my officials predicted and exactly what we told Ministers in June 2010 to prepare themselves for and to start to make savings plans on the basis of, because the intelligence was fairly good. On top of that, however, there were discretionary reductions: for example, the £316 million from the end-year flexibility; the decision not to see through the promised £18 billion programme; and imposing the Barnett consequential on policing and justice without any consultation with us.

Let me make it clear that those were discretionary decisions made by the Government at Westminster. As far as I am concerned, that was the outworking of the comments made, as a Member mentioned, by the leader of the Conservative Party on 'Newsnight'. The Conservative leader made it clear that he wanted to reduce the amount of public spending, especially in those areas in the United Kingdom that had grown dependent on it, and he named Northern Ireland. It is with some strength of feeling that I say that, despite those comments, the party on my right canvassed for Conservative Party candidates. Despite knowing of the prejudice in the Conservative Party, as expressed by its leader, its members said that, if they went to Westminster, they would vote with that party and see through its programme. We can say that the Budget cuts that we face are Ulster Unionist Party cuts because it voted for them.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a wee moment or two. Members of the Ulster Unionist Party voted for them, advocated that others vote for the party that imposed them and said that they would take the Conservative Whip at Westminster. Indeed, they went further. Even now that they know the consequences, they have said that they would still be prepared to be the Conservative franchise in Northern Ireland. In other words, the Ulster Unionist Party would carry the Conservative name and banner. It would carry the flag for the cuts. The Ulster Unionist Party cannot have it both ways. It cannot condemn us for the cuts while supporting the party that imposed them.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to interrupt his great rhetoric. The point that I put to him — *[Interruption.]* I see that the Minister's chief cheerleader is on the Back Benches. We can all raise our voice and make the big gestures. We can demand this and demand that. The real issue is whether we will ever start to talk about reality. I wanted to ask the Minister whether there was a difference of opinion. He said:

"I and my party have not joined in the siren calls to 'resist the Tory cuts'".

He could have fooled me, because all I hear is that it is somebody else's fault, not theirs. What about "Made in Northern Ireland"? What about taking responsibility? The challenge that we put to the Minister and his party is to explain why they criticise in one place and do the opposite somewhere else.

The Minister referred to my being in and out of the Chamber during the debate. Did he attend the House of Commons to hear The Queen's Speech? Did he and his colleagues vote for the amendment? Was he there for that debate? If he was, I want to know why he did not make those arguments then.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: First, let me deal with the point about resisting the Tory cuts. In that context, the Member asked why we would not take responsibility for affairs here in Northern Ireland. That is exactly the point that I was making. Some said that we should resist the cuts and not set a Budget, but I took the view that we had a responsibility, whether we liked it or not, to live within the Budget set for us. One of the people who took action and refused to take responsibility was the Member's Health Minister. He said that he would not accept the cuts. Indeed, he doffed the cloth cap, got out of the ministerial car and joined the protestors outside the City Hall. That was the irresponsible act, and that is the context in which the comments to which the Member referred were made.

6.00 pm

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. It is clear that the Member for Lagan Valley cannot distinguish between responsibility for cuts and a party that recognises that the cuts had been made and is seeking, responsibly, to get additional revenue to reduce the impact of those cuts. His party is

responsible for the cuts; it advocated them and holds the franchise for them in Northern Ireland. It must take responsibility for the cuts that it has heaped on the people of Northern Ireland. We have to mitigate the effect of the cuts by adding, at the moment, over £800 million and by looking at how we might add more to the revenue of Northern Ireland to reduce the pain that the Ulster Unionist Party has brought on the community.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The First Minister brings me to the second part of the point that I want to make: not only did we accept that we had to work with this Budget because it had been handed down to us but we looked at what we could do, honestly, to make it different.

That brings me to my second point in response to the Member's speech. He seems to have found a new word: rhetoric. He says that all we hear from the Finance Minister is rhetoric, or the Budget Bill is long on rhetoric. Let us listen to the rhetoric in the Member's speech. He talked about the need to be financially responsible. He then said that health should be a priority and that it needed more money and resources. I suppose that he cannot be blamed for defending the budget of the Health Minister, who happens to be one of his party's Ministers. He then said that he wanted to be responsible and to address the issue of where the money should come from. At this point, I must disagree with the honourable Member for Strangford, who is not here but thanked him for his responsible comments.

I listed everything that the Member said, because I was waiting in anticipation. He avoided the issue of where the money should come from during the previous debate on the subject. Indeed, either he did not take an intervention, or, if he did, he gave a bland answer. I thought that he had had time to think about the matter since then and was waiting to hear what he had to say. I have written down the seven things that he said: "We have to make savings"; "We must stop the silo mentality"; "We need a discussion on the way forward"; "We need a responsible attitude"; "We are spending more than we can afford"; "Tough decisions are needed" — Hansard will confirm all this; and "We need to argue our case". I do not know how much all those things are worth. I do not know how much they will add to the health budget. However, if that is the Ulster

Unionist Party being financially responsible and wanting to look at where the money might come from and is the sum total of their ideas — I summarised the points — it took the Member 12 minutes to say all that. There is not £12 in it.

I am happy to give way to the Member again in case he missed an opportunity and would like to avail himself of it. I am still waiting for that financial responsibility to be shown in the Assembly. The Member wants more money for the Health Service. Aside from all the rhetoric — I hesitate to use that word, but I will — I am still waiting.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I will try to avoid the use of the word "rhetoric".

It is sometimes worth putting a different point of view, and just because someone does so does not mean that that person is wrong. I want to ask the Minister a question. [Interruption.] Excuse me, Minister. Let me make the point in the most constructive way that I can.

I asked the Minister a question because he has been quite critical of my party and its position on a number of things. I asked the Minister why he did not vote with his colleagues in the House of Commons on 8 June. An amendment moved by Mr Alistair Darling was critical of the Programme for Government and other issues. Minister, you were not there. You chastise me about various issues, yet what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

I have talked about some of the issues that we might make a priority in this Programme for Government, and I have said what the party's position is. I can do no more than that. I am happy to engage in real discussions about where we might make savings. There is a fundamental point that the Minister might make a charge at. I do not understand it, and it is one that I have made to the Minister before. If there are Barnett consequential that come down to health, why is the Health Service here losing ground against England and Wales? It is in Hansard that the Minister conceded that the health spend in England and Wales is increasing and the differential is increasing.

Furthermore, I cannot understand why the other big spending Departments seem to be under pressure. There was mention of the Department for Employment and Learning being under pressure, and the parties opposite mentioned

that the Department of Education had been subject to the most savage cuts of all. If all the big spending Departments are losing money — 70% of the Budget is losing money — where is the effect on the Barnett consequential? I cannot understand that, Minister. Those issues need to be properly investigated, and this Chamber is the right place to go about doing that.

I will finish on this point, as the Minister has been very generous. I am sorry if, by asking a question, I have pulled down the Minister's ire on me. However, as an elected representative and a Member of this legislative Assembly, I believe that this is the right place to ask questions and that I have every right to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I again remind Members that interventions should be short. That certainly was not. I ask the Minister maybe not to get involved in toing and froing with other Members so that we can have fewer interventions and make some progress.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: What we got was a long-winded answer that shows either that the Member has not got a clue where the money would come from or, indeed, that, if he does have a clue, he is not prepared to say. Why? Because he might have to say something that is politically unpopular. I suspected that that was what we would get anyway. The intervention from the Member illustrates the fact that the Ulster Unionist Party is happy to have supported the Government who gave us the Budget that we have to work with and that it is not prepared to take —

Mr B McCrea: So did you.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will come to that point in a moment or two.

The Ulster Unionist Party is not prepared to take responsibility for that, and it is not prepared in any way to identify where the money will come from when it asks for more money to be spent on one part of the Budget. Indeed, it is not just the Health Department that its members want to know about. They want to know why we are not getting more money for education or for the Department for Employment and Learning. I thought that the SDLP was bad last week, but the problem seems to be contagious. It is moving across the Benches; the Ulster Unionist Party now has the same problem.

Mr McCrea made a couple of other points.

Mr P Robinson: The Member for Lagan Valley mentioned the Health Department and DEL, but are those not the two Departments that get the very best deal out of the Budget? Is it not a fact that the Health Department not only gets a better deal than any other Department in Northern Ireland but that, when the Budget is passed in the Assembly, it will have a better deal than in any other part of the United Kingdom, too?

Mr McCallister: Thanks to the Conservatives.

Mr P Robinson: Thanks to Sammy Wilson.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: This is where things get bizarre. On the one hand, Mr McCrea says that they got a bad deal. On the other hand, his colleague says that they got a good deal, but it is thanks to the Conservatives. At least get your story straight before you start making criticisms.

I will inform the Member, and the same goes for the leader of the SDLP. She raised this point the last time as well, then swanned out of the Chamber and was not here to listen to the answer, so she repeated the mistake that, somehow, the Budget was a carve-up. Indeed, she went further and said, as the new defender of the poor Ulster Unionist Party, which is so set upon in this Assembly, that this was done so that tough spending decisions would have to be made by the Ulster Unionist Party in the run-up to an election. Therefore, the DUP and Sinn Féin, like thieves on the road to Jericho, have set upon a poor wanderer, and the good Samaritan has now come to the rescue.

The facts are totally different. The biggest increase in any budget is in that of the Health Department, at 7.5%. The second biggest increase is in the budget of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, at 3.1%. The third biggest increase is in the budget of the Department for Employment and Learning, at 1.86%.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me finish. The fourth biggest increase is in the budget of the Department for Social Development. All the rest of them have a negative cash figure over the four years. Of the top four Departments to benefit, three have Ministers from the Ulster Unionist Party or the SDLP. If that is a Sinn Féin/DUP carve-up, we

are not very good at carving up, are we? The nonsense is peddled, time and again, that somehow we are punishing the minor parties.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Hold on.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister clearly does not want to give way. We need less conversation from a sedentary position. The Minister has the Floor, and I ask Members to respect that.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is claimed that we are punishing the minor parties in order to embarrass them politically before an election. Well, the figures do not say that. Indeed, if anything, the party that should be complaining most is probably the party opposite, because it holds some of the Departments that have taken the biggest hits. That is an illustration —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am fearful. I should not have said that, because I know what he is going to do: he is going to ask for more money now.

That illustrates that we have, first, looked at the Executive's priorities and, secondly, decided how to allocate the money on the basis of those priorities. That is how we allocated the Budget, not on the basis of who is the Minister for those Departments or how we could embarrass a Minister. The shallowness of that argument can be seen in the fact that we do not have a clue who the Ministers will be after the election. They could come from any party. Decisions had to be made on a strategic basis, not on a party political basis. That is how the decisions were made, and the figures reflect the priorities of the growth of the economy and of health spending. Health, as the First Minister has pointed out, will be more generously treated in Northern Ireland next year than in any other part of the United Kingdom. That includes England, as we have not imposed the £20 billion or 5% a year efficiency savings that have been imposed on the Health Service there. I give way to the Member now.

Mr O'Dowd: On allocations and the draft Budget process, the Minister referred to parties having a right to complain. Does the Minister agree that the place to bring proposals is the Budget review group? The place to bring proposals is to the Executive and to other Ministers. Ministers

should sit down and have a constructive conversation with Executive colleagues, rather than what we have seen in this Chamber in the past fortnight.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is exactly where the discussions should take place. The Member is right: the Budget review group was set up for precisely that reason. Indeed, it has been in operation not since after the draft Budget was produced but long before it was ever decided on. It has been operating since the summer of last year, because we wanted to get the parties' collective views on where revenue might be raised, what might be done to raise revenue and how money might be allocated. The idea that secret meetings took place involving only the DUP and Sinn Féin and from which the other parties were somehow excluded is such nonsense. The Budget review group met regularly and ideas were discussed.

6.15 pm

That said, I am straining to think what ideas came from the party to my right during those discussions. I hope that I am not doing its representative on the group violence, but I cannot think of any ideas that came from the UUP. When I look at the rather flimsy document that the party belatedly published, 'UUP Interim Response to the Northern Ireland Executive's Draft Budget Proposal', I see not one idea in it. One suggestion was made, which perhaps shows that its representative on the Budget review group was not passing on too much information. A request was made for discussions to take place between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the party leader, Tom Elliott, on the work of the group. Therefore, there may not even have been any great communication between the party's representative on the group and his party leader.

I also notice that the UUP promised that it would start its detailed analysis of each Department's budget proposals and respond in due course. I think that we are still waiting for that response, yet we hope to finalise the Budget this week. That is the level of input —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No. That is the level of input that we have had. Parties cannot complain that there was not a process that involved them — there was — or that they did not have an opportunity

to give opinions — they did. If a party comes up with a four-page document on the eve of the publication of the draft Budget and then promises to give further information but that has not yet been received, it shows just how seriously we can take that party's input.

I said that I would give way to the lady, and I will.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. My point concerns the DEL budget. Does the Minister concur that many of the costs in the DEL budget are actually inescapable pressures? There is also growing concern at the fact that the number of unemployed people is rising, at a time when increased demand is being placed on DEL's services to provide retraining and develop employability skills. In this Budget, DEL was to receive and did receive in some respects a light touch, but, nonetheless, many aspects of the DEL budget contain statutory obligations to fund. Parts of the budget fall outside of a light touch being applied. I refer in particular to tuition fees, which, I think, the Minister voted against at Westminster. Tuition fees are of grave concern to many families right across the North and especially to the many young people who aspire to go to university. In that context, DEL did not get a light touch.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have just given the figures. The light touch is, of course, relative to what happened with other Departments, and I think that I have shown how that is the case. In the context of the £4 billion reductions that we are to have over the next four years, the Department for Employment and Learning was treated third most generously of all Departments. Incidentally, the Minister for Employment and Learning's main complaint has not been about the areas that the Member mentioned. I note, however, that some of the efficiency savings that are to be made in the DEL budget, especially in administration, are not to come at the beginning of the four-year period but towards the end. There are elements, therefore, in the departmental budget that the Minister can probably do something about.

I will move on, because the debate was not dominated by Mr Basil McCrea's comments. As I pointed out, he talked about his opposition to the Budget and to the Budget Bill, even though he did not understand what was in the Bill. We are still waiting — I suppose that we will be waiting for a long time — to see where the finance will come from to address the pressure

on health, if there is one. We are certainly not getting any ideas on that from him.

I now move on to Mr O'Loan's comments, and I am glad that he is here. He has assumed the role of Mogadon man in the Assembly. He went through an awful lot of documentation on the Budget, and he must have quoted every commentator in Northern Ireland. However, I really did appreciate something in his contribution this time: he did not give us any views from his party document. Maybe it was so comprehensively rubbished the other night that he did not have the gall to bring it up. However, his party leader did not learn that lesson and made some points from the document, which will probably force me to come back to it. I really do not want to do that, because I get nightmares from looking at it. I will come back to it at some stage.

Mr O'Loan made some interesting points about the Budget, especially when he got into the morass of endorsing some of the views expressed by some of the parties and groups that responded to the Budget. He talked about the lack of revenue raising and said that the CBI and the IOD had condemned us for our lack of revenue raising. In endorsing their comments on the Budget, I presume that he is also endorsing their comments on revenue raising. Why else would he mention their comments?

Let us see what the CBI and the IOD said about revenue raising. The CBI called for an increase in domestic rates. So, now the SDLP is the party of getting deeper into the pockets — *[Interruption.]*

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will in a wee minute or two.

Here is the interesting point. He then went on to talk about how the Budget and the current economic recession were hitting ordinary families. Yet, he endorses raising more money by increasing the domestic rate. Who will pay that increase other than ordinary families?

The Member goes further than that, because he supports the IOD's call for revenue raising. I see that he is shaking his head. If what I am saying is wrong, why on earth, in support of his arguments why he thinks the Budget is rubbish, would he quote the IOD and CBI, and why would he point out specifically that they

had condemned the Executive for not raising sufficient revenue, if he did not support the means by which they intend to raise revenue?

The CBI wants domestic rates to go up, and the IOD wants domestic water charging, so now the SDLP is the party of higher domestic rates and water charges.

Mr McLaughlin: Will the record of the debate today not demonstrate that Mr O'Loan said that those organisations agreed with his party?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: They did. As I pointed out in the last debate on the Budget Bill, some SDLP Members were condemning the rise in the regional rate because of the impact that it was having on small business, even though the policy was part of their party's own document.

I will give way. If I have accused the honourable Member in the wrong, I wish to hear his explanation. However, I hope that it is a bit less convoluted than some of the answers that we have heard from him.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for giving way, and my point is a simple one. As the Minister said, I quoted the remarks that were made by a number of commentators and organisations in support of revenue raising in particular. The SDLP supports revenue raising according to its own method of doing so.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We will come to some of those ideas for revenue raising in a moment or two. When someone says that the draft Budget is flawed —

Mr Bell: She needs Conall.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I would not go to Conall for too much advice. I would not rely on some of the advice that he gave Ms Ritchie last week.

If the Member quotes organisations and, on the basis of that, says that those organisations, through their comments, demonstrate that the draft Budget is flawed as a result of its revenue-raising provisions, any reasonable person would conclude that the Member has sympathy with the points that those organisations made on revenue raising.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a moment or two. Let me just finish

this point. A list of organisations — the CEF, the CBI, the IOD, NICVA, PricewaterhouseCoopers and many others — contributed to the consultation on the draft Budget. However, we must be careful. The consultation period gave many bodies the opportunity to make points about the draft Budget. Let us face it, those groups have specific interests that are sometimes partisan but are certainly sectoral. One can never do enough for groups, and all those groups made criticisms in the light of the interests of their own industry or the people whom they represent. However, to try to paint the views of those sectoral interests as a picture of the draft Budget being inadequate is shallow at the very least. Indeed, it is far worse than that: it is being selective in order to play politics with a process that Members have already made up their mind to oppose.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not know from which of the two Members to take an intervention.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he dismiss the Economic Advisory Group, which the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment formed, as a mere sectoral interest group?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Any economic advisory group would approach the draft Budget in that way. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment also has an interest in the draft Budget, and, if the Member had heard the conversations that I have had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the draft Budget, he would know that she fights for her budget and her interests. The job that I, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the Executive — at least the Ministers who want to take a responsible attitude — have is to listen to all the interests and then try to get some balance from them.

There is not a Minister around the Executive table — at least among those who are prepared to take their job seriously — who was not required to make compromises with their budget. There are things in the draft Budget that I do not like and that I am on record as opposing in the past. However, that is the process of coalition, and those are the compromises that must be made when dealing with difficult issues. Members can get infantile about it and say that they did not like or support

something and then stomp away claiming to have been excluded. I am afraid that is the attitude that some of the parties have taken, while others have admitted that they do not like parts of the draft Budget and that there are parts that they will find it difficult to live with. However, that is the outcome of any type of negotiation among parties that come at these things from a different point of view and among Ministers, who, quite rightly, fight their own corner. Indeed, one would expect them to do so, for they would not be very good Ministers if they did not.

6.30 pm

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate the Minister's giving way eventually. I know that he had an issue with the Civic Forum when it was in place and that he saw it as a waste of public resources. *[Interruption.]* That response says everything about the commitment of the Minister's party to proper stakeholder government. It says everything about the commitment of the Minister's party to an inclusive, collaborative, proper conversation about the best way forward for this region.

The reason why this House is divided is not because people are trying to do their job as Ministers; it is because civic society is in discord with the Minister on his analysis. If the Minister had any sense, he would revise his Budget and listen to those people in civic society who are putting their head above the parapet for the first time in 40 years to say that it is not good enough, and he would come back to the House with something that he could be proud of, not something that he is privately embarrassed about, and he knows it himself.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

My opposition to the Civic Forum has been consistent, and it is still there. I believe that the proper place to make the decisions about allocating budgets and having accountability for those allocations is among the people who are elected to the House. That is the way that it should be. Indeed, I noticed that the SDLP's document on the economic recovery talks about doing away with a lot of those bodies and reducing the cost of government. I would have thought that that was a prime target for reducing the cost of government.

Mr P Robinson: I honestly regard the comments from the Member who just intervened as being unworthy of response. The Member seems to

be an expert on every subject that he raises. If he knew anything about what had been going on during the past four years, he would know that we created a cross-sector advisory forum that gives us the grass-roots views on those matters, and it did not cost the Assembly any money to have it, unlike the previous Civic Forum. Does he not recognise that, yes, we did have a business group that gave advice, and its advice was to increase funding for DEL, the Department of Education, DETI and DRD. It wanted an increase in the budget of those four Departments. Other people want an increase in the budget of the Health Department, and others want an increase in the DCAL budget because they want more money for the arts. Some people think that more money is needed for water, and so that budget should be increased as well.

However, nobody is telling us, although they have been asked to tell us on a number of occasions, where those moneys will come from and which Department will have its money reduced. It ill becomes the SDLP to say that there should be more money for libraries so that libraries can stay open, when its amendment called for a reduction in DCAL's budget.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me make one last point, and I will be happy to let him come in.

Mr McLaughlin: He has got 90 minutes of interventions.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes, at least I prefer interventions from the Member than speeches. I am quite happy to let him intervene in a moment or two.

I have one last point, as it illustrates the political opposition that this represents from the SDLP I notice the criticisms. First, the SDLP brings on its side people who have criticised the Budget, and then when some of the criticisms and some of the stands that it has made are immediately pointed out, the SDLP distances itself from that and says that it did not actually mean that bit, it meant another bit.

Secondly — I really did find this amazing — week after week at Question Time, I suppose because the SDLP thought at that stage that the allegation was that Sinn Féin was dragging its heels on the Budget so it made good fun to have a wee pot at Sinn Féin, the SDLP Members

opposite talked about how scandalous and how terrible it would be if the Assembly did not agree a Budget. They talked about how the public would be dismayed and take the view that the Assembly was useless.

Yet what did Mr O'Loan say? He said it was "presumptuous" to write a four-year Budget, because we are committing the next mandate to a budgetary plan.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me just repeat what he said. I wrote it down because I could not believe it. He said that, if it is presumptuous to have a Programme for Government agreed, then it is also presumptuous to have a Budget. So we should operate in some kind of financial vacuum until after June. That is what the Member seems to suggest. It is only when you get to this —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In a moment.

It is only when you hear the kind of arguments that have been employed that you begin to realise that the real opposition to this Budget is not about its content, what the process has been or the extra money that we have added in; it is all about the SDLP positioning itself for the election. I can tell you, and this does not apply just to the SDLP but to the Ulster Unionists, that any party that thinks it will get off with that is taking the electorate for fools.

People realise that, just as you need a budget for your house and business, you need it for your country. Just as a budget for the house and the business requires choices to be made, so it also requires choices to be made for the country as a whole. This kind of nonsense: yes, we need a four-year Budget; no, it is presumptuous to have a four-year Budget; yes, we need to have revenue-raising; no, we cannot have revenue raising in that form or that or that, but they do not tell us exactly in what form it is — will be seen as playing games.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for letting me back in.

I want to pick on one of the points that the First Minister made, and I appreciate that he has come in to be wingman for the night. The cross-sector advisory forum is made up of the people

who, through their representative organisations, are criticising this Budget. The First Minister can choose to ignore that reality or accept it.

Here is the fact: we have a bad Budget Bill in front of us, but all is not lost. We have, by my count, about 10 days before the Finance Minister needs to return to the House with the final Budget statement for the next four years. The question is whether he is listening, not just to the criticism inside this House but to the criticism outside it. Will he make a commitment to stop the argy-bargy and the tittle-tattle and to stop bringing his wingman in for a bit of defence on the side, and make a commitment to come back with a Budget that we can all rally behind? That is what we on these Benches want to see and that is what I am asking the Minister to commit to, right now, right here.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am amazed. Will I stop the argy-bargy? The argy-bargy started two or three hours ago in this debate, and it certainly was not us. I was sitting here listening to it. I have tried to illustrate the kind of shallow arguments that were being employed.

As to the idea that no one was listened to in this, let me explain. It is not just me, as a Minister, who did this. Other Ministers have done this as well. This Budget process started last June. We listened to other parties. We went to Greenmount College of Agriculture, got the picture from the officials and heard the views of other parties. We set up a Budget review group. I can think of at least 20 groups that I met in the period until October. I know that the First Minister and deputy First Minister received representations from a wide range of groups. Most other Ministers got them. Those Committees whose Ministers gave them some of their draft spending plans based on 5% cuts in their budgets also brought evidence in and listened to it and did reports on all of that. It is nonsense that we have not listened or did not engage with the public.

The Member needs to get real about this. We have done that, and we will continue to do that. That is what the consultation period was about. It is one thing to say that we will listen to what the various stakeholders say, but as I pointed out to the Member, we have to recognise that all those stakeholders come with a particular point of view. At the end of the day, we cannot meet all their demands; it would be impossible.

We have to take a balanced view, and that is a decision that cannot be taken by some amorphous civic group. It must be taken by the Executive and then by the Assembly. There is no running away or hiding from that, and a decision has to be made, all the information having been fed in.

The Member is nodding in agreement. All that information has to be taken into consideration, but at the end of the day, we work within the limits of the money that we have got and the extra money that we have found. Then we allocate on the basis, first, of the priorities that we have set, and, secondly, the information that is given to us by all the people who have been consulted. Only then can we take a reasoned vote on those allocations in the Assembly.

I do not wish to be insulting, but Mr Farry's comments were in total contrast to those of Mr O'Loan, whose speech was all about negativity and criticism. It did not contain any positive ideas or any discussion about the tensions and the realism that we have to address when we are looking at the Budget. Mr Farry is not in his seat, but it deserves to be said that he was, at least, honest about the choices that had to be made. He pointed out, for example, that there is a tension in the Budget. If we spend more money on one thing, we cannot spend it on another.

Some of the very people whom Mr O'Loan has enlisted in his support for his criticism of the Budget have recognised that tension. If we spend more on health, and we are, there is a tension there. If we give health a bigger priority, we cannot have two first priorities, and the economy becomes the second priority. If we give the economy first priority, then health has to become the second priority. Members have to recognise that.

There are times when Basil McCrea wears his hat as the spokesman for local industry and manufacturing. At least Mr Farry was honest and realistic when he said that, in making health a priority, we would have to accept that something else will become the second priority. That was a useful touch of realism in the debate.

Mr B McCrea: I accept the point that the Minister makes. It is logical. In the past, I have argued for manufacturing and trade, and I agree with that. I will not go on, but the point that I was trying to make was that — *[Interruption.]*

We are trying to have a sensible debate. There is a debate to be had. The legitimate position that my party is putting forward is that it believes that health is the priority. We will try to argue that case, but we realise that there are consequences — *[Interruption.]*

I will let the Minister back in.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Maybe we are getting somewhere now. I have heard the Member do this before in the Chamber. He has now decided that health is such a priority that he is not going to wear his hat as the spokesman for manufacturing and industry and say that those should have first priority. If that is what he is saying, at least we are now getting somewhere. We may not know where he would take the money away from industry and job promotion and everything else. Of course, that will have an impact on the growth of the economy. However, if that is what he is saying, at least we are making some progress. Maybe the next step is to ask him which programmes he would cut in his second or third priority in order to give more money to health. Maybe, if the Member is going to give us some information on that, the debate will have been worthwhile.

6.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I was agreeing with the logic of the statement that not everything can be a number one priority. If he is asking me from where I would raise money or capital, there are other ways to raise capital and other things that can be investigated. However, it is not my position to do that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister made it clear that there is a forum in which to do all that, namely the Budget review group. If I were in a position to do it, I would have plenty of observations about where we might change the priorities. What I am making clear is that our party has come forward and said that it believes that health is the priority. That is the argument that we are trying to make, and it is entirely logical.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I note that the Member said that he has lots of ideas about how to raise revenue. I will not ask for lots, but, to help us and to inform the process, maybe he will give us one.

Mr B McCrea: I have to question —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot have a conversation between the Member who is intervening and another Member who is in a sedentary position. The Minister should take an intervention and reply. We cannot have a two-way process all the time.

Mr B McCrea: I have to question the effectiveness of our Invest Northern Ireland operation. That is one area that I would look at. There are other capital raising — [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Speaker has just talked about letting people speak from the Floor, which I am attempting to do. Members can come back in afterwards.

A challenge was put down. I made the argument about industrial de-rating — no one actually got on board with that until I made the case — because it would end up costing us money because of a flight of capital. I can make a sensible and reasonable argument on the issue. However, all that I can do here and now, as part of the debate, is say that the Ulster Unionist Party considered the matter and believes that health is the priority. That is the argument that we are putting forward. I understand absolutely that other things will have to change. It is democracy for people to argue their points of view about what should come forward and where they would prioritise.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not revenue raising; it is cutting spending. I am interested in the fact that the Member identifies Invest Northern Ireland. Maybe that comes back to a lack of communication in the Ulster Unionist Party. I read the Ulster Unionist Party's interim response to the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Budget proposal. The UUP said that the protection of jobs and the creation of new jobs must be a Budget priority. On the one hand, the UUP says that that must be a Budget priority. However, off the top of his head — maybe he should try again — the Member says that one idea is to cut the Invest NI budget. Maybe he will tell me: how is that done?

Mr B McCrea: The Minister has taken a particular sentence and extrapolated it into something that it does not mean.

I find it interesting when, for example, I hear people talking about corporation tax who

have never paid it. I hear all the great pearls of wisdom, but I see none of them. When I look at how jobs might be saved and created, at how the Budget should be spent and at whether to maintain or invest, I look to how we could generate cheaper electricity. I would make significant investment in marine and tidal infrastructure.

There is a whole range of issues that you could take forward if you had vision and the courage of your convictions. You challenged me to come up with an idea: instead of laughing you should be listening, because there is a wealth of experience in here that you are not taking on board.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members should make all remarks through the Chair and should not point fingers. I ask Members generally: where this is taking us? [*Laughter.*] We have had tedious repetition all evening. It may be good entertainment for the Members watching, but we have to make some progress.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think that Mr McCrea works on the basis that when his argument is weak he shouts louder.

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will just finish this point. The Member said that I took one sentence or part of a sentence. However, the paragraph that I read out from the Ulster Unionist document — and Members should read it — stretches for a third of a page. I could have read out the rest of it, but I did not need to do so as there was a whole paragraph stating that the Budget does not deliver the existing expectancy for job protection; that there is a need to create 10,000 additional new jobs; that there is no new detailed plan to protect jobs; and that DETI's budget is £18 million short, and it goes on and on. That is not an isolated quote; it is practically most of the document.

The Member says that that is where he would make savings. I do not know whether he understands the difference between revenue and spending, and savings and spending. I thought that I was getting an answer to my question about from where the revenue would be raised, but instead he talks of spending money on marine technology and on a whole pile of other things that I cannot remember now. I suppose that this can become laughable at times, but it is serious.

His party has criticised the Budget. It says that wants more money for the health budget and that it has now decided to change its priority from creating and growing the economy to spending money on health services. It has told me that it has lots of ideas for making savings, but the only idea that I heard contradicts what is in its document. That is how far we have gone in this debate and how inadequate that party has been in taking part in it constructively.

Mr P Robinson: We now have the no doubt considered position of the Ulster Unionist Party. It has moved away from the Assembly and Executive's position, which we all agreed in the Programme for Government should be that the economy should be the main priority, to wanting to make health the main priority and to cut the Invest Northern Ireland budget and, therefore, our ability to create jobs. The Ulster Unionist Party is looking for £200 million for the health budget. How much of that does it intend to take out of Invest Northern Ireland's budget?

Mr B McCrea: I am quite happy to engage, but the Deputy Speaker has given out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has the Floor again.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Usually Mr McCrea is very keen to engage and to jump to his feet before I have even had a chance to jump to mine. However, I think that his reticence is indicative.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I just want to make it clear that I am responding to your direction and that I do not lack the willingness to engage in the debate.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If what we had going back and forth for the past 10 minutes was engaging in debate, then it was very poor debate.

Mr Robinson makes an important point. According to the Health Minister, the hole in the health budget is actually about twice the size of Invest Northern Ireland's budget. So, the Ulster Unionist Party's idea for getting money for the health budget is to take it from Invest Northern Ireland. If it is actually proposing to just shave a bit of money off Invest Northern Ireland's budget, that does not comply with what is set out as a priority in its document and would not make much of a difference, so we would have to start looking at other people's budgets as well.

I suppose that that is why we have not had that level of engagement.

I come back to the Ulster Unionist Party and SDLP's reaction to this Budget: it is very easy to for them to pick holes and to say that they would do things differently. However, if there is silence or inconsistency when it comes to putting your hand up and stating what you would do differently, the only conclusion that we can draw is that that opposition is not based on a real belief that we got it wrong but on short-term party political interests.

The SDLP wants to be part of the Executive but, come the election, its members will go out into the country and say that the Budget was nothing to do with them and that they had no part in it. Minority parties have that luxury, but the public will not accept that that is a responsible way to behave. SDLP Members can embarrass themselves in here, but let us not pretend that they are acting responsibly. Mr McCrea started his speech by saying that he wanted to act responsibly and wanted to be part of the process. He has been given a chance to be part of the process, and this is what we get.

Mr Farry started all this; I was only quoting him. I want to come to another point that Mr Farry raised. He talked about —

Mr Callaghan: I am sure that the Minister would agree that one of the duties of a Finance Minister is to secure value for money across the Budget. The public, by the way, can make up their own minds as to who is electioneering in the Chamber this evening. Will the Minister inform the House whether the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety brought forward proposals arising from the exploratory study on North/South health co-operation and potential savings on joint procurement? If not, given that 40% of all spending on this island in the two Administrations is in the health budget, has the Minister asked him for any potential costings for savings that could arise through greater joint procurement?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There has been discussion on that. The Health Minister has decided, and it is his document —

Mr P Robinson: It is on the Internet.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Apparently it is on the Internet. However, the

Health Minister has decided not to present that document to the Executive.

The Executive take seriously the responsibility for getting value for money, as do I. One reason that we allocated money for a radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin, which the Member has discussed with me, was that we believed that value could be added by a contribution from the Irish Republic and by sharing that facility. To date, there is no indication that any detailed work has been done on how joint working could be established.

From a unionist perspective, where we believe that there is good value for money in co-operating with Departments in the Irish Republic, there is no Minister on this side of the House who would not do that for party-political reasons. However, no Minister on this side of the House believes that there was any need for a political structure to grow up around those issues. Where we believe that value for money, better efficiency and better use of resources can be obtained by co-operating with Departments in the Irish Republic, we will do that. I have no hesitation in saying that. Unfortunately, what sometimes makes that more difficult is the political posturing of the SDLP around the need for a political structure to be thrown up to support that. People then become suspicious as to whether that co-operation is genuinely about value for money — if it is, I have no difficulty with it — or about the pursuit of a long-term political goal.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have given way to the Member quite a lot. I want to move on to the issue raised by Mr McLaughlin and Mr Farry. Mr McLaughlin made a very good point. Until now, the attitudes of some parties in the Executive and Assembly have, to a certain extent, been coloured by the fact that an election is imminent. However, the Budget is a four-year process; there is work to be done.

He pointed out the revenue that we have already identified and the work that still needs to be done to effect savings and revenue after this Budget is over and throughout the four-year period. I hope that he is right. Maybe, after the election is over, we will get the kind of co-operation that he talked about. We really need that so that we can put together all of the ideas that there may be and try to pursue the opportunities that are available so that we

release resources that will fill some of the gap. I do not think that that will happen between now and the election, but there are opportunities afterwards. It is the view of my party, and I know that it is the view of his, that we should keep in place the structures that enable parties to do that and to participate in that kind of arrangement.

7.00 pm

He also pointed out that one of the things that Ministers needed to do — he specifically mentioned the Health Minister — was to look at how they can get the best value out of the resources that are available to them. That work can be done internally in parties. The McKinsey report shows that, despite what is being said by the Ulster Unionist Party, there is within the grasp of the Health Minister the ability to make £60 million of savings in his budget every year for the next four years. Indeed, there are other things that McKinsey did not identify on top of that that could be done. That would relieve a lot of the pressure on the health budget.

Ms Ritchie —

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes.

Mr P Robinson: To put the McKinsey recommendation into terms that people will understand, is it not the case that the equivalent of six to 10 nurses will lose their jobs every day because the Health Minister will not take the strategic decisions that McKinsey has directed?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That certainly puts into perspective the Health Minister's claim that 4,000 nurses will lose their jobs. Every day, he could avoid six of those redundancies if he were prepared to make decisions.

The leader of the SDLP thought that it was a requirement to do what it says in Standing Order 17(7), which refers to engaging in persistently irrelevant and tedious debate. I could not believe some of the stuff that we got from her. We got the usual — I will not use the word "rhetoric" — complaints; I have heard them all before. She said that the process and Budget were flawed. How often I have heard that before. She said that the Budget was not fit for purpose, that it had no underlying economic principles and that money was allocated to

embarrass our opponents. I have gone through a lot of those arguments, but I will come to the two elements of her speech that took up most of it. She started to talk about what should be in the Budget. It was the same kind of mentality that we heard from Mr McCrea. The SDLP will oppose student fees, which is a turnabout. I know that I made this point in the previous debate, but it is worth making again: that party held the Finance Ministry when Tony Blair was emptying pots of money into Northern Ireland, but it decided that it could not abolish student fees because it would have cost £35 million. However, it has had a turnaround, so it will oppose the carve-up.

The SDLP will also oppose any reduction in EMA. It wants more money to be spent on new housing, although I think that she had better tell the Minister for Social Development about that because he wants to reduce by 14.9% the amount that is spent on new housing.

She wants more capital investment in schools and in their maintenance, more money in the green new deal and more money in tourism. I like this item, because she thought that she had caught me out on it; she pointed out that we needed to reprioritise our capital spending to emphasise job-rich projects rather than, presumably, spending money on capital-intensive projects. I pointed out, really by way of observation, that her party was vociferous about spending on the biggest capital-intensive and land-intensive programme: the A5 project. Indeed, Mr Callaghan was vociferous about our having to keep on spending money on it. That may well be a good project, but it is not job-rich and it takes up 60% of the roads budget.

I then asked her which capital investment projects she would cut instead, and although I gave her the opportunity to come back to me on it, she did not do so. I thought that the SDLP document might enlighten me, and it did. It talks about switching from capital-intensive projects and capital projects that do not benefit the local economy. The SDLP identifies — and do not forget that this is all part of filling the £4 billion hole in the Budget — £250 million that can be saved by switching from capital projects that do not benefit the Northern Ireland economy. The SDLP is suggesting that we reduce the money spent on buying new trains. That is the only suggestion made in the document, and we are going to save £250 million on it.

Of course, the only problem is that not only have all of the new trains been ordered but most of them have arrived. They are being commissioned, and, as far as I know, there are no plans to buy any more new trains, so we have got —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will in a wee minute, because I am interested in hearing from the Member.

The SDLP document says that we could save £250 million on trains, which would give us more money to spend on job-rich projects. Given that we do not have any new trains on order, and given that the SDLP leader would not give me any other suggestions, maybe Mr McDevitt, who writes her speeches and supplies her with information will give us some. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister. What I find ironic about his position, and I hope that he has told Mr Ross about this, is that he is arguing against the A5 and A8 programmes as though they would have no material economic benefit for our region. He is arguing against free money from the South five minutes after saying that he would do anything that makes sense for Northern Ireland, so long as it brings jobs here.

His point about trains further puzzles me. We have a big order for new trains, but because of the railway lines, they will run more slowly than the trains did during the Second World War. If the Minister wants to make some serious capital investment here, he can start by building us a new train line between Dublin and Belfast, and get some Southern money into it. Frankly, if he is serious about debating with the SDLP, he needs to drop the rhetoric, look at the substance and stop worrying about this lot over here on the Benches beside me, who are obsessed about anything that is not in public ownership and not stuck in the 1960s. We are up for the conversation: is he? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I raised the subject of the A5 because it was a good example of an expensive capital project that is not job-intensive. I raised it in response to the Member for South Down's point that the SDLP wants money to be spent on job-rich investment projects. Yet 60% of the DRD budget, which it supports, will not be spent on

job-rich investment projects. I agree that there are benefits. Indeed, I spoke earlier about the benefits and importance to the west of the road from Dungannon to Ballygally.

Some Members: Ballygawley.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

Ballygawley or wherever it is. The party opposite actually raised the issue and said that those were not the kind of projects that it wished to support any longer. Since the SDLP put those figures into the Budget, it has to justify them. However, to be fair to the leader of the SDLP, after talking about spending all that money on all those things, at least she asked where the money would come from, although she quickly glossed over it by saying that we would find the answer in its document. Then she sat down.

[Laughter.]

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that it was hugely ironic for the previous contributor, Mr McDevitt, to talk about doing the roadworks and getting money from the South given that, in the run-up to the general election in the Twenty-six Counties, both the likely coalition Government partners — Fine Gael and Labour — said that they want to cut the money for that particular roads infrastructure project?

[Interruption.]

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is even better; he wants to make sure that the money goes away.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No. I think that the Member was justified.

She very quickly glossed over where the money should come from by saying, “Read our document.” I do not want to go through the document again, because we have looked at it in a lot of detail in the past. First, it proposes £690 million of extra borrowing, on top of the borrowing that we are already authorised to undertake. I know that Mr McDevitt said that all we have to do is ask the Treasury for permission to borrow more money and it will not take it off the block grant. That is the kind of fairyland that the SDLP appears to live in. Believe you me, the Treasury does not give up restrictions on borrowing that easily, and, given the fact that the current policy is all about deficit reduction, if Mr McDevitt thinks that we will get £690 million

extra borrowing ability from the Westminster Government, he is wrong; we have no chance.

Secondly, of course —

Mr Callaghan: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will in a minute.

I find the second thing amazing, especially since we have had criticism. The SDLP suggests that we get £250 million from asset sales. I am already being condemned by the SDLP. One of its condemnations of the Budget is that we are relying far too much on asset sales. We put in only £100 million from the capital assets realisation task force (CART). The SDLP suggests putting in £250 million, yet it condemns us for it. Another one is that we will get £150 million from planning gain, even though its document says that we will not get any money in the short run, yet it has already included £20 million for next year from planning gain.

I know that we had a little spat about whether the SDLP is the party of privatisation, but we can prove that it is. Allotments, Housing Executive headquarters, car parks, NI Water, rates collection, the Forest Service and even the Speaker's house would go. If I were one of you lot, I would not sit about too long, because you will get a price tag put on you and sold as well. The SDLP wants to privatise everything.

I listened to Mr McDevitt very carefully.

7.15 pm

Mr Bell: Why?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes, well. The SDLP says that it only wants to sell because it understands the economics of this. I get very suspicious when I hear Mr McDevitt say that. It only wants to sell going concerns. Those going concerns include £37 million for the City of Derry Airport. That is such a going concern that, in the last February monitoring round, we gave Londonderry council £8.6 million towards that airport because it could not wash its face. That is not the first time that we have done that. It is about the third time that it has had that subsidy, yet through the SDLP's Budget proposal and the figures that we are meant to rely on and that we should include in our Budget, it will get £37 million. However, the SDLP is even selling somebody else's airport on them. *[Laughter.]* However, do not worry, Ms Ritchie says that that

is how it will finance her wish list. I could go on, but I will not.

I want to use those few simple illustrations to show that, on the face of it — *[Interruption.]* The SDLP puts those proposals forward as though they are serious and are the way out of the Budget problems. I have heard it time and again, and there is a whole list of proposals, including spending proposals, all of which are equally suspect. However, according to SDLP, that is the constructive way out of the Budget problems and avoids us having to make any of the painful decisions that it did not want us to make or that it does not want to put its hands up for. It is flawed and wrong and is an attempt to hold out hope to people when there really is no hope in any of this.

During the Budget process, we have made it clear that we will take ideas from other parties. However, other parties make such proposals and, immediately after our proposals are put out in public, they condemn them. Mr Callaghan did that on the subject of a rates increase. The SDLP document says that we should increase the regional rate, but he condemns the impact of that on small shopkeepers in Londonderry. It makes a proposal to freeze recruitment in the public sector to save jobs, yet Mrs Kelly stands up and says that that will not save jobs because it will stop new people getting job opportunities. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot put those proposals in the document and then condemn them just because it happens to be a useful way of rebutting a point.

Mrs D Kelly: I am quite shocked at the debate this afternoon on two fronts. First, I am shocked that Sinn Féin has become so house-trained by the DUP that it has little to say about implementing the Tory cuts. Secondly, although the knockabout between political parties can be entertaining for some, many people in the community that I represent are worried about how they will pay their rent this week and how their young people will get jobs. The Finance Minister and, indeed, the First Minister and deputy First Minister went back and forth to London to insist on the £18 billion package deal that they promised the people of the North for the devolution agreement. Where has all that hope gone? Where have all those promises gone?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:
For the very reasons that the Member has

given, despite the fact that it has meant hard decisions for parties in the Executive, we have taken the decisions that we have taken. We wanted to give people certainty; that is why we have set down a four-year Budget.

We wanted to make sure that people had an opportunity to get jobs, and that is why we have given the priority that we have to DEL and DETI. We wanted to make sure that people in the public sector had the best opportunity to hold on to their jobs, and that is why we froze recruitment and froze wages over £21,000. All of that has saved hundreds of jobs. We have listened to what people have had to say. We have listened to people's concerns rather than playing politics, which we could have done. The responsibility on the two biggest parties at least is to make sure that a Budget goes through. The smaller parties can play politics.

I see that the Member from the Alliance Party Dr Farry has come into the Chamber. The one thing that I will say for the Alliance party is that it could have played the same game as the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, and it did not. As a result — *[Interruption.]*

I see the Member making a gesture to say that is about money. That is the ultimate insult. Maybe it says more about the mindset of The SDLP. David Ford could have held on to his job and kept his car and his wage and still voted against the Budget, but he did not. He took responsibility, so do not for one minute suggest that it was done just because money and positions were involved. The real dishonesty is that those two parties have shown that they can hold on to their jobs and still act irresponsibly. That is the ultimate in misbehaviour by the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have probably gone on long enough. I thank Members for their contributions. This is the third debate, and it has been the same old debate. I suspect that we will get the same when it comes to debating the Budget itself. Mr O'Loan said that, despite all of his objections, he will still vote for the Bill. I do not like to think what he would say about something that he objected to. All that the Bill does is to authorise the spending for the past year and to give the power to spend money for the first four months of the new financial year until we have had the chance to debate the final Budget. Hopefully, that will be available very quickly and we can get some certainty injected into it.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 11/10] do now pass.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Committee Business

Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Weir: I beg to move

That the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] do now pass.

I see that the Chamber seems to be emptying by the moment.

As I said during the Second Stage, the Bill is in two Parts. Part 1 establishes the independent financial review panel, and Part 2 establishes the Northern Ireland Assembly commissioner for standards. I will deal with Part 1, and the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, Mr Declan O'Loan, will deal with Part 2.

The independent financial review panel is being established as a result of the consensus view across the Chamber that a move to establish an independent body in line with other legislatures would be a positive step towards greater openness and transparency in this area. Part 1 will come into operation on the day on which Royal Assent is granted. The panel will consist of a chairperson and two other members, and it will have the power to determine all aspects of financial support in respect of Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It will be required to exercise its functions with a view to achieving a proper balance between the objective of ensuring probity, accountability and value for money with respect to the expenditure of public funds and the objective of securing an adequate level of remuneration for Members, which will allow them to discharge their functions effectively.

The general rule will be that a determination will be made by the panel only once in the lifetime of each Assembly. Further determinations may be made as necessary to take account of changes in the law and practice relating to pensions, or in exceptional circumstances.

One of the core principles underlying Part 1 is that the panel will be independent. For example, the Bill provides that the panel will

not be subject to the direction or control of the Northern Ireland Assembly when exercising its functions. Likewise, while the Assembly Commission will be responsible for the appointment of panel members, Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly will not be members of the appointment panel. In addition, in order to ensure that the panel is independent of Members, a broad range of connections to the Northern Ireland Assembly or to individual Members, as refined at the Consideration Stage of the Bill, will result in disqualification for eligibility from membership of the panel.

The Bill provides that the Assembly Commission must provide the panel, or ensure that the panel is provided, with such administrative support, including staff, services and accommodation, as the panel reasonably requires to discharge its functions. That provision has been made to ensure that the panel operates in the most cost-effective way possible. I look forward to the establishment of the panel and to the implementation of a wholly independent and transparent process for the determination of the future financial support requirements of Members.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly and look forward to hearing Members' contributions.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (Mr O'Loan): The Committee is pleased that the Bill has reached its Final Stage. Part 2 provides for an independent Assembly commissioner for standards with significant powers. The Committee has given much consideration to the issue of how we can ensure that there is public confidence in the integrity of the Assembly. The creation of the statutory office of commissioner is an important step forward in making sure that Members of the Assembly are accountable for their conduct.

Prior to preparing the Bill, the Committee carried out an extensive inquiry into the issue of how Members should be accountable, and a number of options were considered. The Committee concluded that when there is a complaint that a Member has breached the Assembly's code of conduct, it is right that the complaint should be investigated by an independent commissioner. It is for the Committee on Standards and Privileges to determine whether a breach of the code of conduct has occurred, and for the Assembly to impose sanctions where fitting. That continues to be appropriate, reasonable

and workable. However, it is necessary to create a statutory independent commissioner with real powers to call for witnesses and papers in order to ensure that the facts on any complaint can be established in full.

Part 2 of the Bill therefore provides for the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly commissioner for standards. The commissioner will be able not just to investigate complaints, but to initiate investigations where it appears that a breach of the code of conduct may have occurred. That was a key recommendation of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and I am pleased that the Bill gives effect to that.

The Bill provides for the commissioner's independence. The Assembly will be able to agree the general procedures that the commissioner should follow when deciding how and when to carry out investigations.

However, as far as any specific investigation is concerned, the Assembly will not be able to direct the commissioner in whether or how that investigation is carried out. Most importantly, the commissioner is free to reach and express any conclusions on the outcome of any investigation.

7.30 pm

The Bill provides that, when the commissioner carries out an investigation, the Assembly will always publish the commissioner's report. That provision puts transparency and openness at the heart of the Bill. The Bill also provides for the commissioner to have the power to call for witnesses and documents, and it creates offences for refusing to provide, or otherwise failing to give, evidence. Those provisions make sure that the commissioner will be able to get to the truth of the matter when carrying out investigations.

I take this opportunity to thank those who have been involved in the Bill's progress. Particular thanks are due to the Committee Clerk for his deep expertise and huge diligence. Creating a Bill that is sound and will not create problems in future through bad drafting is a very intensive and intricate process. I thank the other Committee staff who were involved and those who took the time to give evidence to the Committee. Their contributions were crucial in assisting the Committee develop its policy on the matter.

It is right that we should acknowledge the significance of this joint Assembly Commission and Committee Bill. Committees are more familiar with scrutinising Bills than with drafting their own. I believe that this Bill — or Part 2, at any rate — will be the first Bill emanating from a Committee and passed by the Assembly. It has, therefore, been a useful and educational experience to partake in the process from the other end. As I said, drafting legislation is a complex business. I thank my colleagues on the Committee on Standards and Privileges for their great efforts in preparing the Bill, as well as the Assembly Commission for the role that it played. I also thank the researchers, the Bill Office staff, the lawyers and the Office of the Legislative Counsel, all of whom toiled tirelessly in helping us to get the Bill right.

I pay tribute to the Ad Hoc Committee for the detailed scrutiny that it gave the Bill and for its helpful suggestions for amendments. I also place on record, again, the Assembly's gratitude to the Ombudsman for his continuing support as the Interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Part 2 of the Bill provides a legislative framework that will strengthen the public's trust in the integrity of the Assembly. It has been agreed unanimously by the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and it signifies how seriously the Assembly takes the conduct of its Members. I welcome the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his remarks. I was going to thank the Members, but only one spoke. I think that Members will be relieved to hear that I will not spend as long on my winding-up speech and dealing with Members' remarks as the Finance Minister did in the previous item of business. I see Basil McCrea poised to intervene at any moment.

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, Mr O'Loan, for his contribution. The lack of contributions reflects the fact that the House is united on the issue and that a broad consensus has developed. I am pleased that Members have confirmed their agreement to the establishment of an independent financial review panel, which will, when established, determine all issues relating to Members' pay, pensions and financial support.

I welcome the fact that this important Bill has reached its Final Stage. Once again, I take the opportunity to thank the Chairperson and

members of the Ad Hoc Committee that was established to consider the Bill and to thank the Committee on Standards and Privileges, fellow members of the Assembly Commission and Assembly secretariat staff for their contributions to the development of the Bill. Without further ado, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] do now pass.

Private Members' Business

International Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour 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 Wells: I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the report from the all-party group on international development 'International Development Strategy for Northern Ireland'; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to incorporate its findings into an international relations strategy and to implement its recommendations.

As I rise to propose the motion, I would like to pay tribute to the driving force behind the all-party group on international development. There is absolutely no doubt that I would not be standing here this evening and the motion would never be debated were it not for the determination and perseverance of the former Member for South Belfast Mrs Carmel Hanna. I have to say that she is, in many respects, a stark contrast to the gentleman who replaced her. She was quiet, sensible, spoke succinctly, and was very easy to deal with. I am jesting.

Without her determination and tenacity, the all-party group would have folded long ago. She pioneered much of the progress that has been made, and kept things going during very difficult circumstances, particularly when the Assembly was prorogued, as it were. She has kept at it, and we have now made progress, albeit 12 years after the formation of the all-party group.

There is no doubt that Northern Ireland has a higher level of interest in international development than any other part of the United Kingdom. We have a long history of work throughout the world, particularly through faith-based charities and the Churches. Indeed, at any given time, there are several thousand people from the Province working in far-off parts of the world, dealing with essential healthcare, education and other important work.

I will give an example, which is a minor one, but in my opinion it explains the psyche of the Northern Ireland people. I am involved in

a charitable group that is responsible for the maintenance of an orphanage in Timisoara, in Romania. Three years ago we ran an appeal in Kent and in Northern Ireland, and I, as treasurer, had the privilege of receiving the donations. The part of Kent that we targeted was quite affluent, even by southern English standards. The cheques all came in and, as a little task, I checked the average donation from Northern Ireland and the average from Kent. The average donation from Kent was £31, and the average from Northern Ireland was £90.

That minor example indicates that we, as a Province, are extremely interested in overseas development and extremely generous when it comes to giving. Indeed, one could not help but notice the vast contribution of over £1 million that was made in Northern Ireland when the tsunami appeal was launched all those years ago, when individual churches raised £30,000, £35,000 or £40,000 in one service for that very deserving cause. We have that interest, but, until now, as a devolved Assembly we have not had what could be called the made in Northern Ireland or the Northern Ireland-branded product in relation to overseas development.

We were conscious of the fact that our colleagues in Scotland were very active in countries such as Malawi, and the Welsh Assembly was very active in countries such as Lesotho in southern Africa, yet there was nothing that this devolved region could point to as being its contribution to that very important work.

Of course, the main agency for the delivery of overseas development in the United Kingdom is the Department for International Development (DFID), and it is a reserved issue, which has not been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, through looking at it very carefully, we have discovered that it is possible for the Executive and Assembly to make an immediate contribution to that work without infringing any of the legislation that surrounds overseas development. I am, therefore, glad that, as a result of funding that we received from NI-CO, we have been able to produce a research document and we seem to have found a way forward.

We are starting out on the very tentative steps towards creating an overseas development project branded from Northern Ireland. After a lot of discussion and consideration, the recommendation is that north-east Uganda is the first area that we in Northern Ireland will

become involved in. The statistics for Uganda are quite shocking. There are 31 million people, but the average life expectancy in that country is only 50 years, compared to an average of 78 years in the United Kingdom.

The average income in Uganda is 300 US dollars a year. The average income in the United States is \$38,200 a year. That gives some indication of the huge disparity in incomes between sub-Saharan Africa and western Europe. In Uganda, 35% of residents do not have access to clean drinking water: the major factor as far as hygiene is concerned.

There are many interesting parallels between Uganda and Northern Ireland. Many aid agencies represented by the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland (CADA) are active in that country. We have strong involvement through Irish Aid, the Irish Government's implementation body for overseas development. That, plus the fact that we have strong links with that country, has focused our attention on Uganda.

North-east Uganda has other interesting comparisons with Northern Ireland. It has 1.5 million people, which is not too far removed from Northern Ireland. It is an area that has come out of a long internal conflict, where terrorism, unfortunately in this case the Lord's Resistance Army, inflicted great pain and hurt and caused mass movements of people. Those parallels are helpful in our work. What we propose is in harmony with the Ugandan national development plan. We are working with the Ugandan Government rather than in opposition to it. Four main themes are proposed: education, health, rural development and livelihood security.

Having identified that country as one where we feel we can take forward assistance from Northern Ireland, what are the key principles that we hope to implement? We want to build strong and effective partnerships between Northern Ireland and north-east Uganda by facilitating the transfer and exchange of knowledge, skills and expertise between the two regions. We want to ensure that all actions are beneficial to both regions because we have much to learn as well as assisting north-east Uganda. We want to ensure that all actions in north-east Uganda correlate with the Ugandan Government's development plans. We want to ensure that sustainable development is at the

centre of all actions undertaken, and we want to complement the sustainable international development policies of the two Governments, namely the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, and the work of the major agencies.

We want to reflect the strength and connections of the people and communities of Northern Ireland in international sustainable development, and, of course, we want to assist in the delivery of the millennium development goals. This is a very small start, but we can say that we have crossed the Rubicon if this motion goes through. We are starting out on a journey on which, hopefully, Northern Ireland will start to play its part in international development.

From small acorns, great oaks grow, and I hope that that is where we are going tonight. I would like to think that we will look back in 10 or 15 years and say: "This is where it started. This is where Northern Ireland started to play its role." I believe that the community is behind us in this project, and that the vast majority in Northern Ireland, no matter where they hang their hat on a Sunday morning, want to see us play our part.

There may be a few in here who will say that we have our economic problems; that we should not be spending money overseas, but looking after number one. I hope that the figures quoted indicate that even the most deprived part of Northern Ireland is extremely wealthy compared with north-east Uganda. No one in Northern Ireland is surviving on \$300 a year. The millennium goals are that we should spend 0.75% of our GDP on overseas and international aid projects. What we are proposing is nothing like that. I hope that we will get there one day, but we have to start somewhere. It is only when we reach that UN target that we can start to say that we really do care about others.

Remember, as we speak in the comparative luxury of Stormont tonight, that in Uganda and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, there are children going to sleep who are hungry, children with life-threatening diseases, and a huge proportion of the population with HIV/AIDS.

We have to show that we care. If we agree the motion tonight, we start the ball rolling, and we start to make progress towards that highly desirable goal. If we were to name this endeavour, I would call it the "Carmel Hanna project". Without her, we would not be having the debate. I do not know whether she deserves

a knighthood, a peerage or some other award, but whatever she gets is richly deserved.

7.45 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the all-party group, I commend those who pushed for the motion to be included on today's Order Paper. It could be said that this is the most important debate of the day, because it illustrates that the House is prepared to look outside itself. As the Chair said, we should look at people, countries and places that are not nearly as fortunate as us and try to do something. The motion illustrates the generosity and commitment of the House.

Yesterday, I spoke to Karen Gallagher, who is the chair of the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA). There are about 21 organisations in CADA, including Concern, Tearfund, the British Red Cross and Trócaire. Karen told me that an awful lot of good work is being done in parts of Africa, Asia and the Americas. However, what is lacking is a comprehensive overview of the amount of work being done, who is doing it and what further work needs to be done. She said that, in the first instance, a strategy is of key importance, and the development of such a strategy is the focus of the motion.

The Chair referred to a report from which it emerged that north-east Uganda would be an area with which this area of the world could work in partnership to help those who are less fortunate than us. The Chair outlined the themes and areas on which that partnership could be built. In general terms, one theme is working towards poverty reduction, and a second theme is that of improving the quality of life for citizens living in those areas. Those two themes are underpinned by the eight UN millennium development goals, the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action. Ireland and Britain have signed up to the themes, ethos and culture of all of those.

At today's all-party group meeting, we received a briefing from a Fairtrade coffee farmer from Tanzania, which I found extremely insightful and informative. It was a practical illustration of a partnership that was extremely worthwhile. You were there, too, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as were other Members. The briefing lasted only about 15 minutes, after which there were some questions and answers, but the benefits of, for example, Fairtrade were clear to all. So I want to plug Fairtrade, as we were asked to do so.

I refer to an Assembly debate in 2008, when my party colleague Raymond McCartney expressed Sinn Féin's full support for a strategy and for reaching out and doing what we can as an Assembly for those less fortunate than us. Junior Minister Gerry Kelly was present on that occasion, and, in responding to the debate, he said that the Executive and the Assembly have a role in enabling and supporting international development. That was an affirmation, in 2008, that the Assembly wanted to do something. He referred to the Programme for Government.

The intention of the motion is generous; I fully support it and urge all others to do so as well.

Mr Kennedy: I join Members who have spoken in the debate in paying tribute to all those who serve on the all-party group on international development, particularly Jim Wells and Conall McDevitt. I join Jim Wells in paying tribute to Carmel Hanna, a former Member for South Belfast, who was instrumental in establishing the all-party group and provided strategic leadership and commitment on the issue. I also thank all of the many people across Northern Ireland who are interested and involved in international development for their ongoing work and commitment.

I am pleased that the area that we have chosen to partner is north-east Uganda. The statistics on life expectancy in Uganda are in stark contrast to those for our own very happy situations. Almost a third of the population in Uganda lives below the national poverty line, which is a very sobering statistic, as is the fact that Uganda has the second highest birth rate in the world.

Education is central to reducing poverty. We must, therefore, invest in the young people. I am pleased that the strategy recognises the United Nations millennium development goals, which include objectives such as achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, combating HIV and Aids and developing a global partnership for development.

Although I am not speaking as a Minister in this debate, I am aware that my Department has been involved in the Irish African Partnership for Research Capacity Building for some time. That is a very good example of global partnership in action. Higher education institutions have a crucial role to play in addressing global issues.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the debate on the motion. To my shame, I am not a member of the all-party group on development, but it has my support.

In addition to education, it is very important for us to use the considerable expertise that we have in Northern Ireland. For example, the Housing Executive has fantastic expertise in house construction. We also have expertise in the water service and many other facets of our lives. Translating that expertise and bringing it to places like Uganda is very important. I urge the Member, as a Minister, to urge the Executive to try to channel that expertise into such areas.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his contribution and accept the point that he makes. There are so many agencies and Departments that can co-operate and collaborate to improve things generally. We have to build on that.

I am not sure whether taking that intervention allows me an extra minute.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, it does.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you very much.

I am therefore pleased that the strategy is committed to building strong and effective partnerships between Northern Ireland and north-east Uganda. The transfer and exchange of knowledge, skills and expertise, ensuring that all actions in Uganda correlate with the Ugandan Government's development plans, will reflect the strengths and connections of the people and the communities of Northern Ireland in international sustainable development.

I also draw attention to the potential to co-ordinate the development of internships, mentoring programmes, placements, job exchanges, school-to-school links and community-to-community links. Those experiences often prove invaluable, and I offer support to the opening of such opportunities.

Nurturing public and private sector placements and partnerships that contribute to the strategy, and to how it is delivered, is important. The report also importantly notes that Northern Ireland has a long history of working in partnership overseas, and in Africa in particular, and Mr Wells, rightly, highlighted the extensive charitable giving that is reflective of the entire community here.

I want to draw Members' attention to the work of my colleague, the MEP Jim Nicholson, who

is a vice chairperson of a joint parliamentary assembly between MEPs and elected representatives from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Last September, Jim visited Haiti after the devastating earthquake there, and his work in Europe should and can inspire the Assembly to play its part in global development.

Northern Ireland remains the only devolved region without a specific response to contributing to international development. I am pleased to see that we are closing that breach with the publication of the report, and that is thanks to the dedication of the all-party group on international development.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Kennedy: OFMDFM can drive forward this agenda. My party and I will seek to ensure that the strategy is high on our agendas during the next mandate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Declan O'Loan.

Mr O'Loan: Mr Deputy Speaker, I withdraw.

Ms Lo: I support the motion, and I thank all of those who helped to produce the report. I echo the tributes of other Members to Carmel Hanna, Jim Wells and Conall McDevitt, who kept the all-party group alive for all these years.

People in Northern Ireland are well known for their generosity in volunteering overseas and giving to developing countries through donations to charities. Indeed, CADA members collectively raised around £23 million in 2009 from the public in Northern Ireland.

As a member of the all-party group on international development, I fully endorse the report, and I am very pleased to see that we have at last joined with the other devolved regions in at least having some form of strategy on international development. Although we have no formal remit or budget to fund international development or develop projects of our own, the report will provide a focus and energy to enable us to support the work of CADA, DFID, Irish Aid and others in their work in north-east Uganda, which was recommended as our priority area in the report.

We have a long history of working in Africa, from early faith-based links to more recent aid projects and humanitarian work, public sector support in kind, private sector trade links and community initiatives. A number of years ago, when he was in his late teens, my youngest

son went to Malawi with his youth group, and I know that it opened the eyes and minds of all those young people who spent time with their counterparts from that country.

As other Members have indicated, Uganda is very similar to Northern Ireland in its demographics and its problems with sectarianism and conflict. I hope that we can use our experiences and expertise, for example in agriculture, to positively influence the work and outcomes of the projects that are undertaken in the region.

In Northern Ireland, we have benefitted from financial and political support from the EU and the USA for the past 40 years. Now that we have more peace and stability, it is essential that we help others who are in greater need. However, helping others is very often two-way traffic, and we very often learn more about ourselves and gain from the knowledge and wisdom of others.

8.00 pm

Economically, working in Uganda can enhance trade links between Northern Ireland and developing countries, and we just have to look at the example of China. Many major projects in Africa are producing benefits to both countries.

With regard to education, the Employment and Learning Minister highlighted our links with that country, and more linking of our schools and universities with local institutions would benefit our young people and help them to become more outward-looking.

Joining the Scottish and Welsh devolved Administrations in developing a sustainable strategy to support the eradication of poverty means that we can play our part in achieving the 2015 millennium development goals.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the debate. Unfortunately, I have not been a Member of the House for a sufficient time to be able to provide any particularly constructive input to the group — or really any input to the group at all. Nevertheless, I commend the efforts of everybody involved in it. I know that, inside and outside the Assembly, the valiant and passionate efforts of Carmel Hanna are regarded, acknowledged and noted.

Mr Deputy Speaker, it seems appropriate that you are in the Chair for the debate, given that Mountsandel in Coleraine, the place where

human beings first arrived on this island, is in your constituency. If we think far enough back to the people who made that journey, it brings us back to our common humanity and the simplicity and courage of the people who made very troubled voyages over heavy seas all those millennia ago.

Water is key to so much of life. Only this winter, people in this part of our country discovered the hardship that is caused when water is not available. As Mr Wells said, many of the things that we take for granted and that shock us to our core by their absence, people in other parts of the world can only aspire to as something that is in the future or perhaps is only for their children to aspire to. I do not want to be facetious, but maybe Northern Ireland Water is not the best example of the technical assistance that we would propose to send overseas. Nevertheless, the point is a valid one. There are people in Uganda and other parts of the developing world who can only dream of the standard of living that we have, and, therefore, the debate is timely and opportune.

Having listened to Mr Wells, Mr Kennedy and other Members, I am struck that so much of what we take for granted in our healthcare system and basic expectations around life does not necessarily follow in other parts of the world. The statistics and facts that we often hear about infant mortality and women dying in childbirth strike me, as a new father, as being very real. I know, as every Member knows, that the love that a parent has for a child in Northern Ireland is no greater or no less than the love a parent has for a child in any part of Uganda or anywhere else in Africa or the developing world. That, too, is another reason why we should do whatever we can to provide assistance to develop capacity and well-being in parts of the world that are less fortunate than our own.

As Anna Lo said, the Irish are a globalised people. Although this region has been criticised, sometimes rightly, for being introverted and insular, many of our people are global in their outlook and interested in causes that do not directly affect them. They want to champion big causes and big interests. There is significant interest in the work of the group, and since I became a Member my e-mail inbox is a testament to that. It fits with the fine global traditions, lay and secular, of intervention in economic and developmental work around the

world that this strategy is now laid before the House.

I hope that we will develop better governance and aid links with north-eastern Uganda and that, in time, trade links will blossom and grow from the personal relationships that will come about as a result of the strategy. In his opening remarks, the Member for South Down rightly spoke about the material deprivation and the absence of wealth caused by war and poverty in north-eastern Uganda. To a small extent, we have had similar experiences. I have visited Africa only once.

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

Mr Callaghan: I will draw my remarks to a close promptly. Anyone who visits Africa will realise that, for all the material deprivation, there is a huge wealth of culture and spirit in which we can share. I welcome the strategy and, to coin a metaphor used by Mr Wells, as a Derry representative, I hope that great oak trees grow from this acorn.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Wells, Ms McGill, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr Callaghan, Mr Alban Maginness, Mr O'Loan and yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker, for making those occasional meetings on a Tuesday at lunchtime a special time in the House. What draws Members to the all-party group on international development is their internationalism and the fact that deep inside them is a desire to be a global citizen, to be something more than what we are identified by or what we are confined to by our job in the Chamber. As colleagues reflected tonight, it is not just people in the House who feel that way; it is hundreds of thousands of people in this region. Millions across this island and tens of millions across these islands feel that way.

For that reason I would like, before entering upon the substantive issues discussed this evening, to remind colleagues that we will gather again later this month in the Long Gallery to do something that we have not done yet and celebrate ordinary people who have made a contribution — fundraisers and those who have gone abroad on charitable missions or professionally — and to acknowledge their contribution in the name of this House as the seat of power for this region. At a time when this place was unable to reconcile itself properly, many thousands left our shores to work at

building better societies, better communities and better nations elsewhere.

I feel privileged because I have just taken on Carmel Hanna's job. I am privileged every day to have succeeded her as one of the SDLP MLAs in South Belfast, but I am particularly privileged to have been given the opportunity to pick up on an issue that she championed, as Jim Wells said, with the support of people in the House, some of whom have since left us. I also feel strongly about this issue, as it deserves much greater prominence.

Mrs McGill is right: this is a very important debate. It sends a strong message to people across our community, including children, about the values that we bring here as human beings, and about our commitment to others who, as Mr Wells, Ms Lo and Mr Callaghan said, do not enjoy the material wealth that we enjoy or get the opportunity for education that Mr Kennedy spoke about so eloquently or the jobs, training and internships that we take for granted and which are part of who we are.

At lunchtime today, I was speaking to an exceptional group of 16- and 17-year-olds from schools in my locality. It is interesting as I look around that, maybe, I see too many teachers in the room. Members, particularly those who have taught, will know what I mean. Those young men and women are all set up for life. They are highly empowered and ambitious and want to make this place work. Three years ago, in a previous life and in a different job, I was in Uganda, where I met 16- and 17-year-olds, but the big difference was that they were parents. They were not set up for life or ambitious for the future, with their hopes and dreams bagged. They were working hard at surviving. They were thinking about meals for their children. They were obsessed with getting the fees together to pay for a primary school education. The sad reality in Uganda today is that the vast majority of people get an education only if they pay for it.

Ugandan villages are small and in highly dispersed countryside, like we have on this island. I remember walking through a townland where I came across a farmer who described himself to me as an old man. Mrs McGill talked about the coffee producer that we met earlier today. The farmer that I met was working hard as a coffee farmer on a tiny acre and a half of land for subsistence, as part of a fair trade co-op. I asked him what his big dream was, and he

told me that it was to make enough money to send his grandchildren to school. He is living his life through the hopes of his grandchildren in the same way that, as our history books tell us, people on this island had nothing else to do but live their life through the hopes of their grandchildren and their grandchildren's children. He kept talking about himself as an old man, and I asked him what age he was. I thought that he was maybe 50 or 60, but he was 38, the age I am today. He may as well have been 68, because he was beaten and defeated. The only thing left in him was the hope of another generation.

It is not just that we should do something to contribute to the lives of people like that farmer — we must do something. I thank NI-CO, CADA and the very many people who cannot share the limelight this evening with us for all the work that they did to help us to design and put together the report. We can do what Mr Maginness spoke about; we can bring our expertise to bear to train teachers, inspect schools, build water systems, advise farmers and help with security or institution-building.

In north-eastern Uganda, which has been ravaged by civil war and the awful atrocities of the LRA and Joseph Kony over the past 40 years, people retreated to fortified villages, and they are only now escaping from those villages back to the land. They need to build municipal government as well as regional and state government, and the people need to have faith in it. We have the expertise to share with them and help them on that journey. That does not cost us one red cent. It just costs us time and goodwill. In my opinion, the report asks that we get that goodwill from the Executive; that Ministers and senior civil servants see the opportunity to develop partnerships with the regional and municipal governments, the education and health authorities and the agricultural inspectorates and training colleges; and that we find ways of providing that technical assistance, giving people who are every bit as talented as us the means to build their society and rebuild their communities, allowing them to live their lives not just through their children but for themselves.

8.15 pm

I thought that it was most apt, Mr Deputy Speaker, that Mr Callaghan should choose to draw your constituency into the debate by noting

that we believe and the history books tell us that civilisation arrived on this great island somewhere close to where you were born. What is fascinating about Uganda is that Uganda claims that civilisation emerged there. Uganda is where the Nile starts, just outside the Great Lakes and north of Lake Victoria. Science and history tell us that that is where civilisation started.

We have a fantastic opportunity to be able, in coming years, to respond to schoolchildren in the Assembly when they ask us what we have done for schools or hospitals or this or that by saying, "Ah, but do you know what we did last year for children of not quite your age somewhere else? We did as much for them, and we did it because, in our common humanity and internationalism, we will never be divided".

I am very grateful to the House and to my colleagues. Like Jim Wells, I am in awe of Carmel Hanna. I will remain so for a long time for the fact that we have got to this stage. I will end with a plea that we do not lose momentum and that, in the next mandate, we, as an all-party group, coalesce again to say to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, whoever they may be, that they must progress this matter, because progressing this matter is good news for us all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, before putting the Question, my attention has been drawn to the fact that there is no quorum.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Saved by the bell, Mr Burns.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the report from the all-party group on international development 'International Development Strategy for Northern Ireland'; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to incorporate its findings into an international relations strategy and to implement its recommendations.

Adjourned at 8.17 pm.



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