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# OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 14 October 2008

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Independent Review of the Outbreak of Clostridium Difficile in Northern Trust Hospitals

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the independent review of the outbreak of clostridium difficile in Northern Trust hospitals.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** I wish to update the Assembly on the outbreak of clostridium difficile in Northern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals and on the independent review of that outbreak. Members may recall that I made a statement to the Assembly on the review team's interim report on 3 June 2008.

I am pleased to advise Members that the outbreak is over and that the Northern Trust was able to declare that that was the case as of the end of August.

From the outset, my top priority was to bring the outbreak to an end as quickly as possible and to ensure that every effort was made to achieve that. That is why I brought in the NHS's cleaner hospitals team to assist the trust. I am grateful to that team for its contribution, and, indeed, its support will continue well into 2009.

I also pay tribute to the staff in the Northern Trust who worked extremely hard over a long, difficult period to bring the outbreak under control.

The outbreak was declared in January 2008. In February, I asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to carry out an independent, rigorous review, the purpose of which was to identify, as quickly as possible, the lessons that needed to be learned from the outbreak so that they could be acted on.

I made it clear from the outset that the review should be conducted in such a way that would not

hamper the efforts to contain the outbreak. For that reason, its first phase review concentrated on the other four trusts.

The review team produced an interim report at the end of May 2008, which I presented to the Assembly on 3 June 2008. I have now received the final report, and I am making that available to Members today.

The review included the following key elements a review of extensive documentation provided by the Department, the Northern Trust and the Northern Health and Social Services Board; a review of the actions of the Department and the Northern Board on policy development, performance management, accountability and guidance provided to the Northern Trust; a review of all surveillance reports; and a root-cause analysis of the outbreak. That analysis included an examination of the Northern Trust's arrangement for governance, infection control, prudent antibiotic prescribing, clinical care, and environmental cleanliness and communications.

That analysis covered three periods. First, the period up to 16 June 2007 — the day on which a positive toxin sample for clostridium difficile was taken from a patient in Antrim Area Hospital. A second sample that was taken from the same patient on 16 July 2007 was, later, sent for culturing, and it was confirmed as clostridium difficile ribotype 027 on 14 September 2007.

Secondly, ribotype 027 was present from 17 June 2007 to 7 January 2008, but that was before the clostridium difficile outbreak was declared. Thirdly, the period of the declared outbreak was from 7 January onwards.

The methodology consisted of two main parts: the investigation of what happened, and the analysis of why it happened. In its examination of the first period, the review sought to establish the level of preparedness for such an outbreak across Northern Ireland and in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. Members will recall that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust was established in April 2007, following the merger of Homefirst Community Trust, Causeway Health and Social Services Trust and United Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust.

The review team found that the Northern Trust's lines of accountability for infection, prevention and control were clear. The team did not consider that the merger was detrimental in that respect, as there was significant continuity in staffing. Infection prevention and control were high on the agenda across Northern Ireland. That was evidenced by the range of policies that were in place, such as the Changing the Culture strategy, the antimicrobial resistance action plan and cleanliness audits. The Northern Trust was proactive in adopting those policies. It was the first of the new trusts to identify an infection prevention-and-control lead.

The review team found that clostridium difficile was being taken seriously across Northern Ireland. However, the review found that there was a lack of awareness in Northern Ireland of the potential consequences of the emergence of a virulent strain of clostridium difficile, and that impacted on decisions that were made before the outbreak was declared. That was similar to the position in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Trust was as well prepared as any other trust in Northern Ireland to deal with an outbreak. However, the review found that the trust did not have effective systems in place to ensure that policies adopted by the trust board were being implemented and observed at ward level. For instance, an antibiotic policy was in place, but there were problems with adherence to it.

When clostridium difficile ribotype 027 appeared in Northern Ireland for the first time in January 2007, the infection-control systems and cleaning arrangements in the Northern Trust were not robust enough to cope. That was compounded by the significant level of patient transfers between hospitals in the trust, which reflected the pressure on beds that was brought about by high occupancy and throughput. Shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff in the southern part of the trust also contributed to the pressures.

In the second period — after 16 June 2007 — the incidence of clostridium difficile increased from August. In August and September, there were clusters of cases in Antrim, and, in October, there were cases in Whiteabbey. There was a fall in cases in November. That may have been grounds for believing that the trust had brought the number of cases under control, but, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that that improvement was deceptive. In December, there was an increase in the number of clostridium difficile cases and deaths.

Looking at that period, the review team found that there was a delay in recognising that there was an outbreak at that time. The review team identified a number of possible contributory factors — information systems in the trust did not facilitate tracking and monitoring of real-time trends and the detection of clusters; and there were delays in receiving ribotype information. Analysis of ribotype cases across the affected hospitals could have enabled the trust to identify, more quickly, a pattern that was not fully apparent at individual hospital level.

In the third period, after 7 January 2008 — when the outbreak was declared — the chief executive took personal control immediately. She convened and chaired an outbreak control team, and the review team found that that helped to speed up decision-making.

The Northern Health and Social Services Board provided practical and financial support to the trust to manage the outbreak, and officials in the Department

provided support to the trust when the outbreak was declared. A decision was quickly taken to manage affected patients on one ward. The review team considered that a very positive move and a significant control measure.

The review found that between 16 June 2007 and 30 June 2008, 297 patients tested positive for clostridium difficile. That group had been inpatients in the hospitals of the former United Hospitals Trust when the sample was taken. Based on information provided by the Registrar General on data up to 31 May 2008, clostridium difficile was mentioned on the death certificates of 41 of those 297 patients.

The principal conclusion of the review was that the outbreak was caused by the emergence of the virulent 027 strain in Northern Ireland, and a lack of awareness of the implications of 027 led to some delays in decision-making.

The final report contains 17 recommendations, in addition to 36 recommendations that were made in the interim report. Five of the final report's recommendations are for region-wide action, and include the establishment of a formal risk-assessment system for emerging threats from specific infectious diseases, to be led by the new regional agency; a review of regional arrangements for public-health advice and outbreak support for trusts; further action on antibiotic prescribing, led by the antimicrobial resistance action committee; a robust infection-surveillance system at regional and trust levels, including regular monitoring of virulent strains; and a review of arrangements for ensuring implementation of key regional policies and compliance at patient level.

The report makes three recommendations for action by my Department: a review of the current system for reporting serious adverse incidents and new guidance on roles and responsibilities in relation to healthcare-associated infections; a review of undergraduate education and continuous professional-development requirements for clinical staff in respect of infection control and antimicrobial prescribing; and a baseline review of all trust cleaning arrangements against current standards and methodologies.

The final report addresses eight recommendations to all health and social care trusts. They cover effective arrangements for monitoring the implementation of policies at ward level; arrangements for healthcare-associated infection surveillance in trusts; development of escalation plans for dealing with virulent strains; daily assessment of each patient with clostridium difficile; assessment of risk factors for every new patient with clostridium difficile infection and regular reviews of the results.

The recommendations further cover a decluttering review of ward environments; timely and complete

information for patients, during their stay, to meet the needs of patients, carers and families; and the establishment of a system to ensure that patients' views of their experiences are used to inform the delivery of services.

Finally, the report recommends that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust puts in place a comprehensive communication strategy to ensure that the whole workforce is fully briefed and that everyone understands his or her responsibilities with regard to the quality and safety of patient care.

I have accepted all the recommendations, and work on implementing them is under way. The Department's service delivery unit is working with each of the trusts to develop an action plan for the prevention and control of healthcare-associated infections.

Each trust's plan will include actions to implement every recommendation that the RQIA team addressed to the trusts. Moreover, there are several actions to be taken forward centrally, and my Department is working on those.

One further phase of the RQIA review is an examination of the implementation of the Changing the Culture strategy, and that phase of the review has now started.

On 4 March 2008, Members debated a motion that called for a public inquiry into the *clostridium difficile* outbreak. At that time, I said that I was minded to hold a public inquiry, but first wanted to focus on two tasks that were more pressing: ending the outbreak, and identifying the lessons. Those two tasks have now been achieved. The RQIA review team has fulfilled the terms of reference that I set for it.

It has done so in a highly professional manner, and it has completed the review speedily, without compromising the rigour of the investigation. I am very grateful to the team for its work.

10.45 am

The terms of reference that I set for the independent review were wide ranging and open ended in order to allow the review team to investigate any aspect of the outbreak. The terms of reference also had a clear focus on the contributory factors to, and the management of, the outbreak. The review team did the job that I set for it, and we will now get on with implementing its recommendations.

However, some important issues remain. The first is to ask how many people died as a result of the outbreak. The second concerns the experiences of patients and others who were affected directly by the outbreak. I want to restore public confidence in the safety and quality of healthcare, and I believe that people want to know the answers to those questions.

The review has not provided a definitive view on the number of deaths that can be attributed to the outbreak. The Northern Trust has established two subgroups to analyse both mortality and the outbreak. The RQIA review team found that the approaches that were being taken were appropriate, and it commends that work in its final report.

Such an investigation is necessary, but public confidence is as much about perceptions as it is about scientific rigour. Any account of the deaths that resulted from the outbreak needs to be not only rigorous and objective, but independent. We must hear from the people who suffered as a result of the outbreak; that is, the patients who contracted the infection, their families and the people who have lost loved ones. We owe it to them to provide them with an opportunity to have their voices heard, and we need to listen to their accounts so that we can learn from their experiences. For those reasons, I have decided to hold a public inquiry that will examine those issues. I will advise the Assembly in due course of the terms of reference and of the membership of the inquiry team.

For now, the RQIA review team has identified several valuable lessons that can be applied not only in Northern Ireland, but further afield. Our clear duty is to act on those lessons across Northern Ireland without delay. I thank the RQIA team for the important work that it has done, and I will ensure that the recommendations in its report are implemented for the benefit of patients and their families, carers and loved ones.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I pay tribute to the dedication of all the staff who were involved, particularly those in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, for their efforts to contain and control the severe outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in Antrim Area Hospital.

I am sure that we are all greatly relieved to hear the Minister's assurance that the outbreak is now under control. However, like the Minister, we must acknowledge that the outbreak has rocked public confidence seriously. Many people who are going into hospital now have additional concerns and anxieties that they may be at serious risk of catching infections. I hope that today's report will go some way towards restoring confidence in the healthcare system.

The Committee has taken an intense interest in hospital infections. When the seriousness of the outbreak first became apparent in February of this year, the Committee questioned the chief executives of all five health and social care trusts on the extent of the problem, not just in Antrim Area Hospital, but throughout the North. Committee members examined

the action that was being taken to address the outbreak at that stage, and we were minded to hold a Committee inquiry. The Committee also came to the House and called for a full public inquiry. Therefore, I particularly welcome the Minister's commitment today to undertake a rigorous investigation into the number of deaths that have been caused by the outbreak of clostridium difficile. I also welcome his announcement that he will listen to, and learn from, the experiences of the patients and families involved and those who were directly affected by the issues.

Can the Minister provide any further details on the plans for the public inquiry and its likely timescale? Will the specialist team that carried out the inquiry on behalf of the RQIA have a continuing role in ensuring that all the recommendations — both in the interim report and the final report — will be implemented? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am very grateful to the specialist team that carried out the RQIA review, and I appreciate the time that it took to do so. That team obviously has other work to do now that the review is completed. As I said, I accept all its recommendations, and we are taking the next step of drawing up action plans to ensure that those recommendations are implemented.

Michelle O'Neill is right that this is a case of public confidence as much as anything else. I accept that public confidence has been dented, and I understand the need for that confidence to be restored. That is one of the reasons for having a public inquiry. It was important for the outbreak to be contained and, indeed, the outbreak has now been declared over. However, we must learn the lessons and ensure that the episode is not repeated and that the public has confidence in our Health Service. Therefore, a key part of the public inquiry must be allowing patients, their families and carers to present evidence about their experiences.

As I said, I will present the public inquiry's terms of reference and the membership of the public inquiry team to the House. I appreciate that it has been said that the public inquiry must be time-limited, and I will ensure that the public inquiry team realises that time is of the essence. However, it is difficult to curtail justice in that respect. I am not sure that I can set the team a particular time frame and insist that the inquiry must be completed within six or nine months.

**Mr Easton:** I welcome the Minister's announcement; it is good news. I congratulate the staff of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, and I welcome the news that there will be a public inquiry. Will the Minister update us on whether any of the other trusts are experiencing problems with clostridium difficile? The Minister said that the outbreak is over. Can he confirm

that there have been no cases of clostridium difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust since August?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The figures that I gave show that there were two cases in August and none in September, although there is a time lag in the provision of such information. It looked as though the outbreak had been contained at the end of last year, but then there was another increase in the number of cases. The outbreak has now been declared over, and the precise figures will become apparent later.

All the trusts will follow an action plan, which they will produce along with the RQIA and the cleaner hospitals team. The cleaner hospitals team is from England's National Health Service and has expertise in dealing with the consequences of outbreaks of clostridium difficile 027 in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells. That team is working with hospitals throughout all the trusts to develop action plans so that good practice can spread throughout the region. We can benefit from the team's recommendations — and our experience — to ensure that we prevent an outbreak in the future.

**Mr McCallister:** I join the Minister in paying tribute to the staff who worked tirelessly in dealing with a difficult situation. I welcome the public inquiry, and I agree that it was absolutely vital that we reacted quickly to the unfolding situation. Does the Minister agree that RQIA's unannounced independent inspections of hospitals and healthcare facilities in recent months have been effective and will go a long way to restoring public confidence? Will those inspections continue?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I can confirm that those inspections will continue.

In January 2008, I introduced a series of key measures, one of which was unannounced inspections of all hospitals. Other measures have been put in place, including restrictions on hospital visiting, a dress code, hand hygiene and rapid-response cleaning teams.

Hospitals had almost become areas of public space; large numbers of people were visiting them who had no business being there. Hospitals are for patients to receive care, the people who provide the care and the people who provide the essential backup to that care. Patients also require the support of visitors, but, in the future, the number of visitors will be limited. One of the problems was that large numbers of people who really should not have been in for a walk were wandering around some major hospitals.

The Department has a policy called Changing the Culture, and the culture must be changed all the way through. The damage that a virulent strain such as 027 can do to the elderly population and the ease with



which it can spread means that the number of people who visit hospitals must be limited. Unannounced inspections are a key part of ensuring that hospitals perform in accordance with their action plans, the Changing the Culture policy and the other remedies that have been put in place.

To date, one unannounced inspection has taken place in each trust, and those will continue. Unannounced inspections are important, because RQIA has the expertise to inspect a hospital that would appear to most people to be up to scratch, up to speed and clean. Anyone who has worked in a hospital, however, will know that there are certain things that should be done and things that should not be done.

**Mrs Hanna:** I also welcome the news that the outbreak is over. The staff at the Northern Trust have been through a tough and challenging time, and RQIA has done a good job.

The Minister has gone through all the final report recommendations, and those are very important. It is important that the formal risk assessments continue, along with the action on antibiotic prescribing and the infection control and surveillance system. Importantly for patients and families —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. This is time for questions on the Minister's statement, not for a separate statement.

**Mrs Hanna:** I beg your pardon. Other Members also made a few remarks.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have allowed some leeway for very short statements, but this is time for questions to the Minister on his statement.

**Mrs Hanna:** My question to the Minister has already been answered. The unannounced inspections of hospitals must continue, and they must be monitored and recorded. I seek the Minister's reassurance on that.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As I said when I made the original announcement, it is important that the inspections are unannounced, that the hospitals do not know that the inspectors are coming and that a comprehensive inspection is carried out. That is important for public confidence and for the discipline of maintaining a safe environment for patients. It is also important that staff understand that they are doing the job that is required of them. Mrs Hanna is quite right to say that the Northern Trust staff, particularly in the southern part of that area, have had a difficult time. They have responded magnificently, and they have experience that will prove invaluable to staff in other trusts.

**Mr Ford:** I also thank the staff of the Northern Trust for their efforts in dealing with the outbreak. In doing so, I declare my interest as a former employee of

what is now the Northern Trust, and the father of two recent employees of the trust.

None of the recommendations that the Minister outlined makes any reference to the high level of clostridium difficile that already exists in the community. What action is being taken to address that? How many of the patients to whom the report refers were admitted to hospital already carrying clostridium difficile?

The Minister spoke of shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff. How much of the money that the Department has allocated to cleaning services has been given to trusts to employ cleaners, as opposed to being given to other people to inspect cleaning?

Finally, the Minister said that public confidence is as much about perceptions as scientific rigour. RQIA has clearly demonstrated scientific rigour in the report. Will the Minister explain how he imagines a public inquiry will add to public confidence, and what that inquiry will cost his limited resources?

11.00 am

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Everybody is aware that clostridium difficile is in the community. A portion of the community carries the bacterium. Clostridium difficile will never be eliminated. The reality is that we must always be on our guard.

Clostridium difficile was imported into hospitals. Some of the patients on whose death certificates it was listed as a contributory factor were admitted with clostridium difficile. RQIA is responsible for conducting inspections in other premises, apart from hospitals. That is the area on which it is concentrating at the minute. We are not complacent. There is a long way to go. As far as I am concerned, there are several areas in which there is room to expand.

When that particular part of the trust took over nursing and cleaning, Antrim Area Hospital had a low quota of cleaners and fewer than the standard number of nurses. I requested that the trust rectify that situation. Openness and transparency are key ways of restoring confidence. That is being achieved through this report and through measures such as unannounced inspections, the Changing the Culture action plan, and a public inquiry. The inquiry will allow patients, families who have lost loved ones, and carers to relate their experiences. That is an important part of rebuilding confidence and of determining exactly how many people were directly affected.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members are reminded that mobile phones must be switched off.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his update to the House, and for the swift action of the Department and hospital staff in bringing the clostridium difficile

outbreak under control. I hope that this good-news story will help to rebuild confidence in the community.

I note that the recommendations are to be implemented by the Department and the health and social care trusts — including the Northern Health and Social Care Trust — and that those recommendations are to be actioned regionally. Will the Minister provide a likely time frame for the full implementation of the 17 recommendations that are highlighted in the report and that are accepted by his Department?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have said that I accept fully the 17 recommendations. They include five recommendations for regional action that relate to operational matters, three are for the Department, eight are for all the trusts, and one is specifically for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

All the recommendations are being taken forward. I will expedite them all. Measures will be put in place as quickly as possible. Each trust will provide an action plan that it will follow, with the support of RQIA and the cleaner hospitals team, which plays an important role in the initiative. I assure the Member that the recommendations are being treated as a matter of urgency.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important also to acknowledge the leadership that he has provided as Minister. I have raised my concerns about the clostridium difficile outbreak in previous debates.

There are two issues, which remain unclear from the details that I have heard, on which I want to hear the Minister's views. There have been reoccurrences — patients admitted for a second time with clostridium difficile. I am not sure whether they are treated, medically or statistically, as new cases. Secondly, it is not clear whether anyone has been held to account —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. What is your question, Mr McLaughlin?

**Mr McLaughlin:** I have two questions. Is the Minister aware of the re-emergence, or of repeat incidences of clostridium difficile in some patients? Secondly, will anyone be held to account?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There is a high recurrence rate with clostridium difficile, and the rate is even higher with the 027 strain. That may partly explain why, at the end of last year, after it looked as though the Northern Trust had got on top of the problem, there was a further rise in the number of people infected. However, the medical and nursing staff are now well aware of the tendency for recurrence, and they keep the matter under review.

RQIA and the public inquiry will decide whether anyone will be held to account. We hope that the public inquiry will restore public confidence in the system.

The 027 strain was a new, virulent form of the disease, and, as far as I am aware, it had not emerged before in Northern Ireland. The systems that were in place did not cope with the challenge initially, but the outbreak is now over, and I want to ensure that no further outbreaks occur. Therefore, all the recommendations must be followed carefully, along with the other packages of measures that I have already announced.

**Mr Ross:** I, too, welcome this morning's announcement and pay tribute to the staff in the Northern Trust. Some constituents who came to see me told me that they were hurt and angry about having lost loved ones to clostridium difficile. What help and support is available to those people?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** That is a very difficult part of this entire episode. It is important that people who have lost loved ones, friends, family members and carers, among others, are given an opportunity, during the public inquiry, to provide evidence by relating their experiences. Help and support is available for those people through the normal channels; that is, through the Health Service and through social services. It is always difficult when someone loses a loved one, but, when they lose a loved one under these circumstances, it is doubly difficult. I want to provide reassurance and confidence to the public through the measures that have been discussed.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I, too, welcome the Minister's announcement that a public inquiry will be held. I also wish to add my congratulations to the Minister and his Department, and, in particular, to Norma Evans and her staff in the Northern Trust, who have gone beyond the call of duty in attending to the crisis.

In view of the erosion of public confidence in the health system, will the Minister assure me that there will be no diminution in the resources devoted to tackling the problem in order to ensure public safety and to rebuild trust in the healthcare system?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As far as the diminution in resources is concerned, we have already had this discussion. I am in the hands of the House, as the resources are set down in the Budget. However, patient safety is very important, and it is one of the reasons why healthcare-associated infections are a key priority.

I have set targets for that area, and they are carefully monitored by the Department's service delivery unit. We carefully monitor everything that goes on, but it is important to remind ourselves of the number of hospital attendances: there are 720,000 accident and emergency

attendances, 1.6 million outpatient attendances, and 540,000 inpatient and day cases. Furthermore, each one of those people may bring with him or her visitors, and some may attend for long stays. That gives an indication of the sheer volume of work that goes on in our hospitals and through our Health Service.

The provision of health and social care is a vital role of Government, and society has a duty to ensure that resources are available to match need.

**Mr O'Loan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. We are all grateful to RQIA for its thorough report on what has been a distressing episode for many families.

Although the report makes it clear that major learning was required on how to deal with the emergence of a particularly virulent strain of clostridium difficile — ribotype 027 — I was impressed by the analysis, monitoring and response to the outbreak by the staff and management of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

“Shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff”

and

“pressure on beds due to high bed occupancy and throughput.”

were reported as contributing to the development of the outbreak. How does the Minister reconcile those parts of his statement with recent reports of forthcoming cuts to front-line staffing?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am not making cuts to front-line staffing. My announcements do not concern cuts; however, I am required to provide efficiencies at the rate of 3% a year over the next three years, which means that I will have to find £700 million. Nevertheless, every pound that goes out comes back in, and I have been able to make announcements about service developments because those efficiency moneys have been made available. The fact is that several service developments, of which Members are aware, will not happen without that process. I did not seek or ask for the efficiency process; all Departments are required to submit to it, and my Department is not excused.

Our system meets high levels of bed occupancy, and I am examining our high bed-occupancy rates, some of which have reached 95%. Taking healthcare-associated infections into consideration, we must determine whether a lesser rate of occupancy would improve patient safety.

Concerns about shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff were centred on five hospitals in the southern area of the Northern Trust. As I said earlier, when the trusts were established in 2007, the numbers of cleaners and nurses that it was anticipated would be required were not available. It is important that proper levels of staffing are maintained, particularly in light of the

recommendations of the NHS cleaner hospitals team and the action plans of each of the trusts.

Cleaners play a vital role in hospitals; they are not just ladies who wear green overalls and carry a mop and bucket. We must recognise that and ensure that cleaners and nurses get the support that they need. I am mindful of the ward sisters' charter, and, as Members are aware, I am considering ways in which to empower ward sisters. That is an important piece of work.

I mentioned the Changing the Culture strategy. We want to make changes; they will not happen overnight, but I have a sense of where we must go. We must restore patient confidence, and we can do that by ensuring patient safety.

**Mr Storey:** I welcome the Minister's statement. We have all had contact, particularly in my constituency, with those families who have lost loved ones as a result of the issues that the Minister seeks to address.

In my own family, I can think of an uncle who unfortunately passed away, and clostridium difficile was named on the death certificate as being one of the contributing factors to his death.

Other Members referred to confidence in the community, but it is also important that there is confidence in the medical world — Mr Coulter referred to that — and in particular in the Northern Trust and all those who are involved in the delivery of our Health Service. That is vital, and I hope that the report goes some way to reassuring them that they will not be made scapegoats and that we will deal with the issue.

11.15 am

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member must ask a question.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Minister tell the House what resources are available for the public inquiry? Who will pay for it? Will he also comment on the register of general data that are recorded? Does he believe that that information now needs to be reassessed in order to ensure that it is accurate and up to date?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The data that are recorded, and how they are interpreted, is one of the issues that the public inquiry will examine — that is very important. Public confidence is so important — and it is crucial that it is restored — that I will find the resources for the public inquiry from the Department's budget.

We have a first-class Health Service and a first-class medical, nursing and allied-health workforce. The workforce of the entire Health Service provides first-class care to the population of Northern Ireland. There is a need to ensure that patients understand that, and that can be done through building confidence and ensuring patient safety. The public inquiry, together

with the review team's recommendations, will provide the essential blueprint to inform the action plans so that all of this comes together and results in a better Health Service. I, therefore, pay tribute to Alice Casey and her team from RQIA.

**Mr Beggs:** I must declare a keen personal interest in this subject, as my grandfather was briefly a patient in Antrim Area Hospital and then a patient in Inver House in Larne for several months during the period of the outbreak. I place on record my appreciation for the care that he received from the staff and the efforts that they made to limit cross-infection.

Does the Minister agree that scientific certainty and public transparency are important if public confidence in light of the outbreak is to be restored? Does he also agree that healthcare staff worked very hard at ensuring that infection-control measures were implemented, and, accordingly, they deserve our full support and the public's co-operation?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and**

**Public Safety:** I agree with Mr Beggs's remarks about transparency; indeed, I emphasised that point this morning. I also agree that the co-operation of the general public, who visit hospitals and use the Health Service, is necessary. They must do so in a way that promotes confidence and patient safety. That is a very important message that must be expressed.

**Mr K Robinson:** I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that the outbreak is now officially over. I also welcome the fact that the Minister is in a position to proceed with a public inquiry.

However, I am a visitor to hospitals from time to time, and, although all the procedures and strategies may be in place at a certain level, at ward level, whenever visitors arrive there is no one to actually check that they clean their hands or that half a dozen people are not sitting on a patient's bed. What steps can the Minister take at that level to ensure that all the strategies and procedures are actually enacted on the wards? I also commend the staff, particularly those at Whiteabbey Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital, who struggled manfully — and woman-fully — against the very serious outbreak. Should their reward not be more than further cuts to the staffing levels, which were mentioned in the Minister's statement?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and**

**Public Safety:** I explained that the team found reductions in staffing levels, and we look to remedy any shortfalls. The situation at ward level is an imperfect picture in all hospitals.

Of course, a great deal depends on staff ensuring that regulations and procedures are followed. However, a great deal also rests on people behaving responsibly when they visit hospitals. Visitors have an onerous

responsibility to wash their hands and not to crowd six to a bed.

In response to an earlier question, I mentioned the ward sisters' charter as part of our range of measures. I routinely re-examine that to see how it can be improved to give ward sisters the type of support that they merit and deserve. I am on working that. We must change the culture in hospitals to get to a different place from where we have been. We must ensure that staff do not always approach visitors with trepidation, as can be the case, and that they follow those strict procedures in respect of visiting times and visitor numbers.

Through the ward sisters' charter, I will seek to empower ward sisters so that they are in charge. There has been a drift away from that. I want to ensure that ward sisters have enough clerical support so that they are on their wards, rather than in offices, ploughing through paperwork for half their day.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I beg to move

That the Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The regulations, which were laid before the Assembly on 8 July, are made under the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 and The Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The purpose of the regulations is to enable single students with children to make a claim for jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation of their course. Benefit provision is not usually available for full-time students during an advanced course of education, because they are funded through educational maintenance channels. However, because that funding covers only term time, benefit provision is available during the summer vacation for certain students with children to prevent the risk of child poverty. That provision covers couples who are full-time students and have children.

Student couples can claim jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation of their course, provided that they comply with all the other conditions of entitlement for benefits. Presently, there is no provision for single students who have children or a young dependant to claim jobseeker's allowance during the summer vacation.

At present, single students who have children aged under 16 can claim income support throughout the course of study on the basis of being a lone parent. Once their child reaches the age of 16, however, they are not classed as a lone parent and cannot claim income support. In contrast, couples who have children and who are both full-time students are entitled to claim income support in specific circumstances during the summer vacation.

By making that change to the jobseeker's allowance and income support regulations, I am removing disparity of treatment between single students and student couples and reducing the risk of putting the children of single students at risk of poverty.

That change removes the discriminatory effect of those regulations and is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

I hope that Members agree that the changes to the regulations are worthwhile, of benefit, and necessary to ensure that all students with children have the same

opportunity to claim jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation of their courses.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson):** The Committee for Social Development considered the Department's proposal to approve the Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 on 10 April and considered the proposed legislation on 11 September. The proposed legislation corrects a small but important injustice.

As Members may be aware, current regulations prevent full-time single students who have responsibility for a child or young person from claiming jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation. Therefore, it is not only those students who are disadvantaged but their children or young dependants.

The Committee for Social Development has fully considered the proposed legislation and feels that it will remove the discriminatory elements of certain regulations, which disadvantage the children or young dependants of full-time single students. The Committee recommends that the proposed legislation be confirmed by the Assembly.

**Mr Burns:** I support the motion and commend the Minister for tabling it. The proposed legislation is sensible, and I welcome the proposal to allow full-time single students with children to claim jobseeker's allowance and income support during the summer holidays. The proposed legislation will remove unfair differences in the treatment of single students with children and students who are part of a couple and have children.

The proposed legislation will make a small but significant contribution to the lessening of short-term child poverty, which must be welcomed. Furthermore, we all know that the best way to get out of poverty is through education, and the proposed legislation makes a long-term contribution to that. The changes are necessary, worthwhile and I welcome them.

**Ms Lo:** I was once a mature student with young children, and I understand the pressures experienced by mature students. Single parents who are in education and have young children face a lot of financial and emotional pressure and should be given encouragement and support. Therefore, I fully support the Minister's proposals. When will the proposed legislation take effect? I hope that it takes effect before next summer.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am pleased with the level of support across the House for the proposed legislation. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Simpson, and

Committee members for the positive manner in which they dealt with the proposals.

The Social Development Committee and its Chairperson are absolutely correct that the proposed legislation will put right an important injustice. The proposed legislation addresses child poverty, which Members will recall is an issue on which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister recently commissioned an inquiry.

11.30 am

Thomas Burns and Anna Lo addressed the important issue of needing to ensure that there is proper equality for single students, and I am pleased that they see the value of the regulations. In response to Anna Lo's question, the regulations will not have retrospective effect. The change came into effect on 7 July 2008. Vacation dates for full-time advanced courses of education start at different times throughout the summer months. Therefore, all single students with responsibility for a child or young person were able to make a claim for jobseeker's allowance or income support during their summer vacation this year.

I am certain that all Assembly Members, as well as the wider public in Northern Ireland, want to ensure that the current anomaly is addressed and that single students are treated no less favourably than student couples in the same circumstances. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Financial Pressures Impacting on Public Spending

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time when two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposers of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr McNarry:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any existing and anticipated financial pressures impacting on public spending allocations in the current budgetary period, in light of the global economic downturn and credit crunch.

This motion is a direct challenge to the Minister to be open and transparent, an opportunity for him to be convincing, and an opportunity for the House to judge his Department as custodian of the public purse strings.

The aim of the motion is not only to flush out any departmental balance-sheet dexterity, but to put to the Minister of Finance and Personnel what I assume to be the universal feelings of the Assembly: that if he agrees that he has come unstuck, he will know that we want to help and, at least, face the consequences together. The Minister will know that at the time of the debate on the 2008-11 Budget, we Ulster Unionists argued that it was tightly strung and based on an optimistic and speculatively positive approach for the economy, property prices and efficiency gains.

One of the main features of the economic storm that has been dubbed the "credit crunch" has been the factoring into the housing and financial markets of unrealistic assumptions. I fear that that factoring in of unrealistic assumptions has also been a key feature of the Northern Ireland Executive Budget, and will have serious consequences for the public finances of Northern Ireland for some years to come.

At the time of the Budget, the Ulster Unionist Party made the point that it was based on an overly optimistic outlook for the economy, property prices and realisable efficiency gains. The early signs of what has become the credit crunch were already apparent when the Budget was being formed, but, unfortunately, our concerns were ignored.

The Ulster Unionist Party argued that the Budget was based on risky assumptions, and that if it were to be deliverable, it needed the continuation of strong

economic growth and a strong property market, near-perfect implementation of efficiency savings, and a lack of bad economic news and downturns. In addition, the Budget was missing the £1 billion package that everyone knew was needed in order to keep us afloat, irrespective of the looming crisis.

Unfortunately, none of those assumptions has proved realistic. Instead, there has been a sharp fall-off in economic growth to zero levels. There has been a slump in the housing market. Efficiency savings appear optimistic, to say the least. All those matters pose serious questions about the Budget's deliverability.

As I have said, Members on this side of the House want to help. However, in order for us to do so, the Minister must share those problems — as I hope he will strive to — because he understands that he cannot respond as though they do not exist. The Assembly must be told where it stands on under-expenditure versus over-expenditure in the distribution of the block grant. It must be told what the current and projected impacts are of the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, rates arrears, deferred water charges, and shortfalls in capital receipts.

Does the Minister glance across to Cardiff with envy or dismay, when he looks at the Welsh Assembly Government's plans to raid their reserves and switch over £200 million from 2009's spending allocation in order to serve Welsh needs and protect Welsh public services in 2008? Will the Minister tell the House whether there are any built-in or built-up reserves? Just to satisfy curiosity, can he confirm or deny whether there is such a thing as an Executive contingency fund? If such a fund exists, will he tell the House what it does and how much is in it?

I want to return, if I may, to how the over-optimistic assumptions that underpin the Budget work out in practice. Let us first examine capital receipts — the Northern Ireland Executive's potential additional earning capacity, which were a key part of the overall Budget. By the end of the first quarter, they were already £140 million below target, largely because of the crash in the property market. Basically, development land cannot be sold because no one is willing to pay the price that was envisaged for it in the Budget.

On 9 June 2008, the First Minister admitted:

“any land or property is worth what a willing purchaser will pay for it on the open market.” — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 5, p215, col 1*].

That figure has dropped dramatically during the nine months since the Budget was introduced.

Serious doubts continue to hang over the capital receipts that were anticipated from the sale of former military sites. Apart from the obvious decline in its commercial value, investment confidence has been undermined by the inability of three Departments —

the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) — to come to a decision on the Maze. When the Secretary of State responded to the First Minister's query about when the Government would hand over former military sites to the Northern Ireland Executive, he clearly linked any possibility of receiving those sites, and the money from their subsequent sale, to decisive action on the Maze site, which he said had been transferred six years earlier without any action being taken since.

That is ominous both politically and, more importantly, for the financial well-being of the Northern Ireland Executive. It bodes ill for future Budget receipts. It is difficult to see how the Executive can now live within their means because of a series of cash blows that are bound to render their financial provisions at the start of the financial year already badly outdated.

Problems that are linked to the credit crunch include not only rising fuel costs, but nosediving land and property prices — for instance, the reduction in the valuation of the DARD-owned property at Crossnacreevy from £200 million to between a mere £3 million and £6 million. That takes £194 million out of the Budget. Just one wrong assumption, therefore, has cost £194 million.

In addition, the Executive must fork out at least £100 million in Civil Service back pay and at least another £200 million for deferred water charges.

Even if the latter amount is carried over into the next financial year, the hole in our finances is very real. Those amounts were not budgeted for, so how can there not be a major shortfall in receipts?

Compounding this problem of insufficient receipts are difficulties associated with rates collection. At the beginning of July, DFP confirmed that rates arrears of £130 million had accrued because of the failure in the Northern Ireland Audit Office computer system. Arrears rose from £35 million in March 2005 to £48 million the next year, and they had jumped to a staggering £88 million by March 2007. By March this year, auditors found that the figure had risen to £130 million. If that money is not coming in, how can the Budget be delivered?

In light of the very significant change in world economic circumstances, and provable shortfalls in publicly known budgetary projections, it is time that the issue was faced squarely. The Minister's response to my comments about a budgetary black hole last week was a classic example of Nigel “the Artful Dodger” politics. It would be better if the Minister were to admit the problem, and surely we can collectively do much better by trusting in the people

and being straight about the situation. We, in the Ulster Unionist Party, are willing to help and to play our part with him.

To make it possible for us to help, there must be far greater transparency in the process of auditing the success or failure of the Budget. The purpose — and, therefore, the focus — of the debate is to recognise that there are obvious sensitivities in the issue of shortfalls. Where the Minister and his predecessor made dubious assumptions, current events, linked to their poor judgement, have conspired to make those assumptions unrealistic.

The House awaits the Minister's response in eager anticipation.

**Mr Durkan:** I beg to move amendment No 1: At end insert

“; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to lay a draft budget for 2009-2010, agreed by the Executive Committee, before the Assembly in accordance with section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

The amendment adds to the motion by stressing the central importance of the annual Budget process conducted through the Assembly and its Committees. Only in the past couple of weeks, Committees learnt that a decision had been taken in March by the Executive not to initiate a 2008 Budget process, but to conduct a Budget stocktake.

I have no problem with the Executive deciding how they want to conduct budgetary negotiations among Ministers and around the Executive table. However, the Executive do not have the right to deny the Assembly its lawful role of receiving a draft annual Budget and duly considering it, by means laid down in the previous period of devolution, including affording the Committees time to consider it, public consultation, and take-note debates in the House.

In March, only a matter of weeks after the Assembly had debated and approved the Budget, the Executive were advised by the then Finance Minister that there would be no need for an annual Budget process this year.

Section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 reads as follows:

“(1) The Minister of Finance and Personnel shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget, that is to say, a programme of expenditure proposals for that year which has been agreed by the Executive Committee in accordance with paragraph 20 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement.

(2) The Assembly may, with cross-community support, approve a draft budget laid before them with or without modification.”

Paragraph 20 of strand one of the Good Friday Agreement reads as follows:

“The Executive Committee will seek to agree each year, and review as necessary, a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes, subject to approval by the

Assembly, after scrutiny in Assembly Committees, on a cross-community basis.”

The purpose of this amendment is to make it very clear that the Assembly expects there to be a formal Budget process whereby a draft Budget is laid before the Assembly for due consideration.

11.45 am

Some Members may not appreciate my quoting only the Belfast Agreement, so for their benefit, paragraph 3 (v) of the St Andrews Agreement states that the Executive are the forum for:

“agreement each year on (and review as necessary of) a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes (Programme for Government).”

It is fairly clear and unambiguous that it is, or at least was, intended and expected that there would be an annual Budget exercise. When the House debated the Public Accounts Committee reports recently, members of all parties expressed frustration that we often do not get sufficient real-time scrutiny of spending plans and performance, and are left to see mistakes in a post hoc light through those reports.

If we are to abandon or surrender the Assembly's role as the Budget authority, we are only adding to our own frustration at a time when many people are cynical about, and critical of, the Executive for not meeting, and are attacking all MLAs, saying that we should not be paid because we are not doing our job. Neither I nor my party is prepared to surrender the lawful, proper role that we are mandated to conduct in giving due and proper consideration to an annual Budget.

The argument that was made to the Executive was that the figures voted on earlier this year included figures for the three-year period of the Budget, and that that fulfilled the requirement of laying a draft Budget before this House before the beginning of each financial year. The three-year figures are sourced in the comprehensive spending review, the home of which is Westminster and Whitehall. The fact that it is a three-year Budget does not mean that there is not a pre-Budget report and a full debate at Westminster each year. It does not mean that there is not a Budget statement with debates and votes every year. Why should Ministers in the Executive decide that there does not need to be an annual Budget exercise because the House voted on a three-year Budget? We need an annual Budget exercise.

As Mr McNarry said, many of the assumptions and targets that were presented in the three-year Budget and Programme for Government have since been surrounded and buffeted by significant changes. It would be downright folly to suggest that the assumptions that were made when the Budget votes were taken in January have not been so seriously



overtaken by events that we need not do more than let the Executive undertake a simple stocktake of the Budget, which the Assembly would subsequently rubber-stamp through legislation. We need a full and proper debate on a Budget.

The authority of this House over the Budget does not just apply to the approval of spending lines. In a previous period of devolution, the Assembly passed the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. Members made it clear at that time — not just me as a Minister, but people speaking on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and others — that it would change the nature of the legal budgeting exercise that the Assembly would undertake in future. It was made clear that the Assembly, as well as making decisions on the allocation of spending, would make decisions on assets.

Assumptions about assets were a significant factor in the Programme for Government and the three-year budget figures. We know that, with the change in property prices and the significant change in the overall market conditions, the sort of presumptions and targets about money that was to come from asset sales have now to be significantly revised. When will we hear that those presumptions have been significantly revised?

We cannot pretend that we approved a Budget that is no longer fit for purpose, or that because we approved it, there is nothing else that we can do about it — that it is a three-year Budget, and that is that. The Assembly must be allowed to fulfil its role, and Committees in the Assembly must be allowed to fulfil theirs.

The terms and the timescale in which the Assembly and the Committees considered the three-year Programme for Government and the three-year Budget were fairly constrained. The Budget was late, not just because the start date of devolution was later in the year than we might have wished, but because the comprehensive spending review took place later. Committee members, many of whom were new to the job and to the task of considering a Budget, did not have time to properly frisk, test, and contest some of the presumptions and plans that we were told were inherent in the Budget and in the Programme for Government. That time should have been made up during the annual round of the next Budget and during any revision to the Programme for Government.

During the debates on the Budget and the Programme for Government, SDLP Members tabled amendments stating that the Budget was unclear in its implications for water charges. That was one of the reasons why the SDLP did not vote for the Budget. I predicted that there was a risk that Members who voted for that three-year Budget would be told

subsequently that they had voted for water charges, the details of which would be announced later.

Recently, the First Minister and the Minister for Regional Development talked about the deferral of water charges. That was their first public admission that as far as they were concerned, the Executive and the Assembly had agreed that water charges would come in this year. That was never clarified or specified in the Chamber, despite many invitations to Ministers to do so. The details of water charges would have come to the surface in the draft annual Budget for this year. Many of us believe that it is precisely for that reason that Ministers felt politically motivated to try to abandon or bypass the requirement for laying a draft Budget before the Assembly.

Whatever attitudes led Ministers, back in March, to believe that a mere Budget stocktake would be enough for the Executive and, possibly, the Chamber can no longer be maintained. Given the current circumstances of economic downturn and the serious pressure on public finances, on firms and households, it is not credible that the Assembly will not do its job of presenting and considering an annual Budget.

**Dr Farry:** I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

‘, and to report on any plans to make changes to the underlying allocations within the 2008-2011 Budget, beyond the scope of the quarterly monitoring rounds.’

I am grateful to the proposers of the motion for tabling the debate, which is very welcome. It is somewhat bizarre that we do not spend more time in the Assembly talking about economic and financial matters. The debate that the Alliance Party facilitated on the first Varney Review was one exception to that.

There is a degree of irony in the UUP having tabled this motion, coming as it does only days after the announcement that drastic cuts in front-line Health Service workers are expected over the next three years. The figures include at least 700 nursing jobs. I have yet to come across anyone in Northern Ireland who does not think that nursing staff do a wonderful job, are rushed off their feet and are indispensable.

**Mr McNarry:** What about the consultation document?

**Dr Farry:** I hear talk of a consultation document coming from the side. The people of Northern Ireland are quite clear about what they want — they want nurses.

There is a very fine line between efficiency savings and cuts. Efficiency savings are about changing priorities and reinvesting resources in order to find more productive ways of doing things, whereas cuts are reductions in the level of services. Quite simply, the impression is that a knife is going through the Health Service, all aspects of which are suffering

equally with no proper consideration being given as to how things can be done differently and better.

It is no good the Health Minister saying that it is all the fault of the Budget; he accepted what was, to my mind, a very cosmetic compromise when he marched his troops to the top of the hill and marched them down again.

In the year since the Finance Minister tabled his first Budget statement to the Assembly, the world has changed dramatically. There has been a dramatic rise in the level of inflation; it is worth reflecting that the rate today is 5.2% — the highest figure for 16 years. Furthermore, there has been a significant growth in energy costs; there is pressure on public-sector pay; there is the so-called credit crunch and the housing bubble has burst.

There is a wider slump in the property market, and we are in the midst of an international banking crisis. Those are all major changes from the context in which the Assembly debated the Budget this time last year. I appreciate that the solution to, or even the mitigation of, many of those problems lies beyond the control of the Executive and the Assembly. Nonetheless, it is the Assembly's responsibility to take those factors into account in its spending plans and to make adjustments should the wider financial situation demand that.

Today, by a strange coincidence, the Minister for Finance in the Republic of Ireland is introducing his Budget. It remains to be seen whether major changes will be made to the UK-wide spending plans, but I doubt that they can be sustained in the circumstances. I watch with interest to see what our devolved neighbours will do.

The Assembly must be proactive in addressing the issues, and it must recognise the different context in which it operates. The Assembly must balance the books. It cannot run up deficits in the way that national Governments do because it has neither the borrowing privileges nor tax-varying powers of other Administrations — for which the Alliance Party has long campaigned in Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party supports the SDLP amendment. It addresses a specific point that must be made about the need, or otherwise, for a dedicated Budget statement every year. I refer to section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as did Mr Durkan:

“The Minister of Finance and Personnel shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget”.

Although the Assembly will debate at least two Supply resolutions and two Budget Bills this year, section 64 implies that there should be an annual Budget statement. I am not a lawyer, and I note that the Department of Finance and Personnel argued that the three-year plan that it announced last year meets the

spirit, if not the letter, of the legislation. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that today. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is also examining budgetary procedures, and I await the outcome with interest.

The Alliance Party's amendment is much more flexible than the SDLP's call for a dedicated Budget statement; it takes the motion tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party one step further. Rather than simply calling on the Minister to detail the current financial pressures, the Alliance Party's amendment calls for adjustments to be made to current plans where it proves necessary. Amendment No 2 is, therefore, a call for action. It takes an essentially static motion and calls for the Department to act to address the changed circumstances. I stress that that process may need to extend beyond the current monitoring rounds and address the underlying baselines and core allocations. It is important to ensure that whatever measures are introduced are in line with the law and address the situation.

The Assembly must reflect on the fact that the Budget was a tight settlement that was based on high expectations of land sales and efficiency savings. Furthermore, new commitments have emerged, such as possible new plans for water charges. The wider community is greatly concerned that the changed circumstances and the tight Budget to which the Assembly agreed will result in even deeper cuts than those currently forecast.

It is worth reflecting that some decisions by the Assembly have benefited the better off. As Paddy Hillyard said on the BBC programme 'Hearts and Minds', the freeze on the regional rate, although undoubtedly popular throughout society, helps the better off rather than the poorer sections of the community; and he advises the Executive on water charges. The rate cap at £500,000 also, generally speaking, helps the better off, and I note that a proposal for a cap at £400,000 is on the horizon.

Some short-term measures must be taken, and the inefficiencies in Land and Property Services must be examined. The situation whereby Northern Ireland and its district councils lose out through the inability of that organisation to fulfil its duties is unsustainable.

*12.00 noon*

Furthermore, we must consider longer-term restructuring of financial plans in Northern Ireland — and the current situation should embolden Members in that respect. Members must reflect on the fact that a large amount of money is being spent on managing a divided society. Resources could be better invested in shared public services to benefit the entire community. Managing a divided society incurs major opportunity

costs, and the Alliance Party is finalising proposals to submit to the Department in November.

Members must also consider rebalancing the economy. Are we making the correct investments? Are we making the best use of scarce resources? Are we making the correct interventions?

As an aside, one of the unforeseen consequences of the current financial and economic situation may be that the Executive can, superficially, meet their target for gross value added convergence with the rest of the United Kingdom. However, given the help that Northern Ireland receives from its large public sector, convergence would signify a change in the relative positions of the different regions rather than a step forward in the absolute position of Northern Ireland. Therefore, if convergence happens during the next two or three years, we must be careful to look behind the scenes and not assume that we have met the target for the best reasons.

The sustainability of public services must also be examined. In light of current energy prices, it is logical to invest substantially more money in renewable energy than invested hitherto. Also, we should be shifting the balance from private transport to public transport. We are in a bizarre situation where our investment strategy directs 80% of new investment over the next 10 years into roads and only 20% into public transport, of which rail is merely one component. The balance seems bizarre; it was bizarre when the Budget and the investment strategy were tabled, and it is more bizarre today.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Today's debate is timely, given the worldwide financial and economic downturn. Sinn Féin supports the motion and the Alliance Party's amendment.

In early 2008, when the Assembly agreed the Budget for 2008-11, Members were conscious of the tight public expenditure outlook that arose from the comprehensive spending review. Furthermore, Members were conscious that commitments on the availability of capital resource from the Treasury had been secured during meetings with the British Government. That allowed all Ministers — including the SDLP Minister — to agree that the Budget process could proceed on the basis of a three-year period during which the Assembly would take up the reins. For that reason, Sinn Féin does not support the SDLP's amendment.

Since then, additional pressures have, undoubtedly, arisen in the normal course of business and as a direct result of the economic downturn. Given the global dimensions of the present difficulties, our authority and influence on the situation, as a local regional

assembly, is limited. Nonetheless, Ministers have taken positive steps within their remits to alleviate some of the negative impacts of the downturn on the community. All Ministers should be aware that additional measures can be agreed by Departments and the Assembly. I look forward to hearing the Minister of Finance and Personnel later in the debate outlining details of the terms of reference for the Budget stocktaking exercise and its implications for the assumptions and projections that underpin the Budget and Programme for Government.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I will outline the Committee's focus. Given the upcoming financial pressures, the Committee has been actively working with DFP to resolve the equal-pay issue in the Civil Service and its implications on public expenditure plans.

The Committee is also mindful of the impact that falling property prices have on the scope for financing future investment from the disposal of surplus assets. The Department of Finance and Personnel's Workplace 2010 accommodation project, which affects every Department, was earmarked to generate approximately £175 million in capital receipts during the Budget period.

Immediately after the Halloween recess, the Committee will question DFP officials about that critical project and whether those projections are standing up to the turmoil in the global economic climate. In addition, the Committee recently took evidence from the construction industry on measures that could be taken to ease the difficulties in that sector, which included front-loading capital investment and minimising underspend in Departments.

The Committee has been especially concerned about — and has consistently drawn attention to — the weaknesses in the financial management standards and processes of the Civil Service. Those manifested themselves in poor forecasting by Departments, with the resulting pattern of reduced requirements being declared late in the financial year, coupled with rising levels of end-year underspend. We welcome the equally consistent focus that the Minister of Finance has given to addressing that issue, which will result in a better outcome.

The Committee considers that the present public-expenditure context means that there is now an even greater onus on Departments to manage public finances in a way that achieves the highest level of spend within authorised limits and maximises the impact from available resources. All the Committees can have an impact by scrutinising their respective Departments, and my Committee will be questioning DFP officials about those issues at its meeting tomorrow.

In fairness to the SDLP amendment, my Committee has sought legal opinion and clarification on the issue

from DFP. All Ministers agreed that they could proceed and were, at that point, content that the requirements of section 64 were satisfied. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McQuillan:** I do not want the wrong signals to be sent out from today's debate, so I speak with some apprehension. Everyone is aware that the global financial situation has changed beyond recognition from when the Budget was passed by the Assembly. Despite the global economic problems, it is important that we tell the world that we are ready, willing and able to do business.

The timing of this debate is unfortunate, as a fully accurate picture of the Budget position may not be available to the Minister until after the strategic stocktake returns have been analysed. However, that stocktake presents the opportunity to examine and fine-tune departmental budgets. As a realist, I fully accept that every Department faces additional challenges due to the deterioration of the world's economy. The rising cost of energy — whether oil, gas or electricity — will affect running costs. The much-needed investment in our water and sewerage systems must continue, and the extension of the deferral of water charges could be considered again as a means of aiding households.

The income that was envisaged through the realisation of assets might not now have the financial yield for which we had hoped, as property prices are reported to have fallen by as much as 30% by the Nationwide Building Society. There is also no hope of the Treasury increasing the block grant that Northern Ireland receives.

The Assembly will require cool heads and good judgement as it faces some tough decisions, so I am relieved that we have a cool and wise head in charge of the Department of Finance and Personnel. The entire process would be greatly aided if some people would stop throwing their toys out of the pram and hold an Executive meeting so that full agreement on planning for the future can be achieved.

I end on a positive note, however. Despite the tough financial times, there have been many positive recent announcements: free prescriptions from 2010; the freezing of the regional rate; and the previous Finance Minister making funding available for the extension of free public transport to those aged 60 years and over. Despite the headlines of doom and gloom, this Assembly is delivering real change for everyone in Northern Ireland.

I support the motion and Dr Farry's amendment.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat. Few have not been affected by the recent global economic downturn and credit crunch, and the impact that that has had on everybody. Everyone is aware that the crisis was caused by the reckless behaviour of financial

institutions and the failure of Governments to put adequate regulations in place to protect ordinary in-debtors.

We have recently witnessed large banking corporations throughout the world being bailed out with taxpayers' money. Although that was difficult for some of us to accept, in an effort to offer security to people who had savings in the banks and to secure the jobs of people who work for businesses whose money is tied up in investments with the banks, most of us did so. Sinn Féin hopes that similar, innovative measures will be taken to tackle poverty and disadvantage among less-well-off people.

What impact will the economic downturn and the credit crunch have on public spending in the North of Ireland? Moreover, how will important targets in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy — such as child poverty and investment in the social and affordable housing programme — be affected?

Child poverty in the North — approximately 30% of children here live in poverty — is nothing short of scandalous, and in deprived areas the figure is even higher. Unfortunately, low-income households, particularly those with children, and people who already live in poverty will feel the effects of this impasse most.

Such people already struggle to pay for basic necessities, such as food, fuel and clothing, which most of us take for granted. Those people cannot cut back on luxuries or extras; they must cut back on necessities, and given the recent price hikes in basics, such as food and fuel, more families will be forced to go without. A knock-on effect is that more people will be forced to borrow money, causing them to spiral into debt that they cannot afford.

Businesses — particularly small, family businesses and those involved in the construction industry — have also been affected. When businesses take a downward slump, leading to unemployment, people are faced with even more hardship. Consequently, there is no doubt that the downturn will affect public expenditure in the next few years. More emphasis must be directed towards local businesses, and it is important that we consider innovative ways to ensure that all public expenditure here benefits the local economy and the priorities that have already been set out in the Programme for Government, such as tackling poverty and the need to build a strong economy.

How can Members help to achieve that? We must consider how public money is being spent and how to protect jobs in the construction industry and other industries. We must build local small and medium-sized enterprises and social-economy enterprises so that they can compete on an even playing field for

public-procurement contracts for services, goods and works.

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms J McCann:** I am nearly finished. Go on ahead.

**Mr A Maginness:** The Member rightly highlighted recent economic changes and difficulties with fuel and other necessities. Given the fact that her party has committed itself to a three-year Budget and that there will be no discussion about this year's Budget, how can she reconcile that position with her wish to ameliorate our present difficulties? Surely, there should be an annual discussion about the Budget. Will she clarify her position on that?

**Ms J McCann:** I thank the Member for his intervention; however, I will be dealing with such points now and outlining some ways that we can help people. My colleague already spoke about the Budget.

Departments must make progress with the capital and revenue projects for which they have been allocated funds in the Budget and ensure that when the tendering processes begin, local companies can compete with larger companies.

Ensuring that social clauses are embedded in all public-procurement contracts will help to tackle poverty and need by creating employment for those who are disadvantaged and opportunities for local small and medium-sized enterprises and social-economy enterprises. In turn, that will create conditions that will help to stabilise the local economy.

Strengthening the financial services offered by credit unions would go a long way towards tackling spiralling debt and the problems that low-income households encounter when repaying that debt. Offering communities access to key financial services at affordable rates through credit unions — particularly in the present adverse financial conditions — would give people access to the most competitive rates for saving and borrowing, which, given the recent downturn in the financial climate, are essential. Furthermore, that would provide opportunities for the added income from those expanded services to be reinvested in projects in local communities, including social-economy projects, to benefit the whole economy.

Therefore, although the economic downturn and credit crunch may impact on public spending, it is essential that we consider innovative ideas and that the Governments take innovative measures that will ensure that we meet the priorities for tackling poverty and disadvantage that are set out in the Programme for Government.

12.15 pm

**Mr Weir:** I consider this to be an important debate. However, listening to the Member who proposed the

motion — particularly during the early part of his speech — we heard the phrases “as we told you” and “at the time” so often, and there were so many references to predictions and warnings that had been made, that I wondered for a moment whether Bob McCartney had returned to the Chamber.

**Mr McNarry:** That is a very big compliment.

**Mr Weir:** It may be a compliment, because, to be fair to Bob —

**Mr McNarry:** Where is he now?

**Mr Weir:** He is a member of the one party to which the Member who proposed the motion may not have spoken recently. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr A Maginness:** That will happen next week.

**Mr Weir:** I do not know some Members' schedules.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. This little conversation is very nice; however, will Members please address their remarks through the Chair and stick to the motion?

**Mr Weir:** To be fair to Mr McCartney, whenever he predicted something — for whatever purpose — at least there was a level of consistency in his approach. The reality is that the dire warnings that are being made now seem to have been lost on the two Ministers from the Ulster Unionist Party when they, as members of the Executive, signed up to, and signed off on, the Budget.

Perhaps the Member who proposed the motion believes that the two Ulster Unionist Party members of the Executive are not the right people and that there may be people with more foresight — perhaps Back-Bench Members of the Ulster Unionist Party — who could provide more direct advice on balancing the books or maintaining employment, for example. Indeed, if the Member who proposed the motion or any Members from the Ulster Unionist Party who speak subsequently are willing to provide such advice to the Assembly, I am sure that we will all take it in the spirit in which it is intended.

Similarly, Members on this side of the House will not take any lectures from Mr Durkan, who proposed the first amendment, about our not being robust enough on the issue of water charging, given that he, in his previous guise as deputy First Minister, and along with the then First Minister, opened the door to water charging, through the reinvestment and reform initiative.

**Mr Durkan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** Mr Durkan has had his chance to speak already, so if he wishes to —

**Mr Durkan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** OK; I will give way.

**Mr Durkan:** The introduction of water charges was not part of the reinvestment and reform initiative — neither as negotiated by David Trimble or me, nor as agreed by the Executive. Furthermore, as a result of my prompting, the subsequent Treasury proposal to introduce water charges was rejected by the Executive twice. I will repeat that: it was rejected twice.

**Mr Weir:** The reality is that the Durkan tax — or the Farren tax — opened the door to water charging, and it was left to this party to renegotiate the terms of the RRI.

I do not want to be unduly negative about the Alliance Party's amendment, because although I disagree with some elements of it, I find some merit —

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I am sorry, but I will not give way; I have a limited amount of time and have already given way once.

**Mr A Maginness:** Just —

**Mr Weir:** Mr Maginness will have the opportunity to make his own remarks; I have a limited amount of time. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr A Maginness:** I just —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. If the Member has said that he does not wish to give way, he does not wish to give way.

**Mr Weir:** Although I do not always agree with everything that Dr Farry says — indeed, I could not even agree with everything that he said today — I believe that there is merit in the amendment that the Alliance Party tabled. Therefore, the DUP will support that amendment.

Although no one would dispute that economic circumstances are tough at present, we must ensure that we do not induce a feeling of panic in Northern Ireland. Money has been allocated in the Budget to cover present commitments, but there is a danger that we will lapse into a state of doom and gloom.

Indeed, Ministers anticipated the tough economic circumstances that people are now facing. Consequently, when he was formulating the Budget, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel put measures in place to ensure a degree of protection for consumers. For example, in anticipation of the financial burdens that people would be facing, he froze the regional rate, which affects hundreds of thousands of people across Northern Ireland, and deferred water charges.

If we are to meet the various pressures that we will be facing, a strategic review of the Budget is needed. Therefore, I support the upcoming strategic stocktake. However, if that is to happen, the Executive must work together strategically.

A certain level of fire fighting can be done if Executive papers are progressed through urgent procedure. However, an Executive meeting is the only way in which the Executive can examine strategically how things can be rebalanced to ensure that money goes to front-line services in order to meet new needs. There is no alternative, and an Executive meeting must happen.

A range of issues, which I will not go into, has been raised, particularly by the party opposite. However, from talking to people on the streets, I know that they are worried about issues such as the credit crunch, fuel prices and the pressures that the economy is under. They want to see the Executive tackling those issues urgently.

There is a need for such a strategic stocktake in the overall Budget to ensure that we are able to maximise our ambitions and provide the greatest opportunities for people. For that to be achieved, all parties must sit down around the Executive table. However, unfortunately — and sadly — one party is blocking that meeting. I urge that party to change its position and allow the Executive to get on with their job.

**Mr Beggs:** There has been a dramatic change in our economic fortunes over the past year. Many of the factors that have caused that are outside our control, but others are in the control of the Assembly and our Ministers.

Oil prices have been unstable, varying from \$100 a barrel in January to \$147 a barrel in July, reducing to around \$80 a barrel. Furthermore, we are experiencing the credit crunch, the tightening of bank lending, and, recently, we have seen a £37 billion rescue package for three banks. All those factors affect property prices.

Can the Minister tell us what effect that turmoil has had on Workplace 2010? That project has been budgeted to inject £175 million in this financial year to facilitate the long-term upgrade of substandard, inefficient office accommodation.

Furthermore, what would reduced property prices mean for the Budget? As other Members said, a large proportion of our capital investment is reliant on capital receipts from the sale of underused public property. Those sales are already significantly behind schedule due to a virtual stop in the property market, meaning that developers are reluctant to purchase new land. What is the current sales situation, and how will that have an impact on planned capital projects?

Another issue to bear in mind is the Crossnacreevy saga. We should not forget that DFP accepted DARD's valuation of £200 million for land in a green belt area that had no planning approval. That was ridiculous.

The annual Budget Bill would normally be finalised in December. The purpose of the motion is to try to improve financial transparency and assist Members

and, indeed, Committees as we reach that critical period in the annual Budget cycle. Indeed, in light of the recent winds of change, what stage has that cycle reached? Is there not a need for the Executive to meet to examine it?

My latter comments will concentrate on issues that are within our control. Sinn Féin has prevented the Executive from meeting and making decisions. For example, a decision is needed on whether a stadium should be built at the Maze or elsewhere or whether investment should be made in an existing stadium. With such delays, we risk capital funding being returned to the Treasury. I am not aware how the books are balanced at present, but if capital spending limits are breached at the end of the year, will funds be returned to Westminster?

The Quarry Products Association recently recorded a 23% decline in employees over the first 10 months of 2008, with further declines projected. Those types of figures could be replicated in other areas of the construction sector. Will more jobs be lost needlessly?

The planned review of Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14) is another matter of concern. Some people would like to build their dream homes, but modifications to PPS 14 that would allow them to do so have been prevented by the failure of the Executive to meet. Try telling bricklayers and tradesmen about the squabble in OFMDFM between the DUP and Sinn Féin — they do not want to know. They simply want to keep a roof over their heads and pay their bills.

Furthermore, what do those investors who attended the investment conference in May think of us now, given that our Ministers refuse to meet and make decisions?

In its 2007 manifesto, the DUP claimed that all Ministers would be bound by decisions of the Executive and that that would allow for a more coherent Administration. This is not a coherent Administration: we have two factions — the DUP and Sinn Féin — who are more interested in their narrow self-interests than in the ordinary man and woman who are struggling to keep a roof over their families, food on the table and the winter cold at bay.

The Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services is a fiasco and waste of resources, which must have budgetary implications. Its computer system is substandard. It is unable to issue court summonses; it works out inaccurate penny-product calculations; and it requires excessive manual processing. Furthermore, there are staff shortages in the agency and rates arrears are growing. In March 2007, there were £88 million of rates arrears, and this year, the figure is £130 million. The rates have not been collected. Additional resources are required to collect those overdue, backdated rates. The purse is more likely to be affected by bad debt.

Councils — and I declare an interest as member of Carrickfergus Borough Council — are failing to check properties that, it is claimed, are vacant and to value new properties as they come online.

**Mrs Hanna:** I support the motion as amended by my SDLP colleagues. Never has it been more important to work together and to plan for the future openly and with transparency. We are, of course, still in the middle of the financial and economic tsunami. I appreciate that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is probably as confused as the rest of us about what the implications of that are and what the options are with regard to taxation and public service.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** Speak for yourself.

**Mrs Hanna:** I am speaking for myself, but it is hoped that the Minister is concerned and worried and assessing the implications. *[Interruption.]*

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Are they concerns, or the Member's views?

**Mrs Hanna:** I could mention my concerns about water charges, rates, fuel and the shared future, and I could look for a baseline analysis of our economic and social profile and how it relates to the policy and investment goals that are set down and how they have been measured; however, I will stick to health and public safety.

I appreciate that there is never enough money, but we must look after the most vulnerable in society. The Budget's increased allocation to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was welcome, and it vindicated Members who said that the initial allocation was inadequate. All Members appreciate that health is an area with infinite and changing demands that have to be met from limited resources.

I acknowledge the resources that went towards the completion of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland), the commitment to targets regarding the moving of patients from institutions to the community, the aims regarding the necessary infrastructure of sheltered and supported accommodation and the targets to reduce suicide. Members agree that no area is more complex than health and accept that a more efficient and effective delivery of services is required, but we must promote good health and coping strategies and prevent ill health.

This morning, we heard, and welcomed, the Health Minister's statement on the end of the clostridium difficile outbreak. The Minister stated that the outbreak was compounded by a high occupancy of beds and a shortfall in nursing and cleaning staff. That is still a concern. Furthermore, I am concerned about the loss

of 700 nursing jobs over three years. The impact of those job losses may be mitigated by natural wastage, as has been said, but it will be severe. People are being urged to work smarter, but they can only go so far in increasing efficiencies before basic service levels are affected.

All Members are aware of the issue of free personal care, which has been debated umpteen times; in fact, I moved two related motions. Many years ago, the Executive agreed to it, and we waited for the then Minister to produce her finalised plans. We have still not received them. I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety agrees with free personal care, in principle, and has updated the figures and the assessment of the costs. We can learn from the experience in Scotland, but free personal care must be introduced quickly.

Last night's 'Nolan Live' television programme and the debate on this morning's 'The Stephen Nolan Show' will give people an impression of the urgency of the situation. Baroness Warnock has proposed that euthanasia should be considered for older people with terminal illnesses — especially those with conditions such as Alzheimer's — and those with terminal illnesses who are not contributing to the economy.

12.30 pm

Members, we must work together in the Assembly and the Executive, and commit ourselves to do what any decent legislature must do — defend and look after the elderly and most vulnerable in our society. We must do that with absolute openness and transparency. We must not allow a debate — similar to the one that I heard this morning — to continue without Members of the Assembly making a clear statement that they care for people, and that they will continue to look after the most vulnerable.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Members will be aware that in January 2008, the Executive agreed, and the Assembly approved, spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments, covering 2008-09 to 2010-2011. Some Members may argue that the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves warrant a fundamental review of those plans. However, when the Budget was being agreed, there were emerging signs of the global economic downturn that we now face, from the rising price of oil to the collapse of Northern Rock.

Accordingly, the plans took account of the changing economic position, particularly the growing pressure on households. Indeed, it was for that reason that the Executive agreed that the domestic regional rate would be frozen and that water charges should be deferred until 2009-10. In addition, further funding was

provided to key public services, with health and social care receiving the highest-ever share of spending, supported by the additional Budget flexibilities that have enabled the Health Minister to make the recent announcement about free prescriptions. Indeed, he gave a very warm welcome to his final Budget position.

With regard to the health budget, accusations have been made recently about the 3% efficiency savings target agreed by the Executive as part of the Budget. I want to make it clear on behalf of the Executive that the objective of that target is to improve public services, with all the savings being pumped back into delivering improved services. The Assembly will, rightly, want to scrutinise how each Minister achieves those savings in his or her Department. However, the efficiency agenda overall is about better services, and the Executive were correct in setting an overall target.

Although significant time and effort were spent in developing the Executive's Budget plans, it is also important that there is sufficient scope for the Executive to review their plans in light of changing circumstances. It is for that reason that we have the in-year monitoring process, which provides considerable flexibility in the course of any year to refine and adjust spending plans in light of changing circumstances.

As regards Mr Durkan's amendment, the Executive's Budget for 2008-09 to 2010-2011 set out expenditure plans for Northern Ireland Departments for the next three years. That represented the culmination of a process that had been initiated as long ago as July 2005, with draft Budgets for the three years being laid before the Assembly in October 2007.

In light of the fact that there was, and remains, no expectation of any material additional resources becoming available to the Northern Ireland block for the financial year 2009-10, the Executive agreed in March this year — as has been pointed out — to conduct a strategic stocktake of the spending plans for this year as opposed to a full Budget process. No members of the Executive raised any concerns about that approach. Some SDLP Members highlighted the fact that Margaret Ritchie was not present at the relevant Executive meeting. However, in accordance with normal procedures, the draft Executive paper was circulated to all Executive members and there was a nil return from her Department.

Furthermore, I note with interest that several Members have said — and Mr Durkan referred to the fact — that it was only in recent weeks that they had found out about the Executive's agreed approach. However, Mr O'Loan was present at a meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 2 April 2008, where Hansard records a department official as stating:

"The Executive recently concluded that there will not be a Budget process in 2008."



The official goes on to outline the strategic stocktake approach.

I repeat that that meeting was held on 2 April 2008 — not in recent weeks or in the past few days. The Chairperson asks:

“Do Members wish to make any comments?”

That question was met with silence — silence from Mr O’Loan and other SDLP Members. Therefore, let us not have any nonsense about this matter being last minute or a sudden surprise and all the rest of it.

**Mr Durkan:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** No, the Member has had his say and he blew it. If he had consulted the Hansard report of that meeting or spoken to his party colleague who attended it, he might have realised that he was talking nonsense.

**Mr Durkan:** Well, if the Minister would give way —

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** No, you had your chance and you blew it.

The objective of the strategic stocktake is to review progress to date and to allow Departments to register any significant pressures or easements of which they are aware for 2009-10 and 2010-2011. It should be stressed that the focus is on surveying the landscape at this early stage and in determining our strategic approach to managing any pressures through the in-year monitoring processes. We must face the simple fact that it is unlikely that any additional resources will be allocated to the Northern Ireland block grant, and, therefore, scope to make any additional allocations in specific areas is extremely limited, without corresponding reductions in other areas. For that reason, when Members propose plans for extra expenditure, I will be interested to hear them outline the areas in which they expect cuts to be made or allocations to be reduced. That is a relevant and important consideration when dealing with spending plans.

As regards our legal obligation, the Department’s view has been set out. Of course, there will have to be Estimates, and Budget Bills will have to be taken through the Assembly to provide the legislative authority for Departments to fund services on the basis of those expenditure plans.

I turn now to the motion. Although Departments face a broad range of pressures, the most significant are those that relate to the rising cost of energy, the Civil Service equal-pay claim, the funding of water and sewerage services, and the impact of the downturn in the property market on the Executive’s investment programme. Last week, I had intended to set out further details on the state of play on those matters as part of my statement to the Assembly on the outcome of the September monitoring round. The cancellation of the Executive meeting — through no fault of ours

— meant that that was not possible. However, I have sought to have my proposals cleared through the urgent procedures mechanism, and thus I hope to make that statement in the near future. Of course, I also mentioned those issues in my statement on the June monitoring round, and there was an exchange at that time.

Several Members highlighted the rising cost of energy. Although prices have risen substantially over the past year, it is also clear that there is significant volatility in the market. In addition, although the Executive have a key role to play, there is a need for other bodies, such as our own Government and the energy bodies, to play their part. The Executive will, therefore, rightly wish to adopt a planned approach that involves a co-ordinated response across Departments, with efforts being focused on making the biggest difference to those most disadvantaged by rising energy costs.

I am writing to all Executive colleagues to advise them of my plans to deal with the issue of fuel poverty, which involve working with other relevant Departments and engaging with local energy companies. I intend to table substantive proposals to put to the Executive ahead of the December monitoring round.

Several Members mentioned the Civil Service equal-pay claim. We are still working through the detail of that matter and have had discussions with the trades unions. The Executive’s priority must be to achieve a resolution that is fair to staff but which also safeguards public services.

One of the most important, although less glamorous, services that we provide is water and sewerage facilities. The spending allocations to Departments that were set out in the Budget were predicated on charges being introduced from 2009-10 onwards, in line with the recommendations from the Independent Water Review Panel. Of course, those charges were in line with the commitments given by parties in their manifestos in the sense that they resulted in no double charging to consumers, providing a rate rebate of £160 and ensuring that any extra revenue was put towards extra investment — in other words, no water charges as outlined by direct rule Ministers.

The significant increase in the cost of living since then makes it right for us to consider a further deferral. A main reason for the approach that the Executive took to the Budget is that the block grant’s continued funding of water and sewerage services means that resources are not available for other services. Therefore, deferral will have public expenditure implications.

In recent months, I have had discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about how both the burden of the one-off cost associated with the Civil Service equal-pay claim and the deferral of water changes can be implemented with the least possible

impact on the delivery of local public services. Those discussions are ongoing and, indeed, I met with the Chief Secretary as recently as last week to discuss a range of proposals.

One of the most obvious manifestations of the global economic downturn and credit crunch has been falling prices in the property market. Regarding the Executive's investment programme, I indicated in my statement to the Assembly on the June monitoring round that capital receipts from the sale of surplus assets — particularly house sales — would be significantly lower than what was planned for in the Budget. However, the current state of the construction market also provides an opportunity for Northern Ireland Departments to procure capital projects at lower costs. Therefore, I expect the downturn in the property market to result in both pressures and easements.

I have detailed some of the larger pressures facing the Executive, but there is a broad range of issues that will be considered as part of the strategic stocktake. I do not have time to go through all the important issues that were outlined by Members today. However, we will take into account everything that is said in today's debate as part of the consideration of the issues to be dealt with in the strategic stocktake.

The issues raised by Dr Farry, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Ms McCann, Mr Weir, and Mr Beggs are important to greater and lesser extents. It should not be forgotten that, this year, the investment strategy will result in £1.8 billion of capital investment. That money is available to be rolled out and is not being held back by any "squabble", as Mr Beggs put it. Indeed, I was very interested to hear what Mr Beggs had to say on that point.

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** No, I will not give way because I do not have much time left.

I was interested to hear what Mr Beggs had to say on that point because it seemed to be a plea for the DUP to surrender on policing and justice powers. However, I suppose that that is no great surprise as it is in line with his party's previous position.

I listened very carefully to what Mr McNarry had to say about transparency. Transparency and the opportunity for debate are absolutely vital to the workings of Committees and the Assembly in general, and I welcome this debate as a part of that. I would like to have spoken to the Assembly last week during the October monitoring round, but I was prevented from doing so by the absence of an Executive meeting. I hope that that problem can be overcome.

When listening to Mr McNarry's proposals and his comments about a "black hole" in the economy — which is complete rubbish — it occurred to me that

"Tory Dave" McNarry must be taking lessons from his new mentor "Tory Dave" Cameron.

"Tory Dave" McNarry should realise that his party should not be trying to cosy up to the PUP, the SDLP — as it did before — its new Tory friends, or some other group. The Ulster Unionist Party needs to get its act together and stand on its own two feet, rather than following Tory policies.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I have only a very limited time left, and I should treat all Members in the same way. *[Laughter.]*

We must identify pressures and ensure that sufficient resources are available to address those pressures. Some Members referred to public-sector finance problems being experienced by the national Government even before last week's announcement of measures to instil greater confidence and stability in the banking sector and, thus, the broader economy.

12.45 pm

In that overall context, we must recognise, as Mr Farry did, our circumstances as a devolved Administration with no capacity to take measures that are available to national Governments, such as borrowing. We must recognise that we live within the constraints of the Northern Ireland block grant; that Treasury is unlikely to provide additional funding for public services; and that there will be few, if any, Barnett consequences from either the Budget or the pre-Budget report. The Treasury will also seek to apply similar constraints on enhanced access to our end-year flexibility stock, with any additional resources required to meet strategic issues.

Therefore, it is clear that the Executive have limited scope, but we will address those issues. There is no black hole in the public finances; we deal with emerging issues through the year as they emerge. We face a range of potential pressures, and, as an Executive, we take the appropriate steps in response to those pressures. As Mr Weir pointed out, the people who criticise the Executive are criticising their own Ministers, who signed up to the Budget, the process and the strategic way forward. They can shake their heads and make all the statements that they like, but they signed up to it as well.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the first Member called to speak will be Mr Sean Neeson to wind on amendment No 2.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.46 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

**Mr Neeson:** I am not sure whether I should declare an interest, as I, in common with other Members, have recently become a shareholder in some of the UK's major banks.

I support the Alliance Party and the SDLP amendments. This budgetary issue came to light at a meeting of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. At that time, the Chairperson and I were singing from the same hymn sheet.

What has been proposed shows the arrogance of an Executive that treat this Assembly with the greatest contempt. At present, the Executive exist in name only. The proposed monitoring process is too limited. It is worth defining the problem, because terms such as "downturn" and "credit crunch" are loosely bandied about. The Government's difficulty is that the value of assets has decreased. Therefore, assumptions in relation to land sales — about which the Alliance Party was always wary — may turn out to be inaccurate. As much of the Executive's future planning was based on those assumptions, there will be a significant detrimental effect.

The downturn in the Republic of Ireland will have an impact on tax receipts and, therefore, on the availability of funding for the national development plan for Ireland, which includes projects in Northern Ireland, such as the Belfast to Larne road. Again, the Alliance Party was always wary that such funding might not be prioritised in the event of unfavourable economic conditions.

The credit crunch has an impact on borrowing, but that applies more to businesses and households than directly to Government. The political challenge of how to ensure that small businesses do not suffer at the hands of warier bankers is not related to the motion. The issue is more one of an asset crunch than a credit crunch. Therefore, the motion is well timed and welcome. However, that leaves one wondering why Ulster Unionist Members consistently opposed the Budget and the investment strategy. The Alliance Party has consistently warned that it was risky to sell assets, to freeze rates and to assume that funding would be forthcoming from the Republic of Ireland.

The Alliance amendment is more flexible than the SDLP's; although, as I said earlier, Members in my party support both. I am worried about, and have cautioned the House against, the real danger that we will talk Northern Ireland into a more serious recession than that experienced in the rest of the UK. David McNarry made the point that the Executive do not have a contingency fund, bearing in mind the present economic problems. Mark Durkan stated clearly that

an annual Budget process was needed. Every other political institution has an annual Budget. In order to function properly, this Assembly must also have an annual Budget; particularly bearing in mind the daily changing economic situation in Northern Ireland, the UK, the Republic of Ireland and globally.

My colleague Stephen Farry quite rightly reminded Members that the Health Minister's decision to cut the number of nurses is like a knife going through the Health Service. He also stated that the Alliance Party has always supported the idea of the Assembly having tax-varying powers. Last week, I was very pleased that Mitchel McLaughlin from Sinn Féin also brought the issue to the House. Therefore, there is growing support in the Assembly for such a process to be developed.

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

**Mr O'Loan:** I will begin with three quotations from speeches that Peter Robinson made in the House on 29 January 2008:

"I turn first to the consultation exercise conducted on the draft Budget proposals published last October. In my statement last Tuesday, I acknowledged the key role played by the statutory Committees of the Assembly in reviewing and reporting on the departmental and cross-cutting implications of the draft Budget proposals." — [*Official Report, Vol 27, No 2, p69, col 2*].

"It would be madness for any Finance Minister to bring forward a Budget and say that it will stand for three years and not be changed in any way. That would be a ludicrous position to adopt." — [*Official Report, Vol 27, No 2, p147, col 2*].

"Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty on me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to lay before the Assembly a draft Budget before the beginning of each financial year." — [*Official Report, Vol 27, No 2, p149, col 2*].

I could simply say that I rest my case, because SDLP's case for the amendment is based on the law, and the law is as it is.

I wish to refer to 12 pressures on the Budget and changes that have happened, and I will state them briefly. First, the property market has changed. Secondly, there have been some gains and some losses in construction project costs, but they must be requantified. Thirdly, the construction industry is in turmoil, and we need a revised statement on construction spend.

Fourthly, more than £100 million will be spent this year to address the equal pay issue for civil servants, and more will be spent in future years. Fifthly, there may be a further deferral of water charges, but what are the consequences of that? Sixthly, the First Minister gave his support for the fuel poverty task force, but where is the money to match it? Seventhly, is there really no money in the Budget for the reform of secondary education?

Eighthly, there was a temporary solution to the childcare crisis, but what is the long-term solution, and where is the funding? Ninthly, is it really the case that no lessons have been learned from the efficiency

savings exercise that ought to be factored into Budget allocations? Tenthly, Sir George Bain's report on the decentralisation of public-sector jobs has been published, but where is the plan and the money to move 4,000 jobs in five years' time? Eleventhly, Civil Service reform is an ambitious programme, but timings and costings have not been revised. Twelfthly, with the increasing pressure on household incomes, do the Executive have nothing new to offer on the poverty strategy, or the lack thereof? We need a revised Budget.

I will now refer to the Minister's remarks about the matter coming to the Committee. A departmental official brought the matter verbally to the Committee, saying that the Executive had recently concluded something on the matter. No legislation was quoted, and the matter was presented in what might be described as an offhand way, containing the phrase:

"The Committee might be more interested in future developments."

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Committee did not flag it up as a major issue, never mind a legislative one.

Later in the year, however, the matter was raised in writing, and then the Committee realised that it was a serious issue. All the Committee members, including four Democratic Unionist Party members and three Sinn Féin members, demanded a detailed explanation from the Department, and that remains the position.

I wish to comment on two speeches that were made. Mitchel McLaughlin, who spoke as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, referred to the Committee having sought clarification and taken legal advice. Yet, I was surprised that, as a Member of Sinn Féin, he was content to prejudge that advice and to assume that it would not represent the law as we would regard it, which is the only way that it can be regarded. I find it surprising — but perhaps I should not be surprised — that Mitchel McLaughlin, speaking on behalf of Sinn Féin, is happy to give full authority to a DUP Minister to call the shots on the changes that will have to be made to the Budget.

Jennifer McCann spoke about the problems that many people face, and read out a considerable list of things that must be done. She said that we need to examine our spending but went on to say that we did not need to revise our Budget and that the Assembly and its Committees had no function in revising that Budget. That is a ludicrous and self-contradictory position.

It will be clear to the public that we have no Executive, no Budget and no Government.

**Mr McNarry:** I thank everyone who took part in the debate and listened to it. It was essential that the debate took place, because it is a test of the relevance of the Assembly. The public are worried about one thing above all else — the impact of the economic

downturn on their lives. We should be concerned that the assumptions on which the Budget is based are wildly over-optimistic. If the miscalculations are of the order of the Crossnacreevy situation, we are in trouble.

I thank Mark Durkan for fleshing out the detail of the annual Budget process, which should be taking place in the Assembly. I also wish to thank Dr Farry for drawing our attention to the fact that inflation now stands at 5.2% and that energy costs have risen significantly since the Budget was introduced. However, I wish that he would resist taking cheap shots after complimenting people; I suspect that Members switched off after that and did not hear the important things that he was saying. Perhaps I should forgive the Alliance Party Members; it may be that the grubby deals for an Executive position are going to their heads.

I welcome Mitchel McLaughlin's comments; he gave details of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's engagement with the Department, especially with regard to the effect that falling property prices is having on receipts, and the assumptions that underpin the Budget.

Peter Weir's message of "Don't panic; don't panic", like Corporal Jones in 'Dad's Army', produced almost as much amusement as his comment that he was willing to accept the advice of any other party. However, I welcome Mr Weir's acceptance of the need for a strategic stocktake on budgetary presumptions. Again, despite his knack for knocking his former party, he left out the agony that his new party is going through over the talk about Peter Robinson's and Nigel Dodds's local difficulties.

I thank my colleague Roy Beggs for pointing to the fact that DFP accepted DARD's valuation of the Crossnacreevy site at £200 million. How can we have confidence in the professionalism of DFP's acceptance of that valuation of green-belt land at those levels? I also thank Mr Beggs for highlighting the shambles that pertains in the Rate Collection Agency. Members misinterpreted what Mr Beggs said; perhaps when they read his remarks in Hansard they will see that they referred directly to the Sinn Féin party and to none other.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel rightly drew attention to the Executive's strategic stocktake; that is the whole point of this debate. The Executive are conducting the stocktake, not this democratically elected Assembly.

**Mr Durkan:** How and when?

**Mr McNarry:** Indeed. As part of its report on the Executive's draft Budget 2008-2012, the Department asked Committees for their views on the details provided in respect of departmental budget submissions, and, in particular, whether any additional information would have been of use. I do not know about other

Committees, but the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, in response to that question, said:

“The Committee is of the view that the level of detail provided in the draft Budget document made it very difficult for the Committee to comment constructively”

on the draft Budget. In particular, it was difficult for the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure to assess the impact of funding when the draft Budget did not make clear which specific bids would be met. I have no doubt that the Minister will take note.

The Minister also draws attention to the normal in-year process, which occurs automatically in the DFP system. However, these are not normal circumstances; they are once-in-a-century circumstances. We are in the midst of a stock-market crash on a par with that of 1929. The Minister speaks of opportunities presented by falling costs in the construction sector, as well as the threats posed by a reduction in the proceeds and receipts from property sales. Are those equal? I do not think so.

I was disappointed in the Minister today; I am glad he is here, but he has not inspired confidence. It was not just a question of style or presentation; it was the lack of a convincing argument with substance.

Speaking last week about the world economic crisis, the American inventor, Warren Buffett, said:

“It’s only when the tide goes out that you learn who’s been swimming naked.”

Minister, the tide is rolling in, and we wonder whether you will have a wetsuit on or just your flippers. On that note, I ask the House to support the integrity of the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Before I put the Question, I advise Members that, whether amendment No 1 is made or not, the Question on amendment No 2 will still be put.

*Question put,* That amendment No 1 be made.

*The Assembly divided:* Ayes 34; Noes 52.

#### AYES

*Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Mr O’Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes:* Dr Farry and Mr O’Loan.

#### NOES

*Mr Adams, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes:* Mr Craig and Ms S Ramsey.

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any existing and anticipated financial pressures impacting on public spending allocations in the current budgetary period, in light of the global economic downturn and credit crunch, and to report on any plans to make changes to the underlying allocations within the 2008-2011 Budget, beyond the scope of the quarterly monitoring rounds.

## PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

### Teachers' Strike at Movilla High School, Newtownards

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, for the Minister of Education.

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education to detail the action she has taken to resolve the teachers' strike at Movilla High School in Newtownards.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am very concerned by the recent developments at Movilla High School, which are now adversely affecting the education of all pupils at the school. It is disappointing that the issue has come to this point. It would be better for all parties if it had not come to such public attention. Teachers need to be back doing what they do, teaching; and pupils need to be back in the classroom, being educated. That must happen quickly.

Ach sin mar atá sé. Tá sé riachtanach go bhfaigheann gach dalta an t-oideachas atá sé nó sí i dteideal a fháil — gach uile dhalta. Tá sé de dhualgas orainn freisin a chinntiú go mbíonn múinteoirí ábalta a ndualgas féin a chomhlíonadh i dtimpeallacht atá sábháilte.

That translates as: but we are where we are. It is essential that every pupil receives the education to which he or she is entitled, and that means every pupil. We also have a duty to ensure that teachers are able to perform their duties in a safe environment.

I am aware that a stalemate situation has developed, and I am urging all those involved to work together in order to find a speedy resolution so that the education of all the pupils at Movilla High School can return to normality as quickly as possible.

We need to see this issue resolved, whether by the offer of the Children's Commissioner to mediate, the auspices of the Labour Relations Agency, or through local dialogue. I also ask that the privacy of the pupil and the pupil's family be respected by all involved, in this House and by the media. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr D Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a cause for regret that contributions on this issue are being confined to one constituency, considering the fact that it was a Member from another constituency, who is the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, who tabled the private notice question.

The issue of teacher assaults would have benefited from a wider range of contributions in the House. It was noted in a recent report by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I will answer the point of order if the Member will please resume his seat.

Members will know that in every case the choice of questions and supplementary questions is for the direction of the Speaker. The Speaker decided that this private notice question is related to a constituency matter and that other Members will not be called in that situation. I now want to resume the debate.

**Mr Storey:** I express some concern because I had asked the Minister to detail to the House what action she had taken with regard to this serious situation. Unfortunately, the Minister has not detailed what she has done to try to resolve the situation. Obviously, people want a resolution.

Several questions flow from the dispute. First, can the Minister confirm that the pupil who is at the centre of the dispute is legally enrolled in the school? I concur with her comment that the privacy of the pupil and family is paramount. Obviously, Members are concerned about the pupil who is at the centre of the controversy. Secondly, can she confirm that, in a statement, the South Eastern Education and Library Board agreed to suspend the implementation of complete reduction of salaries for teachers who are involved in the dispute? It seems that the issue has become the subject of another debate. From the union's point of view, that is regrettable. Thirdly, can the Minister confirm that she will speak to the unions concerned about the course of action that she has taken?

The outcome must not, in any way, detract from the safety of staff in any school. However, as Chairman of the Education Committee, I fear that a precedent has been set about how such issues are dealt with, given that there has been a significant increase in the number of assaults in schools during the past several years and the fact that other schools currently experience the same situation when pupils are suspended. Remember that the pupil who is at the centre of the dispute is back at school legally. The Assembly must ensure that a precedent is not set for staff to take action that disrupts the education of other pupils — 540 other pupils in the case of Movilla High School.

**Mr McNarry:** The most important concern in this unfortunate situation is that the provision of education at the school must continue. The Assembly must hear the Minister's assurance that there will be no lasting interference to that crucial provision.

The issue is, of course, of grave concern because it is not clear whether a police investigation is under way in respect of the alleged assault and the complaint that arose from that allegation. Perhaps the Minister can provide that information. If such an investigation is under way, what primacy does it have? Is it intertwined with the Minister's action? If there is no police

investigation, surely parents should ask why not. Therein may lie the answer.

I have listened to the Minister's comments. I am grateful for what she has said. However, she has not said whom she supports in this situation: is it the pupil who is at the centre of the dispute; all other pupils; one set of parents; all other parents; the school; its principal; its board; or the trade unions? The Minister must tell the Assembly now what her position is and whom she supports. Members will then have an inkling of what action and direction she is likely to take.

**Mr McCarthy:** Is the Minister not ashamed to lead a Department of Education in Northern Ireland that presides over the events at Movilla High School in Newtownards where pupils are being denied the teaching and education to which they are entitled? The problem did not arise overnight; it has existed for a considerable time. Surely, her Department should have sorted the problem out by whatever means necessary long before it reached the point of no return, whereby pupils are being denied their education and there have been accusations of assault on a teacher.

We cannot accept such a situation. Will the Minister enlighten the Assembly as to what she is doing in the immediate term to solve the problem?

**Mr Shannon:** It is with regret that I put this question to the Minister; furthermore, it is put from a position of concern. As other Members said, this is a most delicate issue. However, it is vital for the pupil concerned, and for all the pupils of the school, that welfare and education are taken care of.

Is the Minister aware of the discussions that have taken place between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the unions? A solution was put forward to resolve the dispute and end the strike. What steps is the Minister taking to deliver a solution? A solution exists, if all the parties involved will grasp it.

**The Minister of Education:** Members have asked me a couple of direct questions. I will answer those that I can, and I will explain why, in view of the situation, it would be inappropriate to answer others.

The young person concerned is under 18 and we must be careful of putting undue focus on any school pupil. In my statement, I stressed the importance of pupils and teachers being able to operate in a safe environment. As people know, my Department takes a very serious view of assaults on teachers; the bullying of young people; and of the need to provide emotional support for young people.

With respect to the Member who asked whom I support, the question is, rather, how we resolve the issue so that everyone gets back to school — teachers and pupils alike — while maintaining respect for everyone's rights. For me, that is paramount.

I shall answer other questions. The pupil is legally enrolled in the school. The board has not agreed to suspend the reduction in salaries; however, it has agreed to review its decision to suspend pay if one of the parties involved agrees to mediation.

Mediation can happen in several ways, and I outlined three in my statement. The first is through the good offices of the Children's Commissioner; the second is the potential for local dialogue, which would, obviously, involve the board; and the third is through the Labour Relations Agency. It is not for me to say which is the correct option; however, I must insist that everyone sits down, starts talking and resolves the difficulty. We cannot have a situation where 540 children are out of school, or one in which people feel that they work in an unsafe environment.

I am aware that efforts have been made to resolve the matter, and that much hard work has gone into those efforts. There is a way through the impasse, and we must find it. Rather than get involved in a blame game, let us calm the situation, focus on a resolution and ensure that we do not focus on one particular child. To do so would be unfair.

**Mr McCarthy:** Will the Minister —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** No further supplementary questions will be asked.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Climate Change

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time where two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes have been allowed for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

2.45 pm

**Mr Gallagher:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that the Minister of the Environment continues to ignore the mounting evidence that climate change is a significant issue, and

(i) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Department of the Environment recognises recent scientific evidence and sets challenging targets for carbon reductions and sustainable development across all departments; and

(ii) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the principles and priorities for the Department of the Environment contained in the Programme for Government, and approved by the Assembly, are reflected accurately by both the Minister of the Environment and departmental officials, for example, when attending North-South and East-West ministerial meetings.

The motion is essentially about the growing concerns that exist about the environment. Central to it are concerns that human activity contributes to damaging the environment, particularly through CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which are causing global warming, which in turn affects climate change. In the face of overwhelming evidence about that link, our Environment Minister — whom I welcome to the debate — has rejected, on numerous occasions, the fact that human activities have caused climate change.

Two amendments have been tabled. Amendment No 2, tabled by the Alliance Party, pretty much reflects our views, and we have no difficulty in accepting it. Amendment No 1 is detailed; nevertheless, it seeks to focus attention away from the Minister's role. Although the amendment addresses some laudable matters, such as energy saving and sustainable development, it avoids the key issue, which is that the Minister of the Environment continues to equivocate about the contribution of human activity to global warming. The evidence that human actions have contributed to climate change is beyond question, and that is why we are calling on the Environment Minister to adopt a more serious approach.

Time does not permit me to go into the scientific evidence today — and I am not a scientist — but it is

on record and well documented. I refer Members to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has been going for 10 years, and has issued a number of reports. Professor Neil Adger is a leading author with the IPCC, and he works at the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia. He states:

“Anyone who disputes these facts is either a fool or is seeking deliberately to mislead for political or other purposes. The IPCC is the most rigorous science available — on its evidence every country, province and indeed individual needs to act now — anything else is a dereliction of our duty of care to ourselves and our future”.

To bring that home; in April 2008, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, said:

“Current predictions on climate change suggest greater long-term impacts on health than any current public health priority.”

He continued:

“We must tackle this issue on all fronts, reducing our contribution to the problem and responding to the effects of climate change is a shared international responsibility.”

Although climate change is a technical, scientific, health and economic issue, it is also a moral one. As some Members know, in global terms, the present level of carbon emissions can undermine the well-being of millions of people today and condemn further generations to live in an inhospitable climate.

In reflecting on global warming, one of the great tragedies and ironies is that the poor — those who have contributed least to it — will suffer most, especially those in areas that are most susceptible to rising sea levels. Bangladesh is a case in point. Such areas are inhabited by the poor, who have the least resources available to them to change their life situations. Our neighbouring Governments in the Republic of Ireland and the UK have joined with industrial countries around the world to tackle climate change.

All those involved are making some effort to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, which are responsible for carbon emissions. Government spokespersons from those countries have reinforced the message that people have to change their habits and reduce their carbon footprint if the environment is to be saved.

It is time for a serious approach to climate change by all concerned, including the head of the Department of the Environment — the Minister — and his officials. Playing political football with environmental issues is not acceptable. It is not good enough to adopt the strategy that if it is not going to happen on my watch, I will leave it to my successor to deal with, even though I know that what is done now will only exacerbate the problem and create a potentially irreversible situation.

People today must live in a way that is just and fair for all — and for future generations of human beings and all other forms of life on the planet. We, in



Northern Ireland, have opportunities to do things in other ways. We can reduce our carbon emissions without reducing or harming our prosperity. There are abundant resources to exploit: wind, tide, and biomass are possible alternative sources of energy. Domestic renewable sources of energy, such as solar panels and small wind turbines, can make a very significant difference.

I have difficulty with the DUP amendment. How can ordinary people seriously be expected to make a contribution to energy savings in their homes and small businesses when the entire Department is not serious about the issue? The Assembly needs to lead the way.

In Northern Ireland, as is the case around the world, large energy-reliant businesses such as power stations are the main contributors to the problem of carbon emissions. Those businesses are now required to make a contribution to reducing the carbon footprint. What must they make of the dilemma that, on the one hand, they are being asked to make a contribution while, on the other, the Minister of the Environment has been frequently quoted as saying that he does not believe that their activities, or the production of emissions, make any significant contribution to climate change?

I will finish with the words of the theologian Leonardo Boff, who, when speaking about environmental damage, said that unless we get to grips with this issue:

“There will be no new Noah’s Ark to save some and leave the rest to perish. We all either sink or swim together”.

**Mr Ross:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after ‘Assembly’ and insert

“recognises that climate change is occurring, is a significant issue and that mankind should contribute to a solution to the extent to which it is contributing to the problem; calls on the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of the Environment to take action to minimise the impact of this on individuals, households and small and medium sized enterprises; further recognises that the Department of the Environment has already committed to targets in this area in the Programme for Government; and further calls on the Minister of the Environment to promote the Energy Saving Trust and the Northern Ireland Energy Agency in order to help prevent further financial pressure on households.”

I welcome the opportunity to have a full and open debate on climate change, as we have not often had the opportunity to do so. I am disappointed by Mr Gallagher’s opening comments. He did not say that his primary concern was the environment or his constituents: he said that the central rationale behind the motion was to target the Minister.

The argument in the motion is that the Minister is ignoring the significant impact of climate change; he is not. Nor is the Minister denying that climate change is happening; climate change is a fact. It has always happened. It is a natural phenomenon whereby global

temperatures have risen and fallen throughout the centuries; from the ice age and, more recently, between the 1940s and the 1970s when global temperatures have fallen.

The real argument — not only in the House — is about the extent to which mankind adds to the effects of climate change. My amendment accepts that the climate is changing and calls on the Minister to take appropriate action to minimise the impact on the population.

The impact of climate change is clear, and, over recent years, Members have witnessed severe flooding in parts of Northern Ireland, including parts of my constituency. I visited many of the affected houses and saw the damage caused at first hand. Mr Gallagher said that the Assembly must act now, and people expect the Executive to act immediately, as they did after the floods.

However, it is not simply a matter of financial assistance. Other practical decisions must be taken to reduce the impact of climate change: new housing developments should not be built on flood plains, and a certain amount of flood water should remain on the site of new developments to reduce any future surge on the water table. Such practical measures recognise the problem and aim to find a solution that can make a difference to people.

People do not want only targets; they want action. However, let us not forget that some targets were set in the Programme for Government that was passed by the Assembly. The responsibility for dealing with climate change does not rest with a single Department. Rather, several Departments, including the Department of the Environment, have a role to play. The Executive, therefore, are collectively responsible for climate change.

The original motion refers to the North/South Ministerial Council, but that has no mandate to discuss climate change. It also refers to the British-Irish Council, which has only limited scope to discuss the issue. My amendment calls on the Minister to work with groups that can help to reduce the amount of energy that people use in their homes and thereby save money.

Now is not the time to hit people, or businesses, with higher taxes disguised as environmental incentives. The burden is heavy enough, and the Assembly should instead encourage people to take measures that will be to their practical advantage. I listened to Mr Gallagher question why individuals would do so, and the simple answer is that it would save them money. The Assembly should not, particularly given the current global financial crisis, burden businesses to the extent that they lose any competitive advantage against foreign competitors, not only for the sake of the businesses but for their employees.

That is not to say that individuals cannot take action, but it is important to send a clear message that saving energy does not necessarily hit the pockets of constituents. Unfortunately, the idea of being environmentally friendly is often associated with higher costs. The prime example of that is the introduction of green taxes in Europe and elsewhere. Often, those taxes have little to do with saving the environment and much more to do with generating more money for the Government. Therefore, people are rightly sceptical about that approach.

The motion also refers to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which claims that 2,500 scientists agree that CO<sub>2</sub> is responsible for global warming and that humans are the culprits. Al Gore's infamous film, 'An Inconvenient Truth', made as he attempted to set himself up as a potential US President, supported that view. However, it should not be forgotten that, the last time that he ran for president, he claimed to have invented the Internet, and the real "inconvenient truth" was that he did not.

It is important in any debate on climate change to recognise that people have different views on its cause, although Governments across the world have been quick to implement policies on the back of the opinion of a majority of scientists whose data are questionable. As a result of the focus on climate change in recent years, many nations throughout the world have spent billions of pounds of taxpayers' money. That is particularly relevant at a time when the world faces dire financial problems.

The Assembly must be mindful of the impact of Government's decisions on people, but, unfortunately, some Members are not. Indeed, last month, the chairperson of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the UN's top climate scientist, Dr Rajendra Pachauri, urged people to cut their meat consumption as a way to combat climate change.

Members must recognise the potential outcome of that. Mad cow disease was once the greatest threat to the meat industry; now it seems to be mad scientists. Everyone is becoming too used to the extreme fringes of the environmental lobby coming up with ideas that restrict personal freedoms and result in having a costly impact on the pockets of individuals. Those scientists now target the meat sector.

Individuals can decide for themselves what action to take to be sensitive to the environment. Furthermore, the comments of that top climate scientist could have a serious impact on the farming industry here, an industry that has already taken several measures to reduce the environmental damage caused by its activities. The meat industry in Northern Ireland employs thousands of people and generates millions of pounds annually in revenue. The situation in industry

is difficult enough without such outrageous comments being made.

However, individuals can take several steps to reduce their energy consumption and save money. We must ensure that being environmentally friendly is cost-effective for individuals — that will make energy conservation a more attractive proposition. Simple measures such as turning a thermostat down by 1°C can save the average home 10% of its fuel bill. Cavity-wall and loft insulation, energy-saving light bulbs, draft proofing, heating controls and water-tank insulation are all good ways of saving energy in the home, helping to reduce energy consumption and, as a result, helping to save money.

3.00 pm

Several initiatives, such as the cavity-wall cashback scheme, can save money and reduce energy consumption. In the current dire economic situation, a saving of a few hundred pounds a year can go a long way. Furthermore, it is important that we reduce the region's energy dependency. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Nigel Dodds, referred to the significant issue of rising energy costs in an earlier debate. Therefore, amendment No 1 calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with groups such as the Energy Saving Trust and the Northern Ireland Energy Agency to actively promote opportunities for taxpayers to save money.

It is crucial that we change our sensitivity to the environment and to energy consumption and move away from the view that big Government tell us what to do or we get taxed, to a situation where individuals, businesses and householders are given incentives to conserve energy. The agencies that I mentioned give individuals the opportunity to implement simple changes — which are sensitive to the environment and save money — to their everyday routine. It is important that the Assembly identifies the problems and suggests solutions. I urge the House to support amendment No 1, which recognises the challenges that we face and identifies practical steps that individuals and the Government can take that will not have a negative impact on people during this difficult economic time.

**Mr B Wilson:** I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

“(iii) calls on all Ministers to ensure that their Departments recognise the significance of man-made climate change, particularly in the promotion of sustainability in transport, planning, housing and energy consumption.”

I thank Mr Gallagher for tabling the motion. It is important that the Assembly has an opportunity to debate climate change, which, along with the Minister's controversial views, has been in the news during the past few months.

In October 2007, David Ford and I tabled a motion on climate change that demanded that climate change and sustainability be central to all Executive policy. Although the current Environment Minister spoke against that motion, the Assembly agreed to it unanimously. However, I must ask what impact that has had on Executive decisions. As far as I can see, it has had none. It appears that in making decisions, the Executive have ignored sustainability and the threat of climate change. For example, the amount of money that will be spent on public transport in the next 10 years will not increase. In fact, the Department for Regional Development is obsessed with building more roads, which will in turn create more traffic. Alternative measures, such as public transport, should be examined. There has been no leadership on the matter.

Planners continue to give permission to build houses on flood plains. In the past few months, the Assembly has given £2 million of grants to householders who live near riverbanks and have been flooded out by heavy rain. Again, action should be taken on that matter, but nothing has happened.

Although the Executive have taken some action, it has been negative. Direct rule Ministers introduced Reconnect grants to help householders to create microgeneration systems in their houses. However, the abolition of that initiative was one of the first things that was done under the Budget. If we want to encourage people to use alternative energy and reduce their carbon footprint, the last thing that we should do is discourage the development of microgeneration systems.

The previous Administration established the Renewable Energy Installer Academy, which was funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and provided courses on how to install the new microgeneration systems. However, the people who received the training found that jobs disappeared because the Reconnect grants on which those jobs were dependent were no longer available.

Renewable energy systems have great potential. In Germany, 250,000 people are employed to install and create such systems. Our current figure is around 100, so we have not tapped that potential. The Executive abolished the previous plans to set mandatory targets and to install renewable systems in new housing.

Furthermore, the Executive have totally failed to show any leadership on the issue of sustainability. Instead of putting their money where their mouth is, they pay lip service to the issue. We are one of the windiest places, if not the single windiest place, in Europe, so we should take the initiative and develop energy from our offshore wind — a significant resource that is the envy of many European countries.

We generate approximately 1% of our energy from renewable sources. Denmark, which is a country that is

not much bigger than ours, produces 25% of its energy from wind. We could do that if we had the will and if the Executive showed some leadership. We have the advantage of being an island around which there is much potential for wave and tidal power. We have a tidal-turbine prototype that should be developed, and I am sure that the Executive could help to promote that technology. The turbine could be developed at Harland and Wolff, and that technology could be a prototype for the rest of the world.

**Mr McCarthy:** The Member has repeatedly referred to the Executive. What Executive is he talking about? The one that should be in place has not met since June 2008. Will he clarify his position? Is he talking about the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, or is it some other executive? Perhaps the Member will explain.

**Mr B Wilson:** I thank the Member for that point. I was talking about previous decisions that were made when the Executive were meeting.

If the resources that I referred to were developed, thousands of long-term jobs could be created. That could also combat fuel poverty by saving people money on energy bills. In addition, that would increase our energy security, because we are at the end of a long supply line for gas and oil, and we are being hit hardest by increasing fuel prices and shortages.

We are supposed to show that we really believe that climate change is a problem, but the appointment of our new Environment Minister has sent out all the wrong signals to the community. If the Environment Minister does not believe that we are responsible for climate change, why should anyone else?

**Mr D Bradley:** Does the Member agree that the Minister's understanding of climate change is on a par with Ali G's understanding of policing in Northern Ireland?

**Mr B Wilson:** I am not sure what Ali G's understanding of policing is, but it sounds good anyway.

Perhaps the Minister should get out more; he should attend a meeting of EU environment Ministers, which would give him an opportunity to convince those Ministers that they have all been conned by the green, climate-alarmist scaremongering that he mentioned in his 'News Letter' article. Other European environment Ministers would be interested to hear how he worked that out.

Most people who are involved in environmental matters consider the Minister's opinions to be backward, reactionary and irrelevant. He ignores all the scientific evidence, and he gives credibility to a few crank scientists who are sponsored by oil companies, hold extreme views and have a vested interest in promoting the use of fossil fuels.

The Assembly should support amendment No 2 and put sustainability at the centre of Executive policy.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank my colleague Mr Gallagher for proposing this motion.

The Committee recognises the threat from climate change and is aware of the urgency of the problem. Although the planet's climate has fluctuated naturally many times, the rate of change and the fact that human activity has been implicated as a source of warming make climate change one of the biggest problems to face the world this century. In an attempt to halt or minimise the potential effects of climate change, Governments worldwide are actively pursuing policies that aim to reduce carbon emissions, and the Environment Committee believes that Northern Ireland must also play its part.

The Committee supports the Department of the Environment's signing up to the UK's Climate Change Bill, which will put into statute the UK's targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through domestic and international action by at least 60% by 2050 and at least 26% by 2020, compared to the 1990 baseline. In addition, the Committee supports the Bill's five-year carbon budgets, which will set binding limits on carbon dioxide emissions, ensuring that every year's emissions count. However, Northern Ireland has a long way to go if it is to contribute effectively to those targets and move to a low-carbon economy.

The North's carbon dioxide emissions have fluctuated from the 1990 base year; however, by 2004, they had increased by 0.6%. Although that may not seem to be much, it is 3.6% above the level that would be required if we were to be on target to contribute our fair share of the 60% reduction target by 2050. During the same period, England and Scotland reduced their emissions by 6.7% and 14.1% respectively.

The Committee for the Environment supports the establishment of a new statutory body — the committee on climate change — to provide independent, expert advice and guidance to Government. The Committee for the Environment wants the new committee to provide independent advice about how Northern Ireland could achieve its targets, stay inside carbon budgets and implement emission-reducing policies.

The Climate Change Bill contains enabling powers to introduce new trading schemes through secondary legislation, which, while retaining the requirement for thorough analysis, consultation and the scrutiny of proposals before any new schemes are introduced, increases the policy options that Government might use to stay within budgets and to meet emission targets. The Committee can envisage the use of

climate-change mitigation measures in the North, and it welcomes the inclusion of those secondary-legislation provisions.

Furthermore, the Committee for the Environment welcomes the key Programme for Government goal to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint by at least 25% by 2025, and it stresses the need for that programme to be sufficiently resourced in order to achieve its goals. In addition, the Committee would have preferred a higher profile for climate change in the Programme for Government, which is a matter that has already been mentioned. In particular, the Committee urges the Government to highlight the implications of climate change for society and to make an explicit commitment to tackling it.

3.15 pm

In summary, the Committee for the Environment has endorsed the need for scientific evidence and the establishment of challenging targets for carbon reduction in its acceptance of the UK Climate Change Bill [HL]. The Committee welcomed the Department of the Environment's commitment to reducing the North's carbon footprint in the Programme for Government, but was disappointed by what can only be described as a lacklustre commitment by the Department to tackling the issue of climate change and its impacts on society.

As a constituency MLA and a party colleague of Mr Gallagher's, I fully support the motion and commend it to the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak in favour of the motion, and I thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone for tabling it. Sinn Féin supports the second amendment but certainly not the first.

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Wilson, has made that ministry the laughing stock of Europe, if not the world. Most people who have a detailed knowledge of the issue of climate change will agree that the Minister's attitude is a joke. However, it should not be treated as such because, in years to come, its consequences will prove to be costly.

Other Governments are getting to grips with climate change and showing leadership on the issue, and several Members gave examples of that. Looking across the water to Scotland, its Government are showing great leadership and making huge strides in relation to renewable energy. They have also ruled out the nuclear option for the provision of energy in that area. We all know that our Environment Minister supports that option, which is something that could have potentially fatal consequences if it were ever brought to these shores.

The Swedish Government have announced their intention to make Sweden the first country to break its dependence on oil and other fossil fuels by 2020. We

need to see that kind of leadership here because we cannot continue to be dependent on fossil fuels. The recent upsurge in the price of oil and other commodities such as electricity and gas demonstrates the need to find alternative sources of energy. As Brian Wilson mentioned, those alternatives are on our doorstep — wave and wind energy have great potential here in Ireland, as they do in Scotland. Indeed, we are the envy of many other countries in Europe in that regard.

**Mr Wells:** I am sorry to interrupt the Member as he polishes his environmental halo, but does it not strike him as being hypocritical that he is trying to lecture us about our environmental credentials while both his party and the SDLP have supported a massive amount of development in the countryside, which will, inevitably, lead to a vast increase in carbon emissions? Those parties support the environment only when it suits them, but when their constituents want to pepper the countryside with new developments, they are 100% behind it.

**Mr McKay:** I thank the Member for his intervention; however, I will not take any lectures from Members of the DUP about environmental policy because the contradictions in that party are quite clear.

Ireland has great potential to develop renewable energy but that needs leadership, which, to date, has been lacking. Sinn Féin supports amendment No 2, tabled by the Green Party and the Alliance Party, because it is important that all Ministers recognise that human behaviour is contributing to climate change — it is not only the responsibility of OFMDFM and DOE. However, it is very difficult for other Ministers to reduce their Department's carbon footprint when the Environment Minister does not even accept that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions cause climate change.

It is quite clear from reading amendment No 1 that it proposes to do nothing with regard to climate change.

**Mr Ross:** The main focus of that amendment relates to conserving energy in the household. The Member will know that the energy consumed in our homes is responsible for 25% of all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the UK. Therefore, does the Member not recognise that the amendment encourages people to save energy, which will have an environmentally friendly impact?

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

**Mr McKay:** I refer the Member to the text of that amendment, which states that the Assembly recognises:

“that mankind should contribute to a solution to the extent to which it is contributing to the problem”.

By the definition of the Minister and his party, mankind and womankind are not contributing to the problem — therefore, they need not contribute to the

solution. That is the clear implication of the DUP amendment.

The Minister needs to catch himself on. Climate change is a major issue for every Government in Europe and across the world — except for the Administration here. That is an embarrassment for the Assembly, and much more must be done.

The Member for East Antrim Alastair Ross referred to being environmentally friendly as very costly, and he is right. However, that is also the case in respect of the Health Service or other public services. The public is supportive of the need to invest money in order to encourage alternatives to commodities such as oil. That will help to combat climate change, and contribute to the economy. As Brian Wilson has said, a renewable-energy economy must be encouraged to create jobs in Ireland, as has been the case across Europe. That good practice must be examined and replicated.

If something is not done about global warming, there will be more flooding in East Antrim. Indeed, some have blamed climate change on the recent jellyfish invasion in the Minister's own constituency, and the people of East Antrim should take cognisance of that.

I support the motion and amendment No 2. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Beggs:** I support the motion. Amendment No 1, tabled by Mr Ross and Mr Weir, uses a rather Jesuitical set of words, stating that mankind:

“should contribute to a solution to the extent to which it is contributing to the problem”.

Is that a large extent or none? Given the Minister's denial of man's impact on climate change, which appears to be supported by his colleagues, that amendment may mean doing nothing. Therefore, I cannot support that amendment. However, I am content with amendment No 2, tabled by Mr Ford and Mr Wilson.

“We debate the motion because it is now accepted that climate change is the greatest environmental challenge faced by the world today.” [*Official Report, Vol 26, No 2, p55, col 1*].

Those are not my words, but the words of the former Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, when introducing a motion in the Assembly some 10 months ago. That motion was unanimously accepted by the Assembly and it endorsed the extension of the provisions of the Westminster Climate Change Bill to Northern Ireland. Furthermore, a specific target was inserted into the Programme for Government document for:

“Reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25%, below 1990 levels by 2025.”

Page 14 of that document goes on to state:

“Climate change is one of the most serious problems facing the world. While we recognise that it requires action internationally, we

are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change.”

The final words of that statement clearly acknowledge man's contribution to climate change, and support the view expressed in the section of the DOE website that is devoted to climate change. Therefore, the policy of the DOE and the Executive is clear, and it is a policy that fits with the policies of the UK Government, the EU and other devolved UK legislatures.

However, in June this year, there was a revolution — the Paisley-purge in the DUP and the elevation of Mr Sammy Wilson to the post of Minister of the Environment. The Minister has form on the issue of climate change. In May 2005, he signed an early-day motion — number 178 — in the House of Commons. That motion stated:

“That this House agrees with the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser that climate change is a threat to civilisation; welcomes the cross-party agreement in favour of major cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, and particularly in carbon dioxide emissions, by 2050”.

The motion went on to call for:

“annual cuts in carbon dioxide emissions of 3 per cent.”

Those targets were intended to be written into a Climate Change Bill.

The Minister seems to have become a little confused this year. He signed another early-day motion — number 893 — tabled in February 2008 that also supported action against climate change, and which welcomed:

“new EU targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2 per cent. by 2020”.

The Minister went to great lengths to withdraw his signature from that early-day motion, on 26 June — after his ministerial appointment. Why did he perform another U-turn on that issue?

We know what the Minister of the Environment thinks about climate change from his various media performances, such as an opinion piece that he did for the ‘News Letter’ on 4 September. In short, he said that climate change is happening but that it is part of a natural cycle. He said that increasing CO<sup>2</sup> production from human sources is not a major factor and that we in Northern Ireland cannot do anything about it anyway.

In moving amendment No 1, Mr Ross acknowledged man's contribution to carbon dioxide production and its effect on climate change. Not only is the Minister's view out of sync with world scientific opinion and the views of the Executive and his Department, he is contradicting his party's election manifesto of last year, which states:

“The DUP has supported the introduction of a Climate Change Bill at Westminster and called for year on year targets in order to achieve reduced Carbon emissions. Northern Ireland must play its part in that overall effort, and a new Executive should be proactive in this area.”

The DUP also said that Ministers would no longer be able to act alone in narrow party interests. The Minister of the Environment appears to be on a solo run with regard to his attitude to climate change, and it seems as if he is ignoring his own election manifesto. Or has his party done a U-turn? Oops, has another DUP manifesto pledge been broken?

During Question Time on 29 September — a mere two weeks ago — the Minister stated:

“Indeed, 44% of climate scientists disagree with the statement that climate change is mostly the result of man-made causes.”  
—[*Official Report, Vol 33, No 5, p216, col 1*].

Will the Minister inform the House where he got that significant figure and will he back it up?

**Mrs I Robinson:** If hot air emissions were anything to go by, the Chamber would take off and float down Prince of Wales Drive. I am surprised; I thought that those Members who had a leaning towards the green lobby would have mentioned the number of lights that illuminate this Building at night and query whether low-energy light bulbs were being used. I thought that they would ask what we are doing to conserve energy in the Building. This place is like Blackpool illuminations every night and into the early hours of the morning.

Sammy Wilson is a good Minister. He brings objectivity and a breath of fresh air to his portfolio because he dares to question scientific viewpoints. Considering the damage that scientists' input has caused to our fishing fleets, one must question from where the scientists are coming.

Sinn Féin Members talked about damage being done to the environment. I can think of no body that did more to damage the environment with firebombs, petrol bombs and with the blitzing of the towns, countryside and villages of the Province over forty years than Sinn Féin/IRA. I do not take lectures from that side of the House either.

I support rational and reasonable debate on climate change, the part that civilisation contributes and on what our responses should be. Unfortunately, the mass hysteria of those supporting the “humans are responsible” argument has made it difficult for any degree of objectivity to prevail. I am as concerned as anyone about the change in climate and the possible repercussions on humanity; however, I am not prepared to buy blindly into the hysteria that has been generated by some sections of the green lobby. Its supporters demand that we listen to scientific consensus on the matter, but, at the same time, ignore those who disagree with their narrow view, thus ignoring the lack of scientific consensus on the causes of climate change.

The only certainty is that the facts are inconclusive. That is a serious matter.

3.30 pm

**Mr McKay:** Does the Member recognise that, aside from green lobby groups and green non-governmental organisations, many charities and anti-poverty groups recognise the effects of climate change, and that they also attribute it to the behaviour of mankind?

**Mrs I Robinson:** I have not heard any comments from that sector, but I take the Member's word for it. I thank him for raising the matter. It is on record, so I am sure that he is happy.

There is no doubt that climate change is a serious matter. Those who peddle doom and gloom have succeeded in swaying the Governments of countries around the world and have seriously undermined our ability to establish the true extent to which humans contribute to climate change. There seems to be a three-pronged tactic to undermine those who do not buy in to the AGW theory — the theory of anthropogenic global warming. The first tactic is to accuse sceptics of being dishonest, and to suggest that they are funded by big business and that they produce bad research to suit the needs of private business. What is conveniently omitted is the fact that pro-global-warming scientists have also received huge funding from business and, more notably, from Governments. The second tactic is to accuse sceptics of being akin to Holocaust deniers — that they and their theories are crazy, just like those who deny the Holocaust. The third tactic is to state that the majority of scientists subscribes to the global-warming theory and take that as proof of its reality. The fact is that there are reputed scientists who do not subscribe to the AGW theory.

It has already been established that climate models that inform the views of those at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are nothing like as unflawed as it would have us believe, and that there is a considerable pattern of error on the IPCC's part. If Governments are to get the best advice, they need information and analysis, including that from genuinely open and disinterested sources. With the environmental risks laid out, drafting the correct policies demands proper political accountability and, therefore, a much wider range of opinion than the IPCC currently provides.

No one would be so ignorant as to suggest that humans are not contributing to climate change. However, to suggest that we are completely responsible is both inaccurate and irresponsible. Advances in science can help us to address the impact that we do have by improving technology and mitigating what impact we have through greater efficiency. That is happening already. During the past 15 years, power-station generators have become 62% more efficient, and cars have become more than 80% more efficient. We do not need a raft of legislation and

penalties that are based on knee-jerk reactions that do not deal with the issue of climate change and that simply penalise individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland. I support amendment No 1.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for tabling the motion.

As we all know, climate change is one of the major issues that we will have to face in the future — not only here in Ireland but in the rest of the world. It has the potential to be of even greater concern than the global credit crisis that engulfs us at present.

There is real concern in the Assembly, and among the general public, that we have a Minister of the Environment who does not take the matter seriously. The Minister may have his own thoughts on the issue, but it is unthinkable that he let his personal opinions cloud his judgement, when all the evidence suggests that real action is needed now to counteract the effects of climate change.

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member point out when the Minister or his party did not take climate change seriously or say that the impact of climate change needed to be addressed? I am not sure from where he gets his information.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Member for his intervention, but if the Member were to read press statements from the past 12 months, he might find out for himself.

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Boylan:** No; you have had your chance.

The general opinion of the public and interested parties is that they have no confidence in the Minister to deal with the real issue of climate change. The Stern Report states that climate change will affect all countries and, if it goes unchecked, temperatures could rise by 4°C above pre-industrial levels.

We use statistics, notes and evidence during every debate. We have evidence from certain scientists on climate change, but one party is neglecting to use that evidence in this debate. Why is that happening with this particular issue?

If climate change goes unchecked, global food production will be affected and sea levels will rise. Some Members have mentioned flooding, and we have all seen its effects. To be honest, I do not fancy the thought of Members from Belfast being flooded and perhaps floating down to the border; so we might as well take the issue seriously.

The Minister needs to take the matter seriously. Is he prepared to disregard the vast majority of scientific evidence on the pretext that he does not agree with it? Early in the new year, local councils will be signing up to the climate change declaration, and they will be

seek funding from Europe to improve the environmental sustainability of district councils and local communities. That action is to be commended.

The mixed messages from the Department, on the one hand, and the Minister, on the other, mean that we do not know who is in charge and what will be delivered. Mr Ross said earlier that people should take responsibility, and I agree with that. However, they also need leadership, and the Minister of the Environment should be providing that leadership. The Minister must make it clear that he is committed to tackling climate change — no ifs and buts or personal opinions. He must commit to meeting the targets and recognising the need for sustainability. Let each of us in the Chamber send a clear message that we are taking the issue seriously and that everyone else should do likewise.

In conclusion, I will quote from the Stern Report:

“The benefits of strong, early action on climate change outweigh the costs.”

I ask the Minister to take strong action, or we will all face the cost. The Minister has the responsibility to lead in the face of the challenges that climate change brings, and he must ensure that the public do their part to meet those challenges. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Shannon:** Aa' suppoart tha amenment. Aa' hae mien o' tha furst tiem that aa' heert about globel warmen en that wus whun mi sinns' brought ther hamewark tae tha kitchen table about this. Up tae this stage aa' haud thought that things went in circles en loops, that tha wather cycle faced bi mi grandfather wud jist be tha same facin mi wanes — that it wus normal fer ther tae be rain in tha simmer. Hoo'iniver, efter lising tae tha grouwin consarns about globel warmen en tha ozone layer aa' sterted tae gaein seeryous thought tae tha hamewark mi boys brought hame.

I support the amendment. I remember the first time that I heard about global warming; when my sons brought homework on that very issue to the kitchen table. Until then, I had figured that there were circles and loops; that the weather cycle that my father had faced was the same cycle that my children would face, and that it was normal to have rain in the summer. After having listened to the growing speculation about the ozone layer and the effects of global warming, I began to think that there was something to the homework that my boys had brought home some years ago.

I began to look at ways to cut my carbon footprint. I planted 2,500 to 3,000 trees on my home farm just to do my bit for the environment. That was a good action to take. I know that the Minister has done the same on land that he owns, and he might mention that later. In fact, he may have planted as many trees as I have. However, the fact remains that global warming and climate change cannot be entirely put down to human faults. We can do only so much. The only one who can

truly restore anything to perfection is the Lord God Himself. We have a duty of care, but we cannot repair that which is beyond us. It is my opinion that swallowing the entire blame for climate change places far too much responsibility on our shoulders.

I will mention a few quotations and reports, which will help to illustrate the arguments. A United Nations report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that was published earlier this year stated that humans are very likely to blame for global warming, and that there is virtually no doubt that it is linked to man's use of fossil fuels. However, other climate experts say that there is little scientific evidence to support that theory. In fact, they say that global warming could be caused by increased solar activity, such as a massive eruption. Ice core samples from Antarctica have been used as proof of how warming over the centuries has been accompanied by raised CO<sub>2</sub> levels. Ian Clark, an expert in paleoclimatology at the University of Ottawa, claims that warmer periods of the earth's history came around 18 years before rises in carbon dioxide levels. That is another opinion, which, again, is slightly different from others.

Philip Stott, the professor emeritus of biogeography at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, stated that:

“The system is too complex to say exactly what the effect of cutting back on CO<sub>2</sub> production would be”.

A spokesman for the Royal Society said:

“We are not saying carbon dioxide emissions are the only factor in climate change and it is very important that the debate keeps going. But, based on the situation at this moment, we have to do something about CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.”

That is another viewpoint that is at odds with some of what has been discussed today. I am not arguing that we should be absolved of our responsibility to care for our world. However, I have quoted those men of science to show that we can only do so much.

I encourage the Minister of the Environment to ensure that the targets set in the Programme for Government are met. With the credit crunch nipping hard at almost everyone's heels, we should err on the side of caution and examine the possibility of increasing reliance on renewable sources. That would have less of an adverse effect on the environment than the use of fossil fuels, and it would lessen the strain on our pockets. We must strike the correct balance. Indeed, I have urged the elderly members of my constituency to take advantage of programmes such as the warm homes scheme so that they can save money and keep warm this winter. The promotion of such schemes will enable everyone in the Province to play their part in helping the environment while saving money.

The DUP amendment will make the motion better suited to making a real change to the lives of people in



the Province, which is what we are elected to do. The amendment will also encourage people to be environmentally minded. Having read articles and watched documentaries, I believe that we must shoulder some of the blame for climate change. We can do our bit to make the world a cleaner place. I encourage the Minister of the Environment to urge people in Northern Ireland to make our part of the world a little cleaner and healthier.

**Mr McCallister:** I support the motion. By its very nature, science has periods of debate that lead to consensus based on overwhelming evidence. There was a time when people thought that smoking was good for you, but we would now consider anyone with that opinion to be deluded or even dangerous. The opinion of the overwhelming majority of scientists in the world — based on compiled scientific evidence — is that the debate on the causes of climate change is over. Only a small radical minority oppose that world scientific opinion. Unfortunately for Northern Ireland — indeed, for the United Kingdom — Sammy Wilson has joined the ranks of that radical group.

When the most influential countries in the world are attempting to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> production and adapting to living with the effects of climate change, we in Northern Ireland — unfortunately and typically — are languishing behind. When other economies are taking advantage of new opportunities presented by renewable energy, sustainable development and green consumption, we in Northern Ireland have to waste time trying to convince our Environment Minister that climate change is happening.

The situation has resulted in some of Northern Ireland's most-respected scientists lambasting the Minister. Sir Bernard Crossland, a professor at Queen's University, Belfast, said:

“Sammy Wilson is ill-informed on the reality of the situation, but I guess that he will not believe much of our present climate change is manmade until the water is lapping up his knees in East Belfast.”

That reality is already happening, but the Minister's head is still buried in the sand. Professor Brian Whalley, also from Queen's University, said of the Minister:

“He should look at all the government-produced analysis, climatic and economic, before making such sweeping statements with no scientific validity.”

However, it does not appear as though the Minister will change his position.

There are economic, security and moral reasons why we need to mitigate the causes of man-made climate change. People throughout the world — including those in Northern Ireland — are facing increased flooding and drought causing immediate risk to life and health. Concerns are also being raised about food security and water security. In today's global economy, it is extremely naive to think that what

happens in other parts of the world will not affect us. Therefore, it is imperative that we act with the UK Government and the international community to reduce our carbon emissions. We must also persuade developing economies to switch to more environmentally friendly methods of production and consumption.

3.45 pm

The motion is correct to draw the attention of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the commitments that are contained in the Programme for Government — commitments which were approved by the Assembly. The Minister of the Environment is bound to Westminster decisions by those commitments. He must accurately reflect and fully implement the commitments that have been made to reduce carbon emissions and meet the targets for renewable energy production.

For the past 25 years, the UK economy has been, in part, driven by financial services and has been significantly de-industrialised. In the light of the current economic crisis in the financial markets, one of the driving forces of the economy is, potentially, in some jeopardy for the foreseeable future. It must be recognised that Northern Ireland has the potential to use renewable energy and a sustainable economy to supplement and improve traditional economic activity. The Minister does not recognise those opportunities, and that is regrettable.

I support amendment No 2, which was tabled by the Alliance Party and the Green Party. It is a logical and sensible extension to the motion. I urge the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to rein in the Minister of the Environment, especially in the light of the forthcoming climate change Bill, which could be embarrassing and damaging for Northern Ireland and the DUP.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House. I share the concerns expressed by other Sinn Féin Members that the Minister of the Environment has expressed personal opinions that are sceptical about, and contrary to, the wealth of scientific evidence that has emerged in recent years, which shows that climate change in the form of global warming is happening as a result of human activity. The fact that the Minister holds such views is troubling; if he allows his views to influence his decisions, it is a much more serious matter.

Climate change is real, and if Governments throughout the world do not take urgent action to address the issue, the impact will be devastating. Human interference has made the single biggest contribution to climate change, and the Assembly has a duty to do all that it can to reduce the acceleration of global warming.

As was mentioned earlier, the Programme for Government recognised that responsibility and set clear and achievable targets to reduce carbon emission, to use more renewable energy sources and to increase areas of forest and woodland. All parties signed up to the Programme for Government and approved those aims, which should be considered to be the minimum requirement. Every Minister and every Member has a responsibility to research, identify and implement measures that reduce our impact on climate change.

We have a responsibility to encourage more efficient use of energy by using cleaner, greener, renewable sources of electricity, such as wind, wave, biomass and solar power. The use of public transport must be encouraged, along with car sharing, cycling and walking. In order to reduce dependence on landfill and to limit methane emissions, the message of reduce, reuse and recycle should be promoted. Such a global problem requires global solutions, and we must be part of them. We must identify and borrow solutions from other countries and invest in learning facilities that will, in time, identify our own solutions, which we can share with the rest of the world.

The targets that are set out in the Programme for Government are achievable, and Sinn Féin believes that they are only the beginning. The issue must be addressed on an all-island basis. Under the conditions of the North/South Ministerial Council, the two Environment Ministers do not have the remit to tackle climate change. That must be changed in the review. Climate change knows no borders, and Dáil Éireann, through its Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, has already conducted considerable research into renewable energy projects. We must link that the Assembly's work on renewable energy, such as that which has been done by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. It is not the responsibility of only one Minister; it is the responsibility of all Ministers.

Greenpeace said that switching to green energy technologies based on solar, wind, biomass and hydropower and increasing energy efficiency makes environmental and economic sense. A spokesperson said:

"The amount of money world governments have pooled now in the financial crisis is huge and we have no guarantee it isn't being wasted — it would take just a fraction to spearhead renewable energy technologies".

The Assembly need not look far for evidence of success in reducing carbon emissions. A biomass power station at Lockerbie in Scotland has not only reduced emissions but has provided more than 300 jobs for the local economy, and it can supply electricity to approximately 70,000 homes. What the Government must look for to create the conditions for such a biomass plant is reflected in the reasons that the operators sited that plant in Scotland. Their deciding factors included:

a predicted 66% increase in Scottish forestry timber output by 2017; a high level of support from the Scottish Government and from Scottish Enterprise; the designation and preparation of the site for forest industry clusters; excellent transport links; and the plant's close proximity to densely forested areas.

Those are issues that show that we must be prepared to change. We have a unique opportunity to do so. Sometimes, in facing the most difficult times such as the current global credit crunch, the entire world seeks change. Barack Obama is leading the way in relation to renewable technologies. The House must follow suit.

**Mrs D Kelly:** To be able to save money by cutting household bills in these uncertain and difficult economic times is an attractive option, and there should be incentives to do so. It is an added bonus if such measures contribute to a reduction in individual and collective carbon footprints. Our dependency on oil for energy puts us at the mercy of other nations. We must invest in other energy resources, particularly in renewable energy, as a means of becoming independent and of meeting our long-term energy needs.

The scientific consensus is that most global warming is a result of human activity that causes the release of greenhouse gases — in particular, carbon dioxide. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007 states:

"Global atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide have increased markedly as a result of human activities since 1750 and now far exceed pre-industrial values determined from ice cores spanning many thousands of years."

That may be a difficult scientific statistic for the Minister to accept, given that many in his party believe that the earth was created some 4,500 years ago.

**Mr Wells:** I will give the Member an equally difficult statistic. The proliferation of single dwellings in the Irish Republic creates several thousand tons of excess carbon every year; yet her party, which claims to be environmentally aware and green, supports the proliferation and continuation of that trend. How can the Member pretend to be environmentally aware and to support the reduction of carbon emissions, when her party and Sinn Féin support a policy that will lead to a huge increase in those emissions as a consequence of increased journeys in the countryside?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will be allowed an extra minute to speak.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I will answer such a charge with pleasure. As a representative of a rural constituency, I can say that PPS 14 is at the heart of that issue. I honestly do not believe that farms and houses in the countryside are the cause of global climate change.

Perhaps the Member might look to the party that sits to his left in the Chamber — and I am sure that he is glad of its company — because he is on his own on that point. I understand that the DUP wants PPS 14 to be amended. We do not want to see a blanket ban on houses in the countryside. Neither is a *carte blanche* approach sought to planning in the countryside. Therefore, the Member must look to his own party, because that is an additional divergent view. The planning reform and the response to PPS 14 that were promised in April 2008 have yet to be brought to the House. Therefore, constituents continue to ask — practically daily — what is happening.

What about our constituents? What about our farming communities and our rural dwellers? Their needs must be expressed. The Member would do well to reflect on his party's policy in relation to PPS 14.

Other Members referred to the fact that climate change and the responsibility for sustainable development do not lie solely with the Minister of the Environment, because we have been failed miserably by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who were due to publish, by June 2008, a strategy for sustainable development. However, it has yet to be published. There is no guidance yet on the statutory responsibilities of local authorities in relation to sustainable development.

I am not privy to the papers that have been tabled at the Executive, so I do not know whether the strategy is another victim of the logjam caused by the DUP and Sinn Féin's failure to agree and to get an Executive up and running again. I do not know whether it is one of the 30 papers, to which the First Minister referred some weeks ago, that are sitting there ready to be discussed. However, climate change is taken seriously in Europe and across the globe, and, thankfully, many young people have a keen interest in the matter. After all, we are merely custodians of the environment, and we are here but for a short time.

Climate change has been recognised across the globe as one of the major challenges facing all Governments and people in the twenty-first century. The SDLP takes seriously its commitment to deal with climate change, and we appeal to the Minister of the Environment to take the matter seriously as well.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** I welcome the debate. When I first became Minister of the Environment, I said that I hoped that there would be some debate on the whole issue of climate change, and I have succeeded in generating that. Indeed, it appears that the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Gallagher has become so concerned about it that he has almost developed a climate change fetish. I receive questions on climate change from the Member all the time. I do not know how many questions I have

had from him about the matter; however, if he is so concerned, he should at least have done some research before he tabled his motion. I will come to the scientific part in a minute, but, for now, let us consider the motion. The Member is concerned that:

“the Minister of the Environment continues to ignore the mounting evidence that climate change is a significant issue”.

That is not the case. In fact, I have written newspaper articles about climate change, and I have participated in radio interviews about the matter. I do not deny that climate change is taking place. In fact, I made the point that climate change is happening all the time and has happened throughout the history of the world. Therefore, we must recognise it.

The motion then went on to call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that I set challenging targets for carbon reductions. That is not the job of the Minister of the Environment. Indeed — leaving the science of climate change aside — had the Member known how the Assembly works, he would have realised that those targets are set in the Programme for Government; they are not set by me or by my Department. He went on to say that I should ensure that those issues are raised at North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Again, if he had done some research, he would have realised that they do not even have a mandate for those responsibilities. Therefore, if the Member cannot even get the motion right, I doubt very much whether he will ever get the science of it right.

The Member also proclaimed that there is overwhelming evidence of climate change, but time did not allow him to present any of it. If there was such overwhelming evidence, he could have included a couple of lines of it, but he did not. Such was the time constraint that he stopped speaking two minutes before his time was up. At least we would have had two minutes' worth of evidence if the Member could have produced it.

*4.00 pm*

The issue of evidence came up time and time again in the debate, but no one came up with any evidence to back up their claims. Yet they talk about me being a crank.

**A Member:** Perish the thought.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Perish the thought. Indeed, the Member for North Down Brian Wilson, when he talked about leadership, said that I was a crank and that all the people who did not believe that were sponsored by the oil companies. I wish that I was; but I am not sponsored by the oil companies.

Let us look at some of those cranks. Several people's opinions on climate change were quoted in 'The Independent on Sunday' this weekend. The

conservationist David Bellamy — much beloved by the Green Party, I am sure — said:

“Global warming is the biggest scam since the church sold indulgences back in the Middle Ages. If our Government actually believes that all those people are going to die, why did it build Terminal Five?”

David Bellamy hit the nail on the head. While people wax eloquent about climate change and the need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, does it make any difference when it comes to making decisions? I will give Brian Wilson the chance to answer me if I am wrong, but does he not live near one of the best railway lines between a satellite town and Belfast? There is a great bus service from Central Station to Stormont. Brian Wilson ranted and raved about building roads and showing leadership, so perhaps he will tell the House how he got here today. Did he come by sustainable transport or did he drive up in his gas-guzzling, carbon dioxide-emitting car?

**Mr B Wilson:** It certainly was not a gas-guzzling car. I commuted on the train to Belfast for more than 20 years.

**The Minister of the Environment:** He did not do that today.

Even Brian Wilson's environmentalist friends are deserting him. Patrick Moore, one of the founders of Greenpeace, has said that the evidence on climate change produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is nonsense. The leading economist Ruth Lea said exactly the same thing. She said that more economists speak out on this issue because they can speak more freely than scientists, many of whom find that if they speak out, they put their jobs in jeopardy.

Climate change is now a multi-million pound industry. Universities receive massive grants to pump out information about carbon dioxide and man-made climate change. Those who dare to dissent put themselves in jeopardy. There is almost a witch-hunt against some scientists. The climatologist Piers Corbyn, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, and the House of Lords Economics Committee have all voiced their concerns. I could go on, but I assure Members that I am not in the company of cranks.

**A Member:** There are one or two here.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Perhaps there are, and I will come to them in a moment. Nevertheless, my stand on this issue is not shared by an assembly of cranks; there are well-respected people in the fields of science, economics and politics with whom I share my view.

Mr Beggs challenged the figures that I produced. The last report on the scientific consensus on climate change by scientists who knew something about the

issue was produced by Joseph Bast and James M Taylor — not the 2,600 scientists who signed a letter on behalf of Al Gore.

It turned out that the letter had been signed by landscape architects, gynaecologists, hotel managers and practitioners of Chinese traditional medicine. The report on the consensus of climate scientists found that 45.8% of them disagreed with the statement that the scientific debate on climate change is over. I know that the Member is very keen on reading the early-day motions that I introduce in the House of Commons; if he wants to do a bit of reading there is some material that I would be quite happy for him to read tonight on the issue.

Many Members said that we do not give leadership. I have already shown that the honourable Member for North Down, who waxed so eloquent about leadership, has not actually practised a great deal of it. If one looks at other Members' constituencies, one will find the same. Mr Gallagher spoke about reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and Mr Wells hit the spot two or three times when he challenged both Sinn Féin and the SDLP on PPS 14. They denied that planning policies and housing dispersal had any impact on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Members ought to read the recent report on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in local-government areas across the United Kingdom — I will make it available in the Library if they wish. The surprising thing is that the constituents of North Down do very well when it comes to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, as do those of East Antrim. The highest concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as illustrated by the red areas of the map that I am holding. That is partly due to living patterns, traffic movements, agriculture and heavy industry.

I would like to challenge those Members who spoke about leadership. Will they go to their constituents in the areas that are marked red on the map — the areas with the highest levels of carbon concentration — and tell people that they must stop using their cars? I wonder whether those Members who spoke about leadership car-share on their way here. I doubt it very much. Will those Members tell their constituents that they will stop the dispersal of housing in the countryside? I doubt it very much. Will they tell constituents that they want fewer roads built for them to move around rural areas? I doubt it very much.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Minister not acknowledge that there have been 80 years of neglect west of the Bann, and the reason that Members are today asking for infrastructure west of the Bann is because there was none. There was no investment, no infrastructure, and nowhere for people to live. Many people are still living in unfit houses.

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Member misses the point. If settlements are dispersed, people

have to travel more, and if they travel more, they will emit more CO<sub>2</sub>.

There are many different solutions to the problem. Many such solutions have landed on my desk, and I have no embarrassment in saying that I have rejected them. The latest proposal flagged up the fact — I am sure that Members who serve rural constituencies will love it — that it is not just fast cars that cause CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; it is flatulent cows as well, apparently.

At least the honourable Member for South Down Jim Wells is consistent on that. Twenty per cent of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Northern Ireland comes from animals, and the suggestion is that we should all reduce our consumption of milk to one quarter of a pint per day. I could not even have my cornflakes in the morning. The proposal also suggests that we have four 4 oz portions of meat per week — a couple of sausages a day would do — and the rest of the time we would have to eat cabbage or whatever it is that Jim Wells eats. Think of the impact that that would have. That was one of the suggestions that I received to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In the past couple of months I have received submissions from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on carbon-emissions trading, asking that we support the UK position.

The impact of buy-in carbon allowances would be a 25% increase in electricity prices. The impact of scrubbing the chimney stacks to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions would be a further increase of 20%.

When the Member for North Antrim and the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Tommy Gallagher say in the Assembly that they are concerned about fuel poverty, are they really saying that I, as Minister of the Environment, should have given the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the United Kingdom my assent to negotiate two pieces of work that would have led to a 45% increase in electricity prices in Northern Ireland? Are those Members really saying that? Would they support such a motion had I proposed it? I dare say that would not have, and yet we get this cant.

Those Members do not want to stop people building houses in the countryside. They do not want to reduce farming. They do not want to stop using their cars and start using public transport — yet they want everybody else to do it. They do not want energy prices or taxes to rise. I think that it was the Chairman of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, who complained about the increase in road tax for cars that are more than seven years old in order to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. He complained that that increase would affect more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland. Carbon emissions cannot be reduced without pain. Almost every action is painful. Of course, Members say that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions can be reduced by insulating

homes and by saving energy. However, those measures would reduce carbon emissions by only around 5%.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Your own party said that.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Yes, but the point that I am making is that it would be a drop in the ocean in the fight to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. I am committed to policies that do not hit people in the pocket. Today, I have shown that, first, there is no scientific evidence or, as people have suggested, consensus on climate change. No Member has offered one piece of scientific evidence to support that.

Secondly, I have shown that the cost of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is enormous. Members talk about fuel poverty and the impact that that has on their constituents. However, climate change is not the most important issue that people face today. It is an issue, but it is not the most important issue. Let us get that into perspective.

**Mr B Wilson:** I am sorry, because I did not anticipate that I would have to wind on the debate.

The Minister certainly offered an interesting defence of an indefensible position. First, I did not refer to him as a crank. Rather, I was referring to the scientists who produced the argument against climate change. During the debate, recurring points were that humankind should take action to reduce climate change and that the climate change is solely man-made. Obviously, it is not the sole cause; many other factors exist.

One point that was raised several times was that those Members in whose name the motion stands believe that climate change is solely man-made. We do not believe that. It is a contributory factor, and, in most cases, it is a major contributory factor. Debate continues in society about the extent of man-made climate change. The debate is not whether man has caused climate change but to what extent he has done so. The debate about whether man has caused some climate change has already been won. Few scientists would disagree with that particular point.

Mr Ross referred to green taxes, which I fully support because they are the only way to change people's behaviour. The congestion charge was very unpopular when it was introduced in London by Ken Livingstone, but it has stopped traffic gridlock there. There is no way that Boris Johnson will repeal the charge, because it has made the atmosphere in London significantly better, and driving in the city is much easier because of the congestion charge — a green tax. The argument that green taxes are used to raise revenue is, in most cases, nonsense. We want to encourage people to do what is best for the environment; not raise taxes.

4.15 pm

The idea that we must choose between the environment and the economy was also mentioned.

That choice is not difficult — we must choose the environment, which will, in turn, help the economy. We must look at the new green economy, because our present economy, which has operated for many years, is unsustainable. Sustainability is the key issue, because we cannot continue as we are. We must look to new technology, because it holds potential, and the Executive should show leadership on that issue.

Reference was made to PPS 14 once again. It is an issue on which I have considerable sympathy with the views of Mr Wells. Instead of addressing environmental problems when it suits us, we must make hard choices and sacrifices.

**Mr Wells:** Is the honourable Member appalled, like me, by the hypocrisy of the Members of the two parties opposite who are only prepared to accept pain when it suits them? When accepting pain means a loss of votes from their core constituency, the environment takes second place for those Members. There is no chance of the two parties opposite taking difficult decisions that affect dispersed rural communities, because they know that that is where their core vote comes from.

**Mr B Wilson:** All Members have difficult choices and decisions to make, whether we are from rural or urban areas. The Minister is —

**Mr Boylan:** I remind Mr Wells that the previous Minister of the Environment said that developing a plan for the countryside was about striking a balance between protecting it and sustaining rural communities. How can Mr Wells disregard a sector of the rural community in the development of that policy? That is what is happening — a section of people who live in rural areas is being excluded. How would Mr Wells sustain rural communities if a section of people who live in rural areas is being disregarded?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Brian Wilson's time is up.

**Mr Ross:** I will briefly address some of the points that were made in the debate. In proposing amendment No 2, Mr Brian Wilson focused on the Minister rather than the issue, which was disappointing. He mentioned public transport, which is a very important issue. The best way to get people to use public transport is to make it more attractive and efficient — I am sure that all Members agree on that. He also mentioned planning and will, therefore, support the fact that the Minister has already taken action on that issue.

When proposing amendment No 1, I said that we must ensure that we do not build on flood plains and that a certain amount of flood water should be kept on the site of all new developments. Those are practical steps that have already been taken.

He spoke of the importance of individuals conserving energy. However, the amendment calls on

the Minister to do just that; therefore the Member should be able to support it. He promoted — or seemed to promote — the idea of a congestion charge. I am not sure that he would find support from his constituents for introducing a congestion charge in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, recognised the seriousness of the issue, as has the DUP and the Minister of the Environment. He outlined some of the legal obligations to which the Department and the Executive are subject.

The Member for North Antrim Daithí McKay spoke about nuclear power, which is now supported by the co-founder of Greenpeace. He did not care to answer my colleague Mr Wells, whose green credentials cannot be questioned. He did not read the amendment properly, because he accused my party of not taking climate change seriously, which is simply not a fact.

He agreed with my original assertion that many environmental policies are costly to individuals. That is precisely why our amendment calls for a way for individuals to be able not only to save energy but also to save money, because that is a message that can be supported by the community and one that will have an impact. It will save energy and money, and that is how environmental issues should be promoted.

**Mr McKay:** Has the Member spotted the contradictions coming from his side of the House about the main causes of climate change, and does he agree that it is the actions of people that mainly contribute to climate change?

**Mr Ross:** Various reasons were given for climate change. What we know as fact is that climate change is happening and that it must be addressed, which is what we are urging.

I do not know whether my East Antrim colleague Roy Beggs was speaking for the Ulster Unionist Party, the Conservative Party, the PUP, the Traditional Unionist Voice or whoever his party is now linked to. *[Laughter.]* We are getting used to his party-political sniping, and today was no different. He talked about large ideas but little about local solutions. I am not sure where in the amendment he saw that there was no mention of manmade contribution to climate change. Perhaps he should have taken the time to read it.

My colleague Iris Robinson pointed out simple, cost-effective ways of conserving energy; hers was a balanced, rational approach. She spoke about the seriousness of the issue — a view with which no one on this side of the House disagrees. She said that she is against green taxes, as they simply hurt those who cannot afford to pay them, which is particularly important in the current global economic situation.

**Mr Easton:** Is my colleague aware that at North Down Borough Council, only last week, the Member from the Green Party, Brian Wilson, and his colleague from the Alliance Party, Stephen Farry, voted to cut down trees in north Down? Surely, there are double standards from the Alliance and Green parties?

**Mr Ross:** That is interesting. Given the fact that planting trees can help the environment, that seems to be hypocritical indeed.

Cathal Boylan also got it wrong and did not listen to the amendment; he said that the DUP did not take the matter seriously, and that is not correct. However, I support one thing that he said when he recognised that there is a border, and that is progress for Sinn Féin. He said that the Minister was not providing leadership. However, the amendment calls on the Minister to show leadership and actively to support certain agencies that are helping environmental issues.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ross:** I will not give way because I do not, I believe, get any extra time. My colleague Jim Shannon spoke of things that individuals could do, which is what we are calling for. Individuals can do simple things around their home to save energy, money and the environment. He said that humans contribute a certain amount to climate change; and the amendment states that humans should make amends for any such contribution.

John McCallister spoke about world scientists, or a section of them anyway. He said that we have to convince the Environment Minister that climate change is happening. Speaking where he did in the debate, it would have been clear to him that we know how serious the issue is and that the Environment Minister has never denied that climate change is happening.

He then asked what practical steps had been taken to reduce flooding. The Minister has taken practical steps, which I have already explained. Mr Willie Clarke discussed global problems and called for an all-Ireland solution. I am not quite sure how an all-Ireland solution would deal with global issues. I am somewhat bemused by that.

Dolores Kelly started off her comments well, discussing saving energy and money, which is my party's message. However, she went on to make a point about the farming community. International panic on climate change would, of course, ruin the farming industry in Northern Ireland. I support the amendment and hope that the House will do the same.

**Mr Dallat:** I suppose that I should start my comments by congratulating the Minister on his research, which all seemed to come from 'The Independent'. Of course, I would be the last person to accuse the Minister of relying on research from one source. Indeed, I am convinced that he has just

graduated from the Bart Simpson school of environmental science.

The debate simply confirms what Members have known from the beginning; that the Minister is not serious about climate change. Indeed, he was quoted in the 'News Letter' of 5 September:

"there is no scientific consensus around the causes."

He argues that there is no conclusive evidence that greenhouse gases are a major cause of climate change. Thanks, Sammy, for confirming that for us. Of course, everyone enjoys the good weather — lambs skipping through the fields, birds singing, and so on. However, that is not the reality in many parts of the world at present. The Minister knows the reasons for that.

Tommy Gallagher opened the debate on a serious note. Alastair Ross said that cross-border bodies have no mandates. Of course, we no longer live in the wonderful era of the blue skies of Ulster and grey skies of the Republic. The matter is now a global problem. I must congratulate Jim Wells, who, in fact, was not listed by the DUP to speak in the debate. He did extremely well. As he is a planning consultant in south Down, I believe that he deserves to be heard. At one stage, I was pleased that he was joined by another Member. That increased his mandate by 100% — if my mathematics is correct — which is good.

Brian Wilson pointed out that too much money is spent on roads. I wish that he would visit Dungiven. Of course, he went on to admit that he did not come to the Assembly by public transport. I am sure that that applies to most of us. I wonder whether Sammy shared the ministerial car with Nigel this afternoon. I suspect not. Sometimes, it is not a good idea to probe such matters too deeply.

Brian Wilson made the point that if the Assembly deals seriously with climate change, we could increase employment. He illustrated that point with figures from Germany. Patsy McGlone spoke on behalf of the Environment Committee. I understand his views, which were a constructive contribution to the debate. The misrepresentation about houses in rural areas that occurred afterwards —

**Mr Gallagher:** During his misrepresentation about rural housing and energy usage, as with all of his other threadbare arguments, the Minister treated the House to much gesticulation and jumping up and down when he held up a map that compares energy consumption in the east with that of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which is my constituency. He said that my area was the worst abuser as regards carbon emissions and suchlike. In fact, he was comparing houses in the city of Belfast, where there is street lighting, with scattered housing in a rural area where there are long lanes; where children come home on dark evenings and parents must put lights on in their farmhouses; and where farmers work

outside until, perhaps, 11.00 pm and, therefore, must keep lights on. The Minister has no argument at all.

**Mr Dallat:** That was a fairly lengthy intervention.

Iris Robinson told the House that she did not buy into the hysteria over climate change. God knows, Members were relieved to hear that. *[Laughter.]* Perhaps we should all go home and contact our psychiatrists, or it could be another abomination.

4.30 pm

Cathal Boylan described the whole crisis as being more serious than the credit crunch; he may know more about those banks than the rest of us.

Jim Shannon said that he was not convinced about climate change but, to be fair, he encouraged the Minister to take the whole thing seriously and to try to achieve the targets, which was honourable.

John McCallister made his usual contribution; however, he managed to get the politics into it.

Dolores Kelly reminded me that Nigel Dodds lives in Banbridge but is a councillor in Belfast, and Ian Paisley Jnr lives in the Lagan Valley but represents North Antrim. With respect to travel to work, we could all make vast improvements to the levels of carbon emissions.

The Minister of the Environment then confirmed our worst fears: nothing will change.

However, all in all, the debate has been extremely interesting and constructive. At the end of the day, Minister Sammy Wilson has got the message. The nonsense that has been churned out on the environment is extremely worrying and that is very sad. Those Members who have travelled to other parts of the world are aware of the consequences of climate change in Africa, South America and other areas. Those who are dying in their thousands are dying because —

**The Minister of the Environment:** Education.

**Mr Dallat:** Sammy Wilson knows that I spent 30 years in education, the same as him. I made my contribution, and I hope that he has listened carefully today to what has been said to him.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if the amendment is made the Question will not be put on amendment No 2 and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

*Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 58.*

#### AYES

*Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan,  
Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson,*

*Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,  
Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord  
Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Rev Dr Ian Paisley,  
Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson,  
Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,  
Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Ross and Mr Shannon.*

#### NOES

*Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley,  
Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns,  
Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert  
Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty,  
Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford,  
Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly,  
Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn,  
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,  
Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann,  
Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr B McCrea,  
Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland,  
Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,  
Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd,  
Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey,  
Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane,  
Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Gallagher and Mrs D Kelly.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses concern that the Minister of the Environment continues to ignore the mounting evidence that climate change is a significant issue, and —

(i) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Department of the Environment recognises recent scientific evidence and sets challenging targets for carbon reductions and sustainable development across all departments; and

(ii) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the principles and priorities for the Department of the Environment contained in the Programme for Government, and approved by the Assembly, are reflected accurately by both the Minister of the Environment and departmental officials, for example, when attending North-South and East-West ministerial meetings; and

(iii) calls on all Ministers to ensure that their Departments recognise the significance of man-made climate change, particularly in the promotion of sustainability in transport, planning, housing and energy consumption.



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

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Omagh Bombing

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I caution Members that civil matters relating to the bombing are before the courts and that a judgement has not yet been made. Therefore, those matters are sub judice and, in accordance with Standing Order 73(2), should not be mentioned during the debate. Furthermore, I remind Members of their general duty to behave responsibly in order to ensure that their comments do not prejudice any future court proceedings.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. Amendment No 2 has been tabled by the proposer of the motion, who will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a joint winding-up speech on the motion and the amendment. The proposer of amendment No 1 will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Members should be aware that an extra 15 minutes will not be allocated for the debate because the motion and amendment No 2 will be moved and wound simultaneously.

**Mr Ford:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the establishment of a formal, cross-border, legally binding process, designed to secure full disclosure from the Intelligence Services and Security forces in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, to establish what relevant information they had before, and immediately after, the attack which killed 29 civilians on 15 August 1998.

I also beg to move amendment No 2: Insert after "civilians"

“, and two unborn children,”

This is, possibly, the most important motion that the Assembly has debated since March 2007. It is, certainly, the most important piece of private Members' business that has reached the Chamber.

The events in Omagh on 15 August 1998 were horrific, and every Member will be aware of the facts surrounding them. Those of us who have family connections in the Omagh area have particularly strong feelings on the matter. Although I did not experience that afternoon's events as directly as my colleague Dr Kieran Deeny, my family roots are in Omagh and, a generation earlier, I might have been walking up Market Street

with my family. Therefore, I understand the feelings of the community in Omagh and the Omagh district.

We must recognise the suffering that the bomb caused to the bereaved; to the injured; to those who were involved in the rescue efforts, the nursing and other aspects of hospital care; and to those in the Omagh community who were traumatised by the bomb. We must make clear our utter condemnation of those terrorists — in every sense of the term — who perpetrated the bombing. I mean those who made it, those who planted it and those who detonated it. They are solely responsible for the crime. Those points are clear and do not need to be reiterated at length.

The purpose of the motion is to consider what the organisations that were, and are, responsible for security on both sides of the border now need to do. It is not just about the past and about Omagh but about learning lessons so that future generations are protected. In recognising that the victims of the Omagh bombing came from all sections of the community and from three nations, it is important that the Assembly unite in support of the families and all those who suffered, and, therefore, in support of the motion.

Too often in the past, victims came from one section of the community and were supported by public representatives from that section of the community alone. In the case of Omagh — a town with good community relations, and where people from every section of the community suffered together — it is important that we, as representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, come together today.

Over the years, there has been a slow, steady trickle of information from various journalists who engaged in background research. That trickle culminated in the revelations of the BBC's September 'Panorama'. In contrast to those alleged and apparently accurate suggestions, the security services — potentially North and South — have failed to disclose the information that they had that might have either led to the prevention of the bombing or to speedy moves to arrest the perpetrators. Those possibilities must be considered.

We may well discount the allegations that were made by the alleged informer Kevin Fulton, who accused the RUC of having prior knowledge of the bomb and of taking no action. Those allegations were subject to full investigation by the previous Police Ombudsman. However, serious journalists have made credible allegations that certain security agencies held intelligence that was not passed on to the detectives who investigated the bombing. Whether or not that could have occurred before the bombing, it certainly appears that there are strong reasons to believe that information that could have been passed on within hours of the bombing was not passed on for days, or even weeks or months — particularly the specific information

that was highlighted on 'Panorama' that related to the use of mobile phones on both sides of the border.

There is, therefore, a shadow over Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and the other security services. Nobody knows who knew what and who withheld what information. It certainly seems that security services tend to work to protect their informers, methods, technology and general sources. However, if they got it wrong, there is absolutely no excuse for their having failed to pass on the information subsequently, and as early as possible.

If there is any truth in the suggestion that GCHQ had information that was not passed on within hours after the bombing, who knows what might have been discovered if the RUC or Garda Síochána had had the opportunity to raid appropriate places within hours of the bombing? Who knows what prospect there might have been of turning up a weak link in the gang, or what forensic scientists might have determined if they had had access to appropriate samples at an early stage? If any of the intelligence services failed to take action that they could have taken in the wake of such mass murder, they have serious questions to answer.

The failure to get answers to those questions so far calls into question the promises of the then Chief Constable, Prime Minister and Taoiseach about leaving no stone unturned.

Those promises have subsequently been repeated by others in Government, including the Secretary of State. For example, when the leader of the SDLP asked questions in Westminster, he received no significant answer from the previous Secretary of State.

5.00 pm

We understand that the Prime Minister has called for a review by the Intelligence Services Commissioner of the information that was available, but that is simply not good enough. The Prime Minister's record on dealing with the security services is not one of openness and transparency, and it does not inspire confidence. I doubt whether anyone in Northern Ireland — and certainly no one in Omagh — would believe the Prime Minister if, in the next two or three months, he were to rise to his feet in the House of Commons and announce that, following an investigation, there were no causes of concern. There must be a much wider investigation.

Moreover, there are concerns about the relationship between the security services in both jurisdictions. Investigative work by journalists suggests that co-operation was distinctly less than that which was promised. Indeed, what should have been a joint investigation by the police and the gardaí appears to have been two parallel investigations. The point about parallel lines is that they never meet. It is questionable

whether information sharing occurred, and that is a further matter for concern.

It is understandable that the families are calling for a full public inquiry, and I share the families' and the Omagh Support Group's concerns. However, although the motion does not rule out a public inquiry, it does not call for a commitment to one. Much of the required information — which is held by the security services — is unlikely to come out directly to a public inquiry and, therefore, that may not be the right route to take. The motion is broadly based and non specific; it calls for:

“a formal, cross-border, legally binding process.”

Such a process will probably require legislation in Westminster and the Oireachtas. That will require an innovative solution because it cannot be conducted solely in a single jurisdiction. The Assembly must not be prescriptive about how that might be achieved; rather, it must set out the required principles and make the moral case for action by the two Governments, and I trust that we can all agree on that.

I turn to amendment No 1. I hope that it is clear to DUP Members where the supporters of the motion stand concerning violence in general, and their condemnation of this crime in particular. The motion focuses on the Omagh people's legitimate demands for closure, through the disclosure of the information held by the security forces, including information about actions that were not taken. The focus of the motion is not on the perpetrators.

In addition, rather than shifting the focus back to the terrorists, it is important to send a clear message to the security services on both sides of the border about what future generations can expect. Furthermore, I regret the fact that the DUP amendment appears to be prescriptive. For example, it suggests that two parallel inquiries could follow up on problems that we witnessed previously.

At the beginning of the debate, I said that my family roots are in Omagh district. Ironically, my mother's home was a couple of hundred yards from Tom Buchanan's mother's home. Therefore, I feel that I know as much as anyone who was not directly involved about how things were and how people feel about the matter. I trust that Mr Buchanan can therefore accept the bona fides with which the Alliance Party proposed the motion and that he will recognise that, although there are good points in his amendment, it does not meet the current requirements. The best message that could come from this House would be a united and unanimous call in support of the motion.

**Mr Buchanan:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“condemns the republican terrorists responsible for the murder of the 29 people and two unborn children in Omagh on 15 August 1998; recognises that they alone were responsible for this tragedy;

notes the recent revelations about the possible breakdown in the provision of information that may have assisted in the prevention of the bombing; and calls on the UK Government to urgently institute a process to investigate the matter (i) in a way which is open, transparent, and commands the confidence of the community; and (ii) in co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Ireland.”

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the car-bomb explosion on Market Street in Omagh on the afternoon of Saturday 15 August 1998 was the single worst atrocity ever witnessed in Northern Ireland, claiming the lives of 29 people and two unborn babies. The horrific aftermath of the bomb, which revealed the true extent of death, injury, devastation and destruction, not only plunged the people of Omagh into a state of shock and disbelief, but stunned the entire nation.

For many people in Omagh, that was a day that they will never forget; a day when families were torn apart and the entire heart of Omagh was ripped out by a bloodthirsty republican mob calling itself the Real IRA. From the Floor of the House, I reiterate my condemnation of those who orchestrated, planned and planted the bomb in Omagh, as well as my full support for the families of the victims in their search for justice.

I still remember the scenes of sorrow, and the tears and heartbreak of children and parents as the lives of their loved ones were so brutally taken away, all because they were law-abiding citizens. Those are memories that I will never forget, and I again tender my sympathy to all those families. Although 10 years have passed, I know that the heartbreak and sorrow still remain, and I commend those families for their courage, strength and determination as they have sought to pick up the broken pieces and continue in their fight for justice, so that those who were responsible for that heinous crime are brought before the courts.

I have no doubt that, on many occasions, just as those families thought that they were reaching closure, they were disappointed simply because all the i's were not dotted and the t's were not crossed, resulting in the case falling foul of the judicial system. Today, we should pause for a moment and reflect on why, after all the effort by the families and the security forces, no one has been charged for that atrocity to date. Is it not because there are still those in the republican/nationalist community who, to this day, have failed to come to the security forces with relevant information that would have nailed the perpetrators?

Over the years, while the focus of blame has been put on the security forces and the intelligence services for failings on their part as they sought to put together a case and gather evidence to bring the perpetrators to justice, those republican terrorists have been let off the hook. If we want to see justice done and closure reached for the families in Omagh, we must focus our attention on those who orchestrated, planned and carried out that atrocity.

I am in no doubt that the recent revelations from the BBC 'Panorama' programme, claiming that the Government's communications headquarters withheld information from the security forces that might have prevented that bomb, have generated a sense of disbelief as well as further frustration and anger among the families and the local community.

Those who withhold that information are as guilty of that atrocity as those who carried it out. A clear message must be sent from the House today; if anyone in the communities or in Government circles are withholding that information, they are as guilty as the people who carried out that terrible atrocity on the people in Omagh.

Although I commend the Prime Minister, Mr Brown, for his swiftness in ordering a review of the intercepted intelligence material connected to the Omagh bomb, I call on him again to have that material released with the utmost urgency. I also call on the First and deputy First Ministers to do all in their power to compel Mr Brown to have that material released.

I have tabled the amendment because I feel that the original motion is flawed and weak in its content, and would bring neither justice nor closure for the families of Omagh. It fails to condemn those who carried out the atrocity, and it also fails to request the Government to act with urgency.

The motion is rather open-ended and fails to call for action to be taken in an open and transparent way; such action would command the support of the entire community.

Time and again in Northern Ireland, we have witnessed inquiry after inquiry. We have witnessed people pressing for inquiries, only to be let down, and when those inquiries have eventually taken place, they have taken a long time to complete. However, after completion, there have still been no results nor any answers for the families concerned.

Mr Jason McCue, the lawyer acting on behalf of the Omagh families, has urged the Assembly to press Gordon Brown to release the secret GCHQ surveillance transcripts. He has stated that that evidence is more important than any cross-border inquiry. He also stated:

“The best thing the assembly can do is to ask for that evidence ... The focus of the debate should be on that evidence being handed over ... The assembly should unite to press Gordon Brown on that.”

Therefore, I humbly ask Members not to divide the House on this important and sensitive matter. Instead, I ask that Members support amendment No 1 and help to bring justice and closure to the Omagh families.

The Omagh families have gone through so much in the past 10 years that we do not want to see the process being prolonged any further. We want the withheld information to be brought to the fore so that the

perpetrators of this terrible atrocity can be brought to justice. Those responsible for killing, maiming and injuring so many in Omagh have left their victims with scars for the rest of their lives. They have engraved in their hearts something that they will never forget, will never get over and will have to learn to live with. I do not believe that we want to put those families through any further pain or stress.

The House would do well to unite behind amendment No 1, which calls for information to be urgently released. A broad, sweeping motion again lets the perpetrators off the hook, and this matter must be dealt with urgently. Therefore, I plead with the House to support amendment No 1, so that the people of Omagh can find closure to the terrible atrocity that occurred in 1998.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have no hesitation in supporting the motion and amendment No 2, which makes specific reference to Avril Grimes's unborn twins. The motion makes reference to a formal, cross-border, legally binding process, and I support that.

My first contribution to a debate in the Assembly's first mandate, a short time after the Omagh bomb in 1998, concerned this very subject. What happened then was a huge tragedy; it was wrong and was condemned by everyone. It caused a multiplicity of deaths and injuries, physical and emotional scars, and it had long-lasting effects on people throughout Ireland. Those effects were most particularly felt in County Tyrone and in the Omagh area. There were also major implications for people in Madrid.

Some of the people who died were known to me personally, and I know many of their relatives. That is why it was appropriate for David Ford to say that we should all recognise the suffering that was occasioned by the Omagh bomb in 1998.

I want to recognise the efforts of the medical staff at Tyrone County Hospital at that time. Those members of staff played a vital role in saving lives, healing wounds and dealing with many of the dead.

5.15 pm

I bear in mind the Deputy Speaker's comments reminding Members not to say anything during the debate that might prejudice criminal proceedings.

My colleague Pat Doherty, MP for West Tyrone will address the issues in detail. I want to say at the outset, however, that Sinn Féin supports the establishment of an independent international truth commission. We support families who organise and campaign for the truth. The thrust of the motion is about arriving at the truth as to what happened in Omagh in August 1998, and Sinn Féin supports the families who organise

themselves and who campaign for the truth in respect of the Omagh bomb.

There is concern about the British Government's and the Irish Government's commitment to a truth-recovery process that has been talked about here today. No one should seek to sweep the truth under the carpet. If society is to move forward, and if we are to leave conflict behind, we must address the tragic human consequences of the past. I therefore approach the motion in a supportive capacity.

**Mr McNarry:** As Members know, I organised an event in the Long Gallery on 1 April this year — over six months ago — at which many Omagh families told their stories to Members and at which they called for the tabling of a motion that would request a cross-border inquiry into the Omagh bomb. They have made no other requests. I must say that that evening in the Long Gallery was one of the most harrowing of my life. The sheer dimension of the human suffering and the tragedy of the wanton and cruel loss of life left a lasting impression on me. Frankly, the enormity of what happened in Omagh is difficult to comprehend.

I heard the desolation in the words of Michael Gallagher, whose son was killed in the bomb, as he told us that evening that the families did not expect anyone to be convicted of the atrocity and that the best that they could hope for was to get to the truth. His words were profound and moving. The least that the Omagh families could expect is the establishment by the United Kingdom Prime Minister and the Taoiseach of a properly instituted, cross-border inquiry to determine the truth of that wicked and cruel event in Omagh.

The cross-border nature of such an inquiry remains essential because of the legal technicalities of operating across two legal jurisdictions and two legal frameworks with different methods of evidence taking. The Assembly should encompass that in its explicit and unequivocal support for the call for a cross-border inquiry that the Omagh families made that evening six months ago in the Long Gallery, and it is hoped that it does.

It is a pity that an Ulster Unionist amendment that called for such an inquiry was not accepted for the debate. As there is no other method of including the wishes of the families in the debate, the hope on the Ulster Unionist Benches is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will, at their earliest opportunity, place an inquiry at the forefront of any representations that they might have with the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.

I share and concur with Mr Buchanan's request to the House not to divide on this issue. For heaven's sake, as a house of representatives, let us show solidarity with the Omagh families, and let us do so accordingly and, it is hoped, with dignity and integrity in their names and at their request.

**Mr Attwood:** I welcome the debate. The motion is one of a school of motions around injustices and miscarriages of justice in this part of the world in which this Chamber can prove itself to be effective and strong in raising the voices of those in our community who have difficulty in being heard. It is in that spirit that I speak in the debate.

The SDLP supports the motion for two reasons. First, along with Mr McNarry, we support the call of the families for an independent judicial international public cross-border inquiry. Ten years after the bomb in Omagh, people are still trying to obscure the truth, and they are not only those in the security forces and agencies, but also those in illegal organisations. Therefore, the only basis on which people can have confidence that the truth will be seen to be disclosed is to have an independent cross-border inquiry.

Secondly, in supporting the motion, we support the words of Mr Buchanan — words that are not in the DUP amendment — that the information currently held by the security services needs to be shared, as a matter of urgency, with the families and their lawyers. It may well be that the civil action being taken by the families against several individuals may end before the secret review by the Intelligence Services Commissioner is concluded. The information should be released urgently, given the time constraints that the families have with their civil action.

For the SDLP, and many people outside the Chamber, those are the two tests by which we should judge ourselves, and by which others — in particular the two Governments — should be judged.

As other Members have said, the Secretary of State has stated that no stone should be left unturned in respect of the Omagh bombing. Unless the Secretary of State measures himself against the need to share intelligence immediately and agrees with having an independent inquiry, stones will be left unturned.

Similarly, and equally, the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, cannot claim that civil action is the best way to find out what exactly happened in Omagh unless he tells Gordon Brown that the information that the intelligence services hold is shared with the families and their lawyers immediately. Unless Brian Cowen tells Gordon Brown that that is the measure against which he is judging himself and Gordon Brown, a stone will be left unturned.

I want to make some broader points. If, in the future, the security services gather intelligence and do nothing; gather intelligence and decide not to share it; or gather intelligence and decide to share only part of it or share part of it only later, we will not have learned the deeper truths of what happened in Omagh. Given the fact that MI5 has a significant role in the North and that it declares that most of its current work is in

respect of dissident republicans, and given the fact that those operations continue on a massive scale, we will not have learnt the fuller truths from the Omagh bombing, the 'Panorama' programme and the lessons of the past 10 years unless we have appropriate oversight and accountability mechanisms in place for the work of the security services in Northern Ireland.

Many shadows extend over the lives of families in Omagh. However, the biggest shadow is whether the bomb and the unnecessary deaths could have been avoided.

People in London, and, I fear, in Dublin, do not intend to answer those questions. We must ensure that they do.

**Mr Bresland:** There is no doubt that the Omagh bombing was the worst atrocity of the Troubles, claiming the lives of 29 people and two unborn babies; it affected the lives of many in my constituency and families in Donegal and Spain. The atrocity had a tragic impact on the people of Omagh, who have sought, where possible, to rebuild their lives and their communities. Many in my constituency continue to suffer great pain as a result of what happened that day, and the failure to prosecute anyone for the hideous crime has caused further pain.

Thousands of words have been written about the atrocity, television programmes have been made and debates held. However, the republican terrorists who planned the attack, made the bomb, assisted in its transport to Omagh and planted it in Market Street have yet to be brought to justice. The motion fails to condemn the republican terrorists who caused so much suffering to the people of Omagh and, regrettably, it seeks to refocus the blame on the forces of law and order.

Unfortunately, there has been considerable controversy in Omagh in recent months over the wording on the memorial to the bomb victims. However, we must not forget that those who planned and executed the attack were republican terrorists, and they did so believing that the attack on men, women and children would further their cause — the creation of a 32-county Republic of Ireland.

Amendment No 1 notes recent revelations and the failure to provide the security forces with the necessary information that might have prevented that hideous attack on Omagh. I welcome the confirmation from the Prime Minister that the Government will carry out a full review of the GCHQ tapes. Many in the community were shocked by the recent BBC programme on the Omagh bombing, and there are, without a doubt, many unanswered questions about GCHQ's role. I am also disappointed that the original investigation failed to bring about convictions. Amendment No 1 calls on the Government to institute a process to investigate the Omagh bombing in an open and transparent way and

in co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Ireland. There is no doubt in my mind that the bomb was made in the Republic of Ireland and then transported to Omagh; therefore it is vital that the authorities in the Republic of Ireland co-operate, in all ways, to bring those responsible to justice.

The people of Omagh require justice, and those responsible for the atrocity must be brought before the courts and, eventually, to prison. Such an outcome can be achieved only through the provision of evidence, and I am convinced that there are people in the republican community — in County Monaghan, where the bomb was made and in County Tyrone, where it was tragically planted — who have the necessary evidence and yet have failed to provide it to the police.

Days after the bombing, Sinn Féin leaders stood on the steps of Omagh courthouse, offering their so-called words of comfort to the people of my constituency. I call on the Sinn Féin Members sitting opposite to assist in the progress of justice by urging their community and supporters to provide the PSNI with evidence — which I believe exists — that would bring those murderers to justice.

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland's investigation into the Omagh bombing sets out clearly who was responsible for the bomb. She states that:

“The persons responsible for the Omagh bombing are the terrorists who planned and executed the atrocity.”

I support amendment No 1.

5.30 pm

**Mr Doherty:** I speak in favour of the motion and amendment No 2. Saturday 15 August 1998 will be forever embedded in the memories of people in Omagh, and further afield, as one of the darkest days of the conflict in Ireland. On that day, 29 innocent civilians and unborn twins lost their lives in what became known as the Omagh bomb. Once again, I express my ongoing condolences to the families of the Omagh victims. In addition to those who were killed, hundreds were physically and psychologically scarred by the dreadful events of that day.

My party and I are on record as supporting the families in their calls for truth and justice. The families' search for the truth has led them up many paths. Unfortunately, they have been frustrated, obstructed and left disappointed on many occasions. The circumstances surrounding the Omagh bomb have left many unanswered questions. The judge who presided over the Omagh bomb trial raised a number of very serious concerns about the conduct of the investigation into the bomb and the evidence provided by a number of PSNI officers.

Furthermore, the Policing Board's report into the Omagh bomb investigation, which was published

earlier this year, lacked substance in a number of key areas and left many of the questions that were raised by the trial judge unanswered. The very limited nature of that report strengthens the call for a fully independent cross-border public inquiry into the events surrounding the Omagh bomb.

The original motion that was proposed to the Assembly for debate by the Omagh Support and Self Help Group some five months ago states:

“That this Assembly calls upon the British and Irish Governments to initiate a fully independent cross-border public inquiry with international input into the circumstances surrounding the Omagh Bomb.”

That is the core of what the House should support today — a full disclosure of all the facts from both the Irish and British Governments. The so-called republican dissident group that was responsible for the Omagh bomb must be totally condemned. It should disband — it serves no cause, it has no strategy, it has no public support, and it is heavily infiltrated.

I can relate to the passion and conviction with which Tom Buchanan delivered his speech. However, amendment No 1 — tabled by the DUP — prejudices the outcome of any potential investigation. Indeed, amendment No 1 sits ill at ease with a motion that Tom Buchanan proposed to Omagh District Council in July 2005. I urge the DUP to reconsider and to support the Alliance Party motion. My party will support that motion and abstain on the DUP amendment. It is with some regret that I will abstain, because I appreciate the commitment of Tom Buchanan and his party colleague Allan Bresland in respect of this matter.

I reiterate my condolences to the families, and I commend their unstinting quest for the truth about the deaths of their loved ones. I call on all Members of the House to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** News of the awful tragedy in Omagh reached me when I was carrying out my duties as a Member of the European Parliament.

I had some trouble getting home, and all the way home, my heart was torn because of what had happened. Immediately on arriving home in the middle of the night, I went to see for myself what was left. As I stood among the rubble, as I saw the stains of blood, and as I thought of homes where there would be no sleep that night but only tears and sorrow, my heart was rent. The next day, I visited every possible home that had suffered bereavements and to which I could get access. It is well known in the House that my father's people come from the Omagh district. It was a tragedy.

It would be a tragedy if the House did not unite tonight. I do not see any reason why the matters, which are being dealt with in various ways, should not be agreed. The people of Northern Ireland, the people of

the South of Ireland and the people of the world would then know that, on this matter, we are one.

I regret some of the remarks made by the proposer of amendment No 2, Mr Ford. I regret his condemnation of what he thought the DUP amendment was about. The DUP amendment states facts with which no one disagrees. If anyone does disagree, he or she can say so, but all Members condemn the republican terrorists who were responsible for the murder of 29 people. I do not understand why the motion does not mention the deaths of two unborn children.

**Mr Ford:** We have mentioned that.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** Where is that mentioned?

**Some Members:** In amendment No 2.

**Mr Ford:** Amendment No 2 specifically inserts that reference. I make clear, as I did in my speech — which Mr Bresland did not appear to hear — that the point of today's motion is to deal with the issue of undisclosed information held by the security services. I thought that it was quite clear that every Member condemned the terrorists who were responsible.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Dr Paisley, you have one extra minute in which to speak.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** I am glad to hear the Member's explanation that the amendment mentions the two babes. Who can mention that particularly awful tragedy, the worst act of brutal murder during the Troubles, without rightly saying what took place? The DUP amendment says that in the plainest possible manner. It notes the revelations about the breakdown of the provision of information; I do not know whether any Member has not noted those revelations, and I am sure that everyone agrees that those should be noted.

All Members can agree that as our amendment states, the matter should be investigated in a way that is open, transparent and commands the confidence of the community in co-operation with the Government of the Irish Republic. Everyone will wonder at the fact that there are Members who cannot agree to that.

We all have different points of view. The spokesman for Sinn Féin told us how he felt about the matter. He has his feelings and I have my feelings, but, tonight, we can do something to help. People from the Omagh district who have talked to members of my party feel that the matters that are contained in our amendment are close to their hearts. They need to know, one by one, whether Members are for that or not.

I feel very strongly about this matter. It is an absolute disgrace that all we have had from our Government is what the Prime Minister told us: that he was going to have this looked into. That means that he will present a report from the Dispatch Box some day, and say that nothing more will be done. We can

prevent that from happening by uniting in condemning the failure of the authorities to act the way that they should have. By doing so, Members would act in the best interests of everyone concerned.

It is not for Members to try to reach a finding. We must support a call for the Government to be decent and honourable and to do what they must in order to bring peace of heart and mind to the people affected by the Omagh bomb.

**Mr Elliott:** On 15 August 1998, the Real IRA detonated a massive bomb in Market Street, Omagh, killing 29 people and unborn twins. The 220 people who were injured and the thousands whose lives were affected are sometimes forgotten. It is unfortunate that no one has been brought to justice for the atrocity in the ensuing years.

Mr McNarry spoke about the event that he held six months ago in the Long Gallery for the families at which he heard some of their experiences. He described it as one of, if not the, most harrowing days of his life. I was there and felt the same way. I was also in Omagh the day after that bomb. I do not think that anything can compare to the chilling atmosphere of the town on that day. I can only try to understand and imagine what it was like for the bereaved families and the entire community of Omagh on that and subsequent days.

However, it must be recognised, and never forgotten, that the sole responsibility for the Omagh bombing lies with republican terrorists who paid no regard to the sanctity of human life, who were barbaric in their intent, and whose cause can never be justified through violence or abuse either here or further afield.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled an amendment to this motion. That amendment called for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urgently raise with the UK Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, the need for the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of the Republic of Ireland to examine the scope for a cross-border independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding that 1998 bombing. Without an independent inquiry, we may never get to the bottom of all the issues that surround that tragic event. The families of those who were killed and have suffered have endured too many false dawns.

In the absence of its own amendment, the Ulster Unionist Party is supporting the one tabled by Mr Buchanan. I recognise and support the thrust of the Alliance Party motion. However, it is undeliverable. It also has the potential to jeopardise ongoing intelligence operations into dissident republican activity, which, unfortunately, has again raised its ugly head in this Province — particularly in the west.

If we call for full disclosure, there is a danger that live intelligence operations will be compromised. With the current levels of dissident republican activity, that

might put other lives at risk, and it is a step that the Ulster Unionist Party is not prepared to take.

5.45 pm

That said, the recent revelations in the BBC's 'Panorama' programme, concerning the monitoring and recording of some of the Real IRA terrorists by the Government Communications Headquarters, must be fully investigated and the findings openly and transparently shared with the public. The information in those recordings might have prevented the bombing, and the UK Government must thoroughly investigate the matter and bring it to light. However, we should not raise the hopes of the families involved unnecessarily. There is a likelihood that the findings of any investigation will not produce the results that the victims' families had hoped for. That is why we preferred the call to examine the scope for a cross-border independent inquiry.

Dissident republican terrorist activity is with us again, and everyone in the Chamber and beyond should do all in their power to bring active terrorists and those responsible for the Omagh bombing to justice. The Government have a responsibility to uphold public safety, and that includes the current safety of the public. That is why we call on the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to examine the scope for an independent cross-border inquiry.

**Mr Durkan:** As other Members said, the motion and the amendments touch on a landmark atrocity that created so many victims in Omagh — victims to whom many promises and assurances were given but few of which have been honoured. It is important that we remember that, as we consider the issues and consider also what is required not only for the families of the dead victims of Omagh but for the entire population of Omagh and for the entire public interest of the region.

We must be clear in our discussions about the issues involved and in the different emphases and interpretations that are at play in this debate. I join with others in saying that we do not want acrimonious division or difficulties here. People want straight talking, and they want straightforward action from political representatives in this regard. The families have heard too many phoney condolences and empty platitudes.

The phrase "no stone unturned" has been used several times today; but all that the families of the Omagh bomb victims have had is "no cliché unused" repeated again and again. More than 10 years on, families have been left in their grief suffering the profound grievance that basic promises made to them have not been kept. Those are promises that we should want not only for those families but for all of us, because there is no basic pledge of common security and the common law unless authorities act with

propriety and pursue matters such as this genuinely and honestly. Yet the calls for public inquiries have gone unanswered.

For a long time, few of us joined the families in their calls for a cross-border public inquiry. I am glad that more people now realise that there is a compelling case for a cross-border public inquiry, but that may be because people now realise that the likelihood of prosecutions is much diminished. Nevertheless, I welcome the fact that people have at least come to that conclusion, but why can we not baldly state that in the motion? I would have preferred the motion to be more explicit, but I respect fully the terms in which Mr Ford has spoken. I believe that the motion, as amended by amendment No 2, is clear, concise and compelling. We need to ensure that no one in Government in London, Dublin or elsewhere, can make any mistake about what we want to see and about the onus that is on them.

The Governments need to know that the onus rests on them to answer the pleas of the bereaved families and that they must live up to the promises that were made, not just in their name, but in our name. Those promises were made to all of us, not just to the families. We should be as angry and as aggrieved as the bereaved Omagh families. That is why we should be explicit in seeking such an inquiry.

The issues that were raised by the 'Panorama' programme only add to the questions that already existed. I hope that Members of the Assembly who are also Members of another Parliament will support an early-day motion that I have tabled that specifically calls on the British Government to release, in a timely fashion, the information that would help the families to put their case.

Along with Sir Reg Empey, I raised that issue with the Prime Minister when he was here, and he assured us of his consideration of the matter. He then made his move by appointing Sir Peter Gibson. After all the false promises that were made to the Omagh families, to hand a matter of this complexity and seriousness to a safe knight to present a report, in an open and shut way — possibly in Parliament, possibly not — is simply not good enough, as Dr Paisley rightly said. Clarity and sincerity, as clearly expressed and demanded by this Assembly, should not be too much for the families, who have travelled here from Omagh, to ask for.

**Dr Deeny:** I add my condolences to the bereaved families, as I have done for the past 10 years. I remember the day of the bombing as being the most awful day that any of us who is involved in healthcare will ever come across. None of us was trained for that type of scene. I lost three patients from both communities that day, and many hundreds of people were injured.



Afterwards, I remember thinking that it was the second-busiest Saturday of the year — other than the Saturday before Christmas — in our county town. I also wondered how it could have happened. There had been several bomb scares in different towns that year, and indeed, there had been a carbon copy of the Omagh bombing in Banbridge two weeks previously. Phone calls were made by a so-called informer who gave a date for the bombing, saying that it would take place in a large town. Subsequent phone calls were made, warning that the bombing would take place in Omagh. I could not understand how the car could have been parked where it was, nor could I believe, given the previous warnings and given that there are not many roads into the town, why Omagh could not have been cordoned off. The former Police Ombudsman also made that point. From the word go, I thought that something was not right and that there was something evil about that event.

The recent revelations of the 'Panorama' programme only add to our concerns. We also know, as was mentioned earlier, that statements were made by senior people in Government and in the Police Service. I remember them saying that the people who were responsible for the bomb would be hunted down and that no stone would be left unturned. That gave initial hope to the families and to the whole community, but we know what happened, or more correctly, did not happen.

As political representatives, it is our duty to the people of Omagh to leave no stone unturned. That is why I, along with the Alliance Party, ask Members to support the motion and amendment No 2.

I know that this is a very emotive issue for the people of West Tyrone, but the DUP amendment focuses too much on condemning the perpetrators of what was an evil act. However, we have done that from day one, time after time. The motion is about the acquisition and disclosure of information that many people, North and South, believe exists.

At the core of the motion is the call for the acquisition and disclosure of relevant information. I could not agree more with Mr Attwood that that disclosure is needed urgently so that the families can use it in the civil case that they are bringing. Those evil people must be brought to justice so that the victims' families can have closure.

Hundreds were injured and 31 human beings killed that day. Dr Paisley is right to mention that 31 people were killed, although it is also mentioned in amendment No 2. The victims' families need our help, and they need justice. I say that as a doctor, because I have no doubt that the uncertainty, and the lengths to which those families have had to go, is having a detrimental effect on their physical, mental and emotional health. The huge legal wound is still open

and continues to fester. For the sake of the health of the families, justice must be done. As Members of the devolved Government, we must do all that we can to bring closure to this sorry and agonising situation, which began with that terrible atrocity just over 10 years ago in the county town of Omagh.

I do not want the House to divide on this issue; we must speak with one voice, whatever it may take. We cannot split on the issue; it is vital to the families of Omagh that we speak with one voice. I ask all Members to support the motion and amendment No 2.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The phrase "no stone left unturned" has been used often in the debate this afternoon. It was the promise made to the bereaved families and the survivors of the Omagh bomb, in its immediate aftermath, by the then Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan. That promise was repeated in recent weeks by the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, in response to Gordon Brown's announcement of a review of intelligence handling, following the revelations contained in September's 'Panorama' programme. Many people have been left wondering whether the bomb could have been intercepted or whether those responsible could have been brought to justice, had all the available intelligence been shared in a timely manner.

However, let me be clear: the SDLP and many others have stated today that responsibility for the Omagh bomb lies solely with those who planned and planted it. The Omagh families are clear on that point and have raised it in all their presentations. They were very strong on that issue in the presentation hosted recently by Mr McNarry in the Long Gallery.

Mr McElduff rightly paid tribute to the nurses and doctors who worked hard to save lives. The House should also commend those police officers and firefighters who sought to save lives and who worked in very difficult and emotive circumstances. I pay tribute to them and to the many volunteers who assisted in the search for bodies and for the injured and who tried to bring them to medical treatment as quickly as possible.

The present Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde, said that a successful prosecution is unlikely unless witnesses come forward; some Members made that very point today. Even at this late stage, we reiterate our call that anyone who has information should come forward. Many Members feel that the failure to do so gives succour to those who planted the bomb. Some of the guilt may lie with those who say nothing.

The Omagh families — like so many families affected by the conflict of the past 30 to 40 years — are not, at this stage, likely to see justice served unless witnesses come forward. They want the truth, and many of them have made impassioned pleas for it.

Where does the truth lie and how do we obtain it? It is clear, as Mr Ford said, that the track record of the Intelligence Services Commissioner in presenting evidence about security intelligence handling does not inspire confidence. He has never upheld any case made against the handling of intelligence.

Therefore, the motion and amendment No 2, which Mr Ford and his colleagues tabled, go a long way to meeting the reasonable demands of the families affected by, and the survivors of, the Omagh bomb. Like all others, we do not want the House to divide on the matter.

6.00 pm

We ask those Members who tabled amendment No 1 to reconsider it. The Omagh families have made it clear that unless inquiries are open and transparent and have legal accountability and a legal framework in which to operate, there will be little opportunity for some people who hold information to present themselves as witnesses. Moreover, they may be less willing to appear as witnesses. We have seen that happen with past inquiries. An inquiry must have the power to demand reports that the intelligence services hold and to compel witnesses to give evidence.

The Omagh families have also been at pains to point out that we must learn about contingency planning, and that lessons must be learned about how the situation was handled on the day of the bombing. No Member can deny that lessons can be learned. In the aftermath of 9/11, the various emergency services shared information and examined how the situation could have been better handled. One finding that emerged was that the emergency services were not even operating on the same radio frequency.

I ask DUP Members to reconsider their amendment and to give their full and unopposed support to the motion and amendment No 2.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Lord Morrow:** At the outset, I reckon that whatever has been, and might be, said in the House today will fall far short of what should be said on such a motion. I am disappointed that some Members have attempted to rubbish amendment No 1. We tabled the amendment because we felt that the motion did not go far enough. I am disappointed by a couple of Members' remarks. I listened carefully to what Dr Deeny said. He said that amendment No 1 majors too much on condemnation. It is not possible to condemn enough those who perpetrated that atrocity; that cannot be overdone. I regret that Dr Deeny said that here today.

Mr Attwood said that we are in some way reluctant about there being full disclosure. Let me be clear that when that 'Panorama' programme aired, I was either the first, or certainly among the first, to issue a public

statement that demanded full disclosure of information. If any Member misunderstands my position on full disclosure, I want him or her to ask me about it. I want full disclosure on what happened in Omagh on that particular day. I am not particular about whom that hurts. I have no brief for anybody who has withheld information, because justice must be done. However, it is more than that — justice must be seen to be done.

That is the irony of today's situation. In the Chamber, it is easy for Members to condemn the bombing — we are all doing it, but more must be done. Are Members unequivocal in their support for those on the ground who want to see justice done? Is something else holding Members back from going the full distance? I want to go the full distance, and I make that very clear.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Lord Morrow:** I want to go the extra mile. I am disappointed that some Members feel that, in some way, we have tried to be woolly about the situation. Our amendment is quite the opposite. We are determined to get to the bottom of the situation, and we are not particular about whom that will offend.

**Mr McCarthy:** Has the Member discussed his amendment with the people who matter — those who suffered in the Omagh bombing?

**Lord Morrow:** If Mr McCarthy is asking whether I have spoken to the people of Omagh, the answer is yes. I live in County Tyrone, I worked in Omagh, I have relations in Omagh, and I have family roots there. Some of my relations had a narrow escape that day; thankfully, they were not caught in the bomb. Therefore, I am acutely aware of the sensitivities that surround the issue.

Amendment No 1 states that it: "notes the recent revelations". That is reference to the recent 'Panorama' programme, and we are saying that, because of the revelations in that programme, there must be a full disclosure of information. We will not settle for anything less. Any inadequacies must be exposed and examined. Although my colleagues and Tom Elliott made the intentions of amendment No 1 clear, I hope that my comments dispel any doubt. We implore the House to support amendment No 1, which goes much further than the motion. It is important that the House sends a clear message, not a garbled one.

Has Sinn Féin got any information about past colleagues, or anyone else, that it can pass on to the police? It must be noted that when the atrocity occurred, Sinn Féin held back — it was reluctant, it was not clear cut, and it did not meet expectations. However, Sinn Féin still has the chance to redeem itself, and the public demands that it does so. The House and the Omagh relatives demand that all public representatives do their duty and declare —

unambiguously and definitively — their desire for a full disclosure of information on the atrocity. I hope that the House unites behind amendment No 1.

**Mrs Long:** As each Member who spoke recognised, the Omagh families suffered greatly on that August day in 1998. Although those losses can never be undone and the scars will never fully heal, the families have continued to suffer over the past 10 years, because their right to justice has been denied and frustrated and their access to the truth has been blocked. There is not much that we can do in that kind of situation, but we can make a contribution by helping families to get the truth.

That is why we focused on the issue of full disclosure in the motion and amendment No 2. In addition to the pain and burden that they already carry, we do not want the Omagh families to be left with the question of “what if” hanging over them for the rest of their lives. However, the motion is not just about the truth; it is about trying to identify what went wrong with the security services that day; it is about establishing whether it was processes or people that failed; and it is about ensuring that what happened is scrutinised and, importantly, never repeated.

In his opening remarks, David Ford, respectfully, recognised the suffering of those who were bereaved and injured by the bomb. No Member is saying that the issue is not sensitive or difficult. In our motion, we sought the unity of the Assembly and to call for something specific, not to ask the British and Irish Governments to examine a process, but to call for something that would deliver for the families.

Tom Buchanan highlighted, rightly, that there are people who harboured the guilty, have information and, even at this late stage, should co-operate with the police to assist the families with their quest for justice. I agree with Tom Buchanan, but surely his logic means that that obligation should be extended to those in GCHQ, the security services and the intelligence services, because, potentially, they have information that must be disclosed. They have a major role to play in the investigation, and in handing over that information.

I wish that those who proposed the amendment had spoken with us, as did others, because we were willing and flexible enough to have a composite approach that would not have forced division. However, tabling an amendment that runs contrary to some of the content in the motion makes it incredibly difficult to achieve a coherent result.

Barry McElduff recognised the suffering, and the enormity of what faced the emergency services on that day, as did several other Members, including his colleague Pat Doherty.

**Lord Morrow:** The Member said that she was disappointed that we made no approach to her or her party. I am the Chief Whip of the DUP group, which is next door to the Alliance Party, and at no time did any Alliance Party member ever think it worthwhile to knock my door and come round for a consultation.

**Mrs Long:** That is an admission that the DUP did not speak to us about our motion, as did other parties.

Mr McNarry, I believe, referred to the families' call for that process to operate in both jurisdictions, with the prospect, if not of delivering justice, of at least giving them the truth, and we concur with that view.

Alex Attwood rightly emphasised the independence of any inquiry, and rightly noted, given that the civil case is under way, that there is an urgency to the process with regard to the disclosure of evidence.

Sadly, Allan Bresland suggested that the motion was an attack on the security forces. I refute that suggestion. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I am saddened that anyone would suggest otherwise.

Tom Buchanan made a case against full disclosure, because it could compromise the ongoing work of the security services against dissident republicans. We recognise that, in every jurisdiction, there is a need for security and intelligence in counter-terrorism, that counter-terrorism is, by its nature, secretive, and that sources must be protected. We are not naive. However, the public has a right to expect that those working in such services are, at all times, acting to the highest standards and in the interests of protecting the public.

There is considerable doubt in the public mind that that is always the case, and nowhere is that lack of confidence more evident than in the Omagh case. The allegation that GCHQ had intercept evidence that could have prevented a bomb being planted, and the further allegation that the information was not handed to local detectives to allow them to use it in pursuit of the guilty are major concerns. Unfortunately, only full disclosure can set those allegations to rest in people's minds. Allowing secrecy to cloud the issue is incredibly dangerous for public confidence.

Mark Durkan called for clarity, and I agree. The proposed amendment confuses the issue. Furthermore, he was also right — as were many others — to highlight the empty promises of the different Governments. Kieran Deeny had first-hand experience of the tragedy, and he is right that the condemnation of the terrorists who planted the bomb stands.

The motion is about obtaining the information that the families seek. Dolores Kelly quite rightly called on all those who have information or evidence to come forward. I support her 100% in that call.

Lord Morrow called for no division, but the way that he treated the remarks created a sense of division.

There is no division in the spirit of what people are trying to do, even though we may take a slightly different approach. I hope that that is accepted, even by those Members of the DUP who amended the motion. Lord Morrow said that he was committed to full disclosure. However, the words “full disclosure” are not in the DUP’s amendment.

I make it clear that the motion is not designed to shift the blame for the carnage in Omagh onto the security services or the local police. Those who are ultimately responsible for the death and destruction, and its legacy on the families of the victims and survivors, are those who built, primed, planted and detonated that device, and those who took the car, parked it in the centre of Omagh, and walked away into the crowds that they were about to decimate.

Nothing in our motion diminishes the bombers’ responsibility for the choices that they made, the actions that they took, and the lives that they destroyed. That is not the motion’s focus. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on Governments to do all that they can to protect their citizens from such attacks and to ensure that justice is delivered to the victims of those attacks when they occur. The families who have been affected by the Omagh bombing believe that neither has been achieved. They seek the truth; they deserve nothing less.

6.15 pm

The Omagh bombing is a sensitive issue that requires the House to form a united front. Even at this late stage, I appeal to the proposers of amendment No 1 to support the motion and amendment No 2 so that the Assembly has a united position and can act on the matter in that spirit.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if that amendment is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. I will then proceed to put the Question on the motion, as amended.

*Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly condemns the republican terrorists responsible for the murder of the 29 people and two unborn children in Omagh on 15 August 1998; recognises that they alone were responsible for this tragedy; notes the recent revelations about the possible breakdown in the provision of information which may have assisted in the prevention of the bombing; and calls on the UK Government to urgently institute a process to investigate the matter (i) in a way which is open, transparent, and commands the confidence of the community; and (ii) in co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Promoting the Tourist Potential of East Antrim

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have approximately seven minutes.

**Mr Ross:** When other Members have left, I will address what my colleague Jim Wells describes as “a hushed Chamber”. I am grateful to the Business Office for allowing me to raise the topic in the House this evening. I thank the Minister for her presence, and I apologise to those Members who have had to stay until such a late hour.

East Antrim is a magnificent constituency with breathtaking scenery and popular tourist attractions, drawing in walkers, cyclists, golfers and people who fish. As such, it could benefit greatly from the growing tourism industry, as envisaged by the Programme for Government.

Tourism is a growth industry in Northern Ireland. It is worth millions to the economy, and it provides thousands of jobs throughout the country, many of which provide seasonal opportunities for students during peak visitor times. I noted the extent of that tourism growth in a comment that my colleague Jimmy Spratt made when he recognised the number of cruise ships that now come to Northern Ireland and the number of tourists who are on those ships. That is certainly to be welcomed.

That tourism was given such a central place in the Programme for Government is also to be welcomed. It has gained around £60 million in capital investments. Targets have been set for visitor numbers to increase by around 25% over the next three years. In recent years, local hotels, particularly in Belfast, have occupancy rates of almost 70% at times, which demonstrates clearly the number of visitors who now come to the Province.

However, despite that, tourism represents a tiny proportion — only 2% — of Northern Ireland’s GDP, whereas that figure is higher in neighbouring countries. In Wales, that figure is 11%, and in the Irish Republic, it is 9%. Clearly, we are still catching up from our troubled past, when tourists were too frightened to come to Northern Ireland because of the republican

terrorist campaign waged in our Province. Despite recent posturing by some, we now hope that we have sufficient political stability to grow our tourist industry and bring more people to visit Northern Ireland.

The motion refers specifically to East Antrim, but many parts of the country will find it relevant and many of the issues that will be raised will apply to other constituencies. East Antrim is geographically well-positioned to reap the benefits from tourism. It is the gateway to the north coast, and large parts of the constituency lie in close proximity to Belfast. East Antrim should be able to catch tourists attracted by the stand-out attractions of Belfast or the Giant's Causeway. However, we do not want tourists to simply pass through East Antrim; we want them to stop en route along the breathtaking coast road, and spend some time — and, crucially, money — in the constituency.

The port of Larne is one of the busiest in the United Kingdom, and the number of tourists who come from Scotland in particular has grown in recent years. With the credit crunch and the stretching of family finances, many more in Scotland will decide to holiday closer to home, since foreign holidays and other luxuries are often the first items to go when times are tough. Unfortunately, however, most tourists do not stay in Larne, even for an overnight stay or a meal. Many coach trips arrive in the port but do not spend any time in the town. There has to be development in that respect, and places of interest must be promoted to visitors.

I know of several smaller bed and breakfasts whose owners are frustrated that they do not get passing business because they are prevented from erecting certain types of signage to alert people to their existence. Despite the signage on the scenic loop route past Island Magee, there needs to be further signage so that visitors realise that there are places to stay in the area and places to visit nearby. Villages such as Ballycarry seek more effective promotion — some local businesses there are popular with those tourists who just happen to stumble across them and who are delighted at that traditional small Ulster village.

Those in the tourism industry are frustrated that Northern Ireland is not specifically promoted as a tourist destination and, therefore, places such as East Antrim lose out to a greater degree than they would otherwise to more popular attractions in the Province. Tourism Ireland focuses on the images of shamrocks and leprechauns. Those images are alien to most of us in Northern Ireland, who are proud to have historic, cultural and religious links with rest of the United Kingdom — yet Northern Ireland has not been promoted specifically outside of the island of Ireland. The approach to promotion and marketing of tourism is very fragmented, with little flexibility, even among bodies charged to do just that.

This is a massive issue, and one that I have raised before in the Chamber. I am pleased that, over the past year, Northern Ireland-specific merchandise has gone on sale at airports in Belfast, whereas, previously, tourists returning from our two major airports could have been forgiven for thinking that they were in Dublin, because there were no locally focused tourism products available.

I mentioned the historic, cultural and religious links that Northern Ireland shares with the rest of the UK. Ulster-Scots culture is particularly strong in East Antrim. I and several other MLAs from the area have been to well-attended events during the summer, in Cairncastle and Ballygally in particular. I pay tribute to Bobby Acheson, David Hume and others in East Antrim who take on much of the burden of organising events such as the Cairncastle Ulster-Scots Folk Festival and the Broadisland Gathering Festival.

Those events are attended not just by people from Northern Ireland, but by a sizeable number of visitors from Scotland. At the last such event that I attended, several people from New Zealand and the United States were there. I have written to the First Minister to ask him to consider what he can do to promote our culture, and I have asked broadcasters to give more airtime to music associated with Ulster Scots, which is a popular and growing cultural phenomenon, particularly in East Antrim. It is even popular with young people.

That aspect of tourism should not just be exploited locally — there is huge potential in attracting visitors from the United States, as was clear from the success of the Smithsonian events in the US last year. Larne has a long-standing connection with the United States, because it was from that port that many immigrants departed for a new life in America. Larne ships transported people to America for many years, and a memorial testifying to that is situated in Curran Park in the town.

The Ulster American Society of Larne was established over a decade ago and, since then, the town has been twinned with other towns in South Carolina. In Carrickfergus, the Andrew Jackson Cottage and US Rangers Centre includes an example of the traditional Ulster-Scots farmhouse from which the parents of President Andrew Jackson emigrated in 1765.

Other interesting historical attractions in the constituency include the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which has an opportunity to use the old-style food carriages for corporate events. We are looking at business tourism as well; not just at attracting people who are on their holidays. We can attract business people and others to the area through events such as that.

Activities such as walking and cycling are not promoted enough. Carnfunnock Country Park is one

such example, with stunning walking trails, views and gardens, and it is particularly popular with families in the area. Ballygally and Carnlough, at the upper end of the constituency, are picturesque villages with very nice scenery indeed.

Perhaps the most recognised landmark in East Antrim is Carrickfergus Castle, which could also be utilised to a greater degree by holding gala events or medieval banquets there. My colleague David Hilditch will refer to that in more detail.

I will highlight two specific projects within the constituency that I believe could greatly improve the potential for tourism. First is the development plan for the Magheramorne Quarry, where a unique multi-million pound eco-village, world-class biking track, diving school, film studios and a number of other tourist attractions are planned. It is a very exciting project, particularly for those in the constituency. I hope that we will see work begin there very soon.

There is also a project to oversee the restoration of the Gobbins cliff path and the Causeway coastal route, which perfectly links Belfast, at the south of the constituency, to the Causeway at the north. That again is a very exciting project, and it is hoped that we will see it progress in years to come.

Tourism must be exploited to the full, and I hope that the Executive can assist in every way possible. I know that other Members will wish to mention other important issues, so I will conclude. I welcome the opportunity to highlight the constituency.

**Mr Beggs:** The East Antrim constituency, incorporating Larne, Carrickfergus, and parts of Newtownabbey, is full of areas of outstanding natural beauty that are particularly associated with its coastal location. It is good that the Causeway Coast and Glens partnership has been developed in order to provide an identity for the region that can be marketed regionally and internationally. However, more needs to be done.

The East Antrim constituency is often seen simply as the gateway to the glens, yet it has many noteworthy facilities and areas of beauty. There is the preserved Norman castle in Carrickfergus, which is the focal point for the history of the immediate area, and Northern Ireland as a region. Much history emanates from that site. The structure is noteworthy, but more interactive displays and items of historical interest are required to keep the visitors' attention. More items of genuine historical interest would also be useful.

Is the Environment and Heritage Service, or as it is now called, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the best agency to preserve the building? Certainly, it is the best agency for preserving the structure, but more innovative ways of encouraging tourists' use of the facility must be considered. There has been an increase in activity in recent years, with events such as

medieval jousting and crafts, and that is to be welcomed. The events held have been popular. However, more is required. The harbour area is now a bustling attraction with a renovated promenade, a new marina and numerous restaurants to choose from.

Further up the coast, there is the town of Whitehead — a scenic Victorian town that has excelled in the Ulster in Bloom and Britain in Bloom floral competitions. A visit there in the summer is a must. As Mr Ross said, it is also the centre for the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which organises numerous trips on the railway network using its vintage vehicles.

Further up the coast, there is a neglected treasure from the Victorian age, which, hopefully, is on the verge of being restored. I refer to the Gobbins cliff path in Islandmagee. Members will be aware of the recent upsurge in interest in the Gobbins, which has been stimulated to some extent by a recent episode of the BBC's 'Coast' series, which highlighted both its glorious past and its potentially glorious future.

Last weekend, I was fortunate to be taken by Peter Steele on the North Irish Diver to view the impressive cliff face and wildlife along the coastline.

The North Irish Diver is used to carry divers to the numerous wrecks that dot the immediate area; that potential for tourism should be developed further.

*6.30 pm*

The current £6 million scheme is dependent on funding coming from a variety of sources, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Environment and Heritage Service, INTERREG, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. If that scheme is to be delivered, help must be provided, through DETI, by central Government and the Tourist Board. Substantial funding has been identified from other bodies, and huge potential exists for delivering a significant tourist project.

There are already numerous bed and breakfast facilities in the area. At Ford Farm, for example, there is a small camping barn and caravan site at the edge of Larne Lough, which is an area of special scientific interest and a Ramsar site, for those with an interest in wildlife. There is a growing interest in nature and an increasing interest in walking for pleasure and for health. Coastal walking forms a sizeable tourism segment in many parts of Great Britain. The National Trust has already developed walks at Portmuck and Brown's Bay, and I hope that eventually the Gobbins pathway can be restored and the network completed, so that visitors can enjoy the spectacular coastal views.

Further north is the village of Glynn and the town of Larne. As Mr Ross indicated, the Carnfunnock Country Park is particularly noteworthy, and worth a

visit by people of all ages; there are play facilities, walled gardens, and many walks. At Glenarm, the marina has recently been renovated. There is also a castle with a garden and tea rooms; throughout the year, it is the centre for many activities.

Finally, there is the village of Carnlough. A visit there would not be complete without a walk around the harbour and a visit to the historic Londonderry Arms. East Antrim is a hidden gem, and if more people knew about it, they would choose to visit it.

**Mr Neeson:** As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I am only too aware of the importance of tourism to the economy of Northern Ireland, and of the growing number of visitors that we are getting. I welcome the number of airlines now operating all around Europe, which are bringing visitors to Northern Ireland. Hopefully, many of those visitors will come to East Antrim, which has a great deal to offer. However, it is important that we get the tourist product right.

Infrastructure is very important, and that includes the updating of the Carrickfergus to Belfast road, the A2, and the Larne to Belfast road, the A8. Co-operation between the local councils is important, and one very good example of that is the Mid-Antrim Museums Service, which involves Larne, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, and Ballymena councils. Over the last four years, in each of those areas, a major heritage product has been developed. There is the museum in Carrick; Sentry Hill in Newtownabbey; the refurbished Larne Museum; and the Ballymena civic centre.

A lot has been said about Carrickfergus Castle. I think that all of us from East Antrim agree that more could be done with the castle itself, in particular the question of opening hours. The opening hours are not conducive to the tourist trade, and Carrickfergus Borough Council has been trying to make changes to that.

I am glad that the Minister is here today. The Tourist Board promised funding for the development of a son et lumière show at Carrickfergus Castle; that funding has not materialised. Recently, I met Tourist Board officials, and I hope that that will go on the agenda.

Mr Ross mentioned the need for functions and so forth at the castle. I must admit that one of my proudest achievements was helping to organise the very first Lughnasa Medieval Fair, way back in 1971.

The promotion of Carrickfergus as a walled town is also important to its heritage, and David Hilditch is extremely involved in the movement to preserve walled cities and towns.

The previous two Members who spoke referred to the reopening of the Gobbins cliff path, and that must be a priority. One need only look at the popularity of the walk along the Blackhead path and the number of

people that use it frequently to see that it would be an added attraction in the area. I am pleased to say that Carnfunnock Country Park, which is an excellent and well-used family facility, is also in the area. I welcome the use of Glenarm Castle for various activities in recent years, and many overseas visitors have been attracted to events there.

For several years, I have been working closely with the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which is based at Whitehead, and volunteers have done an enormous amount to restore the engines and carriages. It is not only a major local attraction but a major national attraction.

The maritime area of Carrickfergus is now a major attraction, and I am pleased to say that the recently built Premier Inn has been granted planning permission for an extension. That shows how the tourist product is being developed in East Antrim.

It goes without saying that the Antrim coast road is, undoubtedly, one of the most scenic areas on the island of Ireland and, with the port of Larne acting as the gateway to the glens, the number of people using it in recent years has increased considerably. The area has much to offer tourists from near and far. The promotion of East Antrim must be more widely developed to realise its full potential.

I have a final point to make while the Minister is present. Much of the development does not involve only her Department, and, therefore, if the potential of the area is to be realised, an interdepartmental approach must be taken. I thank Mr Ross for securing the debate.

**Mr Hilditch:** I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, on which I am chairman of tourism and marketing. I am also a director of the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership, a forum member of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau Regional Tourism Partnership and, as Sean mentioned, an executive member of the Walled Towns Friendship Circle.

I thank my colleague Mr Ross for securing the debate and bringing the matter to the Floor of the Assembly — and rightly so, as Northern Ireland is benefiting from changing times. Tourism is a growth industry that generates almost £800 million for the local economy and supports almost 30,000 full-time jobs and, equally importantly, numerous opportunities for part-time employment. I hope that, despite the global economic problems, the statistics continue to improve, as will what the area has to offer as a must-see tourist destination.

Of all the constituencies, East Antrim is one of the best strategically placed for infrastructure and inward travel. Within 15 minutes of leaving Belfast International Airport, George Best Belfast City Airport

or the Port of Belfast, out-of-state visitors can be in the heart of the constituency, which boasts its own port facilities at Larne. East Antrim can, therefore, be the gateway to Northern Ireland. One of the most important infrastructural developments in recent years is the Causeway coastal route, which was funded by central Government and delivered by the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership.

That specially signed route takes tourists off the M2, takes them through Whiteabbey, follows the A2 to the north and, eventually, leaves the constituency at the beginning of the glens of Antrim. That journey boasts many attractions in the local-authority areas of Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and Larne such as Loughshore Park, the wonderful development at Carnfunnock Country Park, Carrickfergus Marina — which has been awarded five gold anchors through the Yacht Harbour Association's gold anchor award scheme — the underdeveloped viewpoint at the Knockagh monument and the rich heritage and culture that is showcased by the Andrew Jackson cottage, Carrickfergus Castle and the town walls.

I commend the private and voluntary sector, which provides excellent accommodation in the constituency, and further developments are pending. Sean Neeson mentioned the Premier Inn. Moreover, the Knockagh Lodge, which was previously a roadhouse, will soon provide 31 rooms. That extension was secured with private-sector investment.

Flame, Ireland's award-winning gasworks museum is managed entirely by an enthusiastic team of volunteers, whose work is essential. Therefore, many people play roles in promoting tourism potential in East Antrim. I could go on, but I will sound like an episode of 'Wish You Were Here...?'. That is, perhaps, the origin of some of the problems. Much work is conducted in local government, central Government, the Departments and agencies, the private sector, the business community and the valuable voluntary sector. However, despite the best efforts of the majority, the delivery of a project or service can, at times, be fragmented or undeliverable.

Some of the worst examples apply to the jewel in the crown of East Antrim's tourist trade — Carrickfergus Castle. As Sean Neeson mentioned, the most disappointing non-delivery of a project in recent years was the proposed son et lumière at the castle. That Northern Ireland Tourist Board- (NITB) led project included two other partners, namely Carrickfergus Borough Council and the former Environment and Heritage Service. Those two parties worked hard to fulfil resource and finance commitments and included a strategy in their business plans. However, NITB left them high and dry, and several years later, still refused to visit Carrickfergus Borough Council to discuss that issue and the ensuing difficulties.

The management of Carrickfergus Castle is important to those of us involved in the promotion of tourism. Recently, I provisionally booked banquets for two evenings in early June. That booking was accepted. However, 10 days later I received a letter that, rather than confirming my booking, outlined a new policy that permitted functions to be held in the castle on Monday to Thursday evenings only. Furthermore, groups had to vacate the premises by 9.00 pm, and no alcohol or marquees were permitted on the grounds. The first booking was for a group of Americans, led by the mayor of Danville from Kentucky, who were twinning with Carrickfergus. The second booking was for the European Walled Towns Friendship Circle, which had chosen Carrickfergus to host its annual executive meeting with representatives of nine European countries present. There would have been no better groups to which to showcase East Antrim's assets, but the facility was unavailable. The matter has been referred to the relevant Department and the relevant Minister.

Furthermore, the Territorial Army, which is celebrating its centenary, enquired about the facility at Carrickfergus Castle through the civic offices in Carrickfergus. Once again, the criteria and policy were outlined. I do not need to explain to Members the reaction to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's policy.

Those examples demonstrate how fragmented delivery can damage a product, and those matters will be discussed with the Department and the Minister. However, I do not believe that everyone in the agency shares the same attitude, which seems to say that it does not care if tourists ever cross the ramparts. Such examples indicate that a localised steering group for the delivery of tourism could be considered in partnership with central Government. However, that matter is for another day.

I thank Mr Ross for proposing this topic for the Adjournment debate. All Members share similar sentiments.

**Mr K Robinson:** I declare an interest as a councillor in Newtownabbey Borough Council. East Antrim has accepted tourists not just for the past several years but for the past few centuries and, indeed, since the beginning of the first millennium.

It was one of the first places to welcome people from the Stone Age to this island. It welcomed the Vikings and the Normans. It also welcomed the king of the campers, King William, who brought a multitude of European visitors with him. Most of them were very wise people, because, while the King arrived at Carrickfergus, quickly got on his horse and headed for one of the oldest buildings in Newtownabbey, the White House, most of his army went directly there.



That accommodation must have been more welcoming than Carrickfergus Castle, to which Mr Hilditch referred.

6.45 pm

East Antrim is the gateway to Northern Ireland. The port of Larne has 32 sailings each day that link us to north-west England and Scotland — with a footfall of approximately 25 million potential tourists. Has anyone in the Chamber ever been to the ferry terminals at Stranraer or Cairnryan and tried to lift a brochure for attractions in East Antrim? There will be brochures about the Northern Ireland lakes, the walled city of Londonderry, the Sperrins and St Patrick's Trail, but there will not be any brochures about East Antrim.

The port operates the short sea route to Britain, but we have lots of other networks, as other Members have mentioned. East Antrim is close to the two airports and to the port of Belfast. Increasing numbers of overseas — particularly American — tourists are captive on their ships in Belfast with no Titanic Quarter to see; or nothing worthwhile at the moment. Why do they not come to East Antrim? We have castles at Carrickfergus, Glenarm, and Ballygally, and, if we include North Antrim, visitors can go to Dunluce Castle, although it is not in the best of condition.

Most of the current projects in East Antrim are down to the initiative of the three borough councils, working separately or together or in combination with the Mid-Antrim Museums Service. There are jewels in each crown. Newtownabbey has not received much of a mention, but one of the national railway icons is located there; the Bleach Green viaduct is famous right across Great Britain because of its particular structure and format. Newtownabbey Borough Council only recently opened a pathway to allow people to view that particular splendour.

Community groups in Monkstown estate have brought an old industrial river — the Three Mile Water — back into life again, and it is now a salmon river. The area also contains Loughshore Park, which was mentioned; Hazelbank Park, which is an extension to the former; and the famous Gideon's Green, which was named after one of our overseas tourists — a French Huguenot — who left his mark on that particular part of Newtownabbey.

The cross-community Williamite theme could be developed. William landed in Carrickfergus and moved on to White House, Belfast, Hillsborough, Newry, Dundalk, Drogheda, and eventually to Dublin. The cross-border element should be tapped, because we know nothing about it. Despite the partial existence of the walls of Carrickfergus, only one walled city is promoted by the Tourist Board. With a little imagination, Carrickfergus could have a bigger footfall than Londonderry could ever have. Why is that not being developed?

Too many agencies are dipping their toes in the pond of East Antrim. None of them actually creates anything worthwhile. With the Minister here today, I would like to think that she will talk to her colleagues, so that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will all come together to promote a resource that is sitting there, waiting to be tapped. We have talked about the Gobbins path and the marinas at Glenarm and Carrickfergus. A lot of the infrastructure is in place; it just needs somebody to blow some life into it. However, the body that should be doing that — the Tourist board — seems to be passing it by.

Two sets of visitors come to East Antrim, one of which comprises those from Northern Ireland. The catchment area of greater Belfast — home to more than one million people — is not being tapped into. Across the north of the United Kingdom, there are approximately 25 million people. Again we are not tapping into that area. There is an Ulster-Scots diaspora in America, and we have already heard about some of the links that Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey have with that part of America. Andrew Jackson must not be mentioned to the Cherokee Indians — they have a particular view of him that is not helpful to our tourist industry. However, there is an affinity that could be tapped into, but the agencies are not breathing life into it.

Alastair Ross referred to the Ulster-Scots evening that he, Roy Beggs, Sammy Wilson and I attended recently, which consisted of self-help groups that struggle for money and for the attention of agencies. Something should be done to help them project the very worthwhile and unique culture beyond the local area.

Agencies are attempting to develop tourism. People who attempt to raise the standards of their restaurants and hotels to a higher level to bring in even more money sometimes run into brick walls; officialdom does not offer co-ordinated assistance. Golf-course marketing is not linked either. Packages have not been produced for East Antrim, and that is a tragedy. I therefore appeal to the Minister for some joined-up Government.

Angling, sea fishing, rambling and golf courses have been mentioned, but there are places that offer further tourism potential. The University of Ulster in Jordanstown is upgrading its facilities to make them attractive to visitors not just for conferences or for people attending the centre for sporting excellence, but for people spending their holidays here outside of term time.

Much could be built on, and I hope that the Minister takes on board some of the matters that I have raised and that she lives up to her responsibilities by speaking to her colleagues to ensure that everyone plays their

part in raising tourism levels in East Antrim. Finally, I thank Mr Ross for proposing the motion and for giving me the opportunity to tell Members about the benefits of East Antrim; I will send them a postcard shortly.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster):** I congratulate the Member for securing this Adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity for such discussions at what is an exciting and important time for tourism in Northern Ireland. However, I must add the caveat that the tourism industry is not immune to the major economic challenges faced by everyone. Nevertheless, there is much potential in East Antrim.

I am encouraged by the tourism industry's commitment to address the challenges that exist, and, as the proposer of the motion said, the Northern Ireland Executive, earlier this year, gave their unprecedented commitment to tourism in the form of a £60 million ring-fenced allocation for capital investment, and additional revenue — in excess of £20 million — through the Programme for Government to secure long-term sustainable growth. East Antrim is well positioned to benefit from those projects.

I shall now cover some of the matters that were mentioned in the debate. Mr Hilditch spoke about the Causeway coastal route, which goes through East Antrim and links Belfast and Londonderry. Members will agree that, to date, there has been excellent progress, and more than £10 million has been invested. Key projects include the installation of 400 tourist signs and the commencement of an interpretive programme along the route. Towns and villages along the route will benefit from increased visitor numbers. For example, Island Magee was identified as one of nine routes along the trail that were chosen for their scenic value and their ability to provide visitors with opportunities to explore off the beaten track.

The challenge for local areas is to identify and create opportunities for visitors to spend money, so that those localities can secure economic benefits. We do not just want more visitors; we want them to spend more in Northern Ireland, and we must bear that in mind when considering tourism products.

Belfast and Londonderry — at either end of the route — and the Port of Larne are major gateways to Northern Ireland for tourists arriving by coach and for people on any of the growing number of cruise ships — which Members have mentioned already — that now visit us.

The Antrim coast road was recently described as:

“Arguably the most spectacular 60 miles in Britain.”

Although I will not mention the geography, I will take the compliment. Obviously, it is spectacular, and those

of us who have been lucky enough to travel on that road understand exactly what that quotation says.

Carrickfergus Castle is still very much a gem in East Antrim, and, when I was the Minister of the Environment, I had the pleasure of going there on several occasions, including to an Ulster-Scots event. I also attended a tremendous event at the castle with Belfast City Council, at which Americans from Nashville visited as part of the Sister Cities Initiative.

Carrickfergus Castle continues to be a popular venue for weddings, having had, to date, approximately 36 bookings for civil and religious ceremonies in 2008. The castle is also popular for wedding photographs and remains a popular tourist attraction, with approximately 54,000 tourist visits annually, plus visits by approximately 11,000 schoolchildren.

Conserving the historical fabric of the castle and servicing visits by tourists and school groups will remain the priority of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. It has been recognised that there are tensions between doing that and opening up the castle in the way that Members wish. However, I understand from the Department of the Environment that the agency will investigate the possibility of another body managing evening and weekend events at the castle, because I believe that that is where the difficulties lie for some Members.

As I said, Carrickfergus Castle is a gem in East Antrim, and then there are the spectacular views from the Bla Hole across Whitehead to Scotland. The Sallagh Braes and the glens of Antrim are worth a visit in their own right, and the Giant's Causeway attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors into the area every year and still remains the top tourist attraction in Northern Ireland. However, as Mr Ross said, we do not only want visitors passing through East Antrim, we also want them to stay there, and I agree that Members should be focusing on that.

The East Antrim constituency is blessed with natural beauty and plays a central role in making Northern Ireland an attractive destination. The Causeway coastal route, including East Antrim, features prominently on the consumer websites of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, and the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership.

Although the wider signature project has much to offer visitors, the East Antrim constituency boasts a wealth of smaller but no less worthwhile attractions. Those have all been mentioned by Members and they include: the village of Carnlough; Glenarm, with its castle gardens, forest walks and harbour; Carnfunnock Country Park; the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland in Whitehead, which was mentioned by Mr Neeson; the marine museums; and St Nicholas' Church in Carrickfergus; and the White House in Newtownabbey.

I was pleased to visit the White House, although I must say that I have never heard the immortal and pious memory of the glorious King William referred to as the king of the campers before, but I suppose that there is a first time for everything. Members may be aware that the Loyal Orders are proposing the development of a Williamite trail, and my Department is keen to help them with that. I agree that the story relates to a much wider area than Northern Ireland. As I said when I visited the White House; King William landing there is a European story.

As well as those attractions, there are golf courses with some of the most spectacular views imaginable: Whitehead, Cairndhu, and Larne Golf Club, which is on Island Magee.

I believe that it was Mr Ross who mentioned the Lafarge application — I understand that the Minister of the Environment is expecting a planning recommendation for that in early 2009, and I hope that he will be able to implement that as quickly as possible.

Several Members mentioned the Gobbins cliff path restoration and new visitors' centre. Larne Borough Council has approached the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for financial support in the region of £1.2 million for the restoration of the path and the development of the new visitors' centre. I understand that Larne Borough Council has approached several other organisations, and my Department will continue to work with the Tourist Board and Larne Borough Council to develop that, as I consider it to be a very worthwhile project.

Mr Neeson referred to a proposed son et lumière event at Carrickfergus Castle. I understand that Carrickfergus Borough Council is having ongoing discussions about that with the Tourist Board; I urge the council to continue those discussions so that a good outcome can be achieved.

I had a strong interest in the issue of the walled towns when I was Minister of the Environment. At that time, I visited Carrickfergus and I recall that Mr Hilditch had invited the Irish Walled Towns Network to meet at Carrickfergus for the first time, so it was a useful occasion. However, I believe that, although the signature project sits in Londonderry with the walls surrounding Derry city, Carrickfergus could make more of its status as a walled town.

*7.00 pm*

As consumer spending power reduces, competition will intensify between destinations. Therefore — more than ever — we must ensure that a quality experience is given to the consumer. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board will be focusing its efforts on the development of industry programmes to support the sector's ability to compete internationally. It will also support development in four key product areas aligned to:

business tourism — Members may have noticed the recent Business Tourism Expo; cities; culture and heritage; and sports activities and waterways tourism.

There are already some great places to stay in East Antrim, and Members have mentioned particular accommodation. However, that aspect may need to be considered in more detail, and perhaps we will be able to do that — in conjunction with Members — in the near future.

Recently, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board ran a very successful campaign in the Republic of Ireland which encouraged visitors to the island of Ireland to consider a trip to Northern Ireland. The Causeway coastal route in Antrim featured prominently in that campaign, and feedback suggested that visitors were very impressed by what they could see and do when they reached Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland will continue to work together to organise press trips to East Antrim, ensuring that the area remains on the radar. Mention was made in today's debate that both organisations needed to up their game in that area, but they are committed to continuing those press trips with local and international journalists.

East Antrim can offer much towards growing the number of visitors to Northern Ireland, and I look forward very much to working with my Department's various partners to do that. Members have mentioned that the matters under debate do not fall solely under my Department's remit, and that is very true. Those considerations fall under the remit of several other Departments, but DETI takes the lead on tourism. There is good potential to grow the tourism industry in East Antrim, and I hope to welcome many more visitors to the area in the future. I thank the Member for proposing this topic for debate.

*Adjourned at 7.02 pm*





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