
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 4 November 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: During yesterday's sitting, I indicated on several occasions that I had some concerns about remarks that were made during the debate about the disappeared. Having reflected on what Mr McCausland said and having taken counsel on the matter, I believe that direct and unfounded allegations of criminal behaviour were made about another Member. Those allegations were very clearly denied and refuted in the House by the Member concerned, Mr Adams. I regard the remarks to have been unparliamentary, and I call on Mr McCausland to withdraw them.

Mr McCausland: My comments about the Member for West Belfast were based on extracts from Ed Moloney's book, 'A Secret History of the IRA', which is available in bookshops and in the Assembly Library. Therefore, I will not withdraw my remarks. Given that Mr Adams continually calls for truth recovery, it is important that we get to the truth about those matters.

Mr Speaker: The Member should take his seat. Given that the Member has not withdrawn his remarks, I order him, under Standing Order 65, to withdraw immediately from the Chamber and its precincts for the remainder of today's sitting.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: As I have said repeatedly in the House, it gives me no pleasure to come here and make rulings on such matters. Yesterday, in particular, I reminded Members repeatedly to be careful in what they said and not to make serious allegations about other Members. I ask Members to bear in mind the dignity of this institution and the Assembly when they are speaking during debates in the House.

Reviewing yesterday's Hansard report, I noticed that not all remarks in languages other than English were translated. Another thing that I have continually said in this House is that whatever language Members want to speak in, it is vital that they then translate it into

English. Unfortunately, however, that does not always happen, and I remind the House of that requirement.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have raised the matter of a Member's failure to interpret comments that were made in the Irish language into English. I have been informed that the comments were not translated because they were so defamatory of the individual about whom the Member was speaking and could have been perceived as unparliamentary. Will you make a further ruling and request that the Member concerned withdraws the comments, in which he called another Member a fool and used another derogatory term that I am not permitted to repeat in the Chamber? Will you ask that those comments are interpreted fully and make a ruling on whether Mr Adams ought to withdraw his derogatory comments against a Member from my party?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure the House that I have looked at the Hansard report, and I have taken counsel. The remarks that Mr Adams made yesterday were not unparliamentary.

Mr McLaughlin: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. That interesting intervention by Mr Paisley Jnr is a powerful argument for the introduction of an Irish language Act. That would allow all Members of the House — [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us proceed.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

I am delighted that there is such a full House for the important motion on the Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008. However, I notice that Members are leaving now.

Article 3 of the Order provides for increases in the annual salaries payable to the president and member of the Lands Tribunal for Northern Ireland with retrospective effect from 1 April 2008 following recommendations made in the thirtieth report of the Senior Salaries Review Body, which was published on 17 June 2008. On the same day, the Government, in a written ministerial statement, accepted all the main recommendations, as they are affordable and consistent with public-sector pay policy. It was confirmed that the cost of the awards would be met from the existing departmental expenditure limits.

The Lands Tribunal is a court of record established under the Lands Tribunal and Compensation Act (Northern Ireland) 1964, and its functions are varied. One of its most important functions is to resolve disputes over the amount of compensation that is to be paid for the compulsory acquisition of land or for the injury caused to land by, for instance, the building of roads. Another important function is the hearing of appeals and references concerning the valuation of land for rates relief purposes.

The tribunal must also deal with the renewal of business tenancies, consents for alterations to land, assignments and agreements to surrender and the modification of legal obligations that are, allegedly, impeding the enjoyment of land, such as rights of way. Moreover, parties can agree to ask the Lands Tribunal to sit in private as an arbitrating body to settle disputes concerning the value, use or development of a piece of land. Domestic rating appeals are also referred from the Northern Ireland Valuation Tribunal, which was established on 1 April 2007.

The tribunal consists of a president and one member, both of whom are appointed by the Lord Chancellor. Under the 1964 Act, the Department of Finance and Personnel has responsibility for appointing staff to assist the tribunal in performing its functions and for determining its remuneration. My Department also has various rule-making responsibilities in relation to the tribunal's jurisdiction and proceedings.

It is proposed that the Order will come into operation on 5 November 2008. I commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the proposals for the subordinate legislation at its meeting on 10 September, when members requested additional information on the scope and functions of the Lands Tribunal and on the proposed salary increases for the president and its member. The Minister has set out the role and functions of the tribunal, and I will not repeat what he has said.

The Committee considered the additional information from the Department of Finance and Personnel and, subsequently, the Order and the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At its meeting on 15 October, the Committee agreed unanimously to recommend to the Assembly that the Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved. Therefore, I support the motion, which seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Committee Chairperson for his remarks and for the Committee's deliberations. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008

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

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 (Mr Weir): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Assembly.

Under section 85 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Secretary of State referred the draft Order to the Assembly for its consideration. If approved today, the Committee's report and the Hansard report of the debate will form the Assembly's response to the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office on the draft Criminal Damage Compensation Order.

Members are aware that the NIO conducted a wider consultation on the draft Order and that consultation will end on 10 November. However, the Ad Hoc Committee would expect the views of the Committee, and of the Assembly — if it approves the report — to carry considerable weight when the NIO considers responses to the wider consultation.

I am grateful to all members of the Committee for their diligent attendance and contributions to the debate, and to the Committee staff for their commitment in fulfilling our remit in such a short timescale. I also thank officials and representatives of those organisations who provided information and evidence to the Committee during the past few weeks, and I will speak further on that later.

The amended legislation will make it easier for halls that are damaged to claim statutory compensation. The current limited statutory criminal damage compensation scheme focuses on damage caused by three or more persons or by a paramilitary organisation, and the latter example may result in the issue of a Chief Constable's certificate.

Most of the halls that have been damaged in recent years have been Orange Halls and, regrettably, we have seen attacks on halls in Coagh and Pomeroy at the weekend. I acknowledge that attacks have taken place on halls on both sides of the community; some halls

have been attacked, while others have been completely destroyed. I know that all parties in the House are united in their total and unreserved condemnation of attacks on any community facilities, no matter what the community or the source of the attack.

10.45 am

In recent years, the main problem with the current legislation has been that there is sometimes no evidence to support a claim to the existing compensation scheme. Even though three or more people could have attacked a hall, no one may have seen the attack taking place, particularly as many attacks happen in isolated areas in the middle of the night. The police, therefore, have difficulty in obtaining evidence, or they may be unable to certify that the damage was the result of paramilitary activity. In those circumstances, the Compensation Agency cannot make a payment.

Attacks on halls have caused further problems for their owners because they have resulted in substantial increases in their insurance premiums. Indeed, we heard from witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee that a number of halls have no insurance cover at present. In 2007, there was an unexpected increase in the number of attacks on isolated and vulnerable Orange Halls. Fortunately, since early 2008, the number of attacks has decreased, and we hope that that trend will continue. However, the recent attacks on Coagh and Pomeroy Orange Halls are a worrying development. Hopefully, those incidents are one-offs. It is because of the difficulties that were being experienced by owners of halls in such isolated areas that Northern Ireland Office Ministers decided to add further criteria to the current compensation legislation to give eligible community halls easier access to compensation via the provisions in the draft Order.

I now turn to the Committee's work and the evidence that it received. NIO officials and staff from the Compensation Agency and the Department of Finance and Personnel were the first to brief the Committee. They gave a presentation to the Committee on the background to, and purpose of, the legislation. We deliberately invited representatives of all three organisations so that all the relevant issues could be covered.

We then heard evidence from representatives of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, the Royal Black Institution, and, finally, from representatives of the insurance industry. I must highlight the fact that representatives of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, whose halls would be covered by the legislation, were invited to appear before the Committee but decided not to give evidence — although they indicated their general contentment with the draft legislation. The Law Society of Northern Ireland declined to appear in person before the Committee, but it decided to provide

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written comments. Those were the only submissions that were made to the Committee.

I will now briefly outline the proposals. The new provisions are targeted specifically at community halls that are exempt from rates under the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, and, in particular, halls that qualify under either: article 41(2)(e) of the Order, which relates to a small number of halls or facilities that are deemed as being used for charitable purposes under the Recreational Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1958; or Article 41A of the Order, which, in effect, covers facilities belonging to one of the following organisations: — the Ancient Order of Hibernians; the Apprentice Boys; the Freemasons; the Orange and Black Institutions; the Order of the Knights of Saint Columbanus; and the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes.

In many ways, the report speaks for itself, but, in my role as Chairperson, I will highlight several aspects of it and comment briefly on them. The report focuses on a small range of issues, and the Committee was therefore able to deal with them in detail. First, the Committee did not reach consensus on the general objective of the draft legislation. Some members had reservations about whether it was the best way to tackle the problem. Other members wanted further information before reaching any conclusion. However, after consideration, the Committee agreed to give a broad welcome to the general objective of the draft Order.

Much of the debate in Committee meetings and witness sessions centred on what is known as the sunset clause, and there were differing views on it. It provides that the new arrangements would cease to apply three years after introduction, unless the provisions are renewed by the Secretary of State. The evidence that we received called for the provision to be removed. Different views were expressed at meetings, but the Committee agreed to recommend that the sunset provisions be removed from the draft Order.

I referred earlier to the problem of increased insurance premiums as a result of attacks, and the fact that some halls have no insurance cover. It is expected that the introduction of the legislation will give statutory cover for criminal damage. It is also hoped that it will inspire confidence within the insurance market and will result in all halls having proper cover.

Concerns were raised about the adequacy of the Northern Ireland Office's equality impact screening exercise. Though Members from different parties expressed a range of views on whether a full equality impact assessment was required, the Committee unanimously agreed to recommend that the Northern Ireland Office must demonstrate that the legislation was sufficiently equality proofed. The report contains other minor recommendations. However, I have outlined the main points.

I commend the report to the House, and ask Members to approve it.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the debate, and I want to indicate that I am a member of the Orange Order and the Royal Black Institution.

Every society must create a framework of laws that specifically tackle problems that are endemic in that society. Now that a general political settlement has taken place here, and has gained the stability that only years of peace can confer, we must establish powerful and strong ground rules in order to prevent lawless elements from ever dragging our society back into its disordered and violent past. That is the clear context in which the draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 is set. The draft Order is designed to tackle a problem that runs to the heart of the wider issue of damage to property, which also touches on deeply disturbing ethnic-cleansing issues, since the properties that have been damaged belong, in the main, to the Orange Order.

New laws should not apply for only one, two or three years, or have a best-before or sell-by date. If laws reflect the norms of society, those norms do not disappear when there are fewer incidents of criminal outbreaks, or, in this case, of criminal damage. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party remains strongly opposed to the legislation's so-called sunset clause, which was so favoured by the Northern Ireland Office. It is an entirely novel concept for laws to be temporary. If it is wrong to attack and burn Orange Halls one day, it is wrong tomorrow, the day after that, next week, next month and next year. It is the act that is wrong, not when it occurs. A community may not experience a murder in 100 years, but that does not mean that the sanctions against murder should be removed from the statute book.

A sanction must remain in force indefinitely, and be intrinsic to the overall law and order that the Assembly offers to society. There must be bounds beyond which an individual cannot go, and criminal damage is wrong, and remains wrong. It is not a question of removing laws as society normalises. The entire body of law, including provisions to deal with criminal damage, defines what is normal and acceptable.

Therefore, provisions to deal with criminal damage must remain in force in order to give a proper climate of insurance in which the Orange Order and others can operate. Such organisations have a human right to expect that. It would be wrong to withdraw that provision simply because someone says that we are a normal society; particularly if that someone is a politician. Ultimately, the issue is about right and wrong, not about cost. Failure to make this law permanent would reduce its power and potency, and the public perception of the seriousness of the crime.

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Criminal damage remains a live issue. Attempts were made in the past few days to destroy two Orange Halls in County Tyrone. I condemn those attacks, and appeal to the wider community to share any information that it has in order that those responsible can be made amenable.

It is for all those reasons that I support the measure that is proposed in the draft Order. Equally strongly, however, I reject the sunset clause, which is little more than the sun setting on common sense.

Mr O'Loan: Though the SDLP accepts the report of the Ad Hoc Committee, we are of the view that the remedy that is proposed in the draft Order is not the best one.

The SDLP does not think that that remedy stands up fully to equality considerations, and we believe that the proposal must undergo a full equality impact assessment. We are disappointed that the Ad Hoc Committee refused to append our submission to its report. We feel that it would have been important for our views to have been expressed and for our submission to have been accepted. We will, of course, make a direct submission to the NIO.

The measure in the draft Order is intended to ease the route to compensation, particularly after attacks on Orange Halls. We accept that the Orange Order faces a serious problem, and we acknowledge that many of its halls are vulnerable because they are in isolated rural areas. We reiterate our condemnation of such attacks and accept the validity of trying to address the problem. A significant proportion of Orange Halls have been damaged or destroyed over the years. There was a serious spate of such attacks in 2007, and Members know about the two recent attacks in County Tyrone; indeed, the Committee Chairperson and Mr Kennedy referred to those attacks.

However, I am not convinced that the draft Order is the best method of addressing the problem. It is constructed in such a way that it confers most of its benefit on Orange Halls, but we believe that a measure that is wider in scope and application is needed.

It must be noted that in its submission to the Committee, the Law Society of Northern Ireland directed the Committee to consider the draft Order with reference to statutory equality provisions. That submission refers to a duty on the state under article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights to extend to all citizens equally the rights to compensation that are granted to victims of criminal damage. The submission quotes section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which requires that a public authority has:

“due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity”.

The legal adviser to the Assembly gave similar advice. We regard each set of advice as being significant, and

we ask that Government consider carefully the full opinions of both.

Orange Halls — indeed all halls — covered by the draft Order are not the only community halls that have been, or may be, targeted for an attack or a campaign of attacks. In particular, GAA buildings have been attacked for many years. We stress that the GAA and the Orange Order are very different organisations, but they have in common a history of suffering that has been brought about by sectarian attacks that are related to wider community tensions. Other buildings, such as churches and church halls, have also been attacked. No one can predict what, if any, category of building may be attacked in the future. A mechanism is needed that treats all community buildings fairly and equally.

The approach that we favour must focus on the nature of the attack and not on the status of the building. We note that that is the approach of existing compensation legislation. Modification should remain within that framework and should relate to tests around the action that caused the criminal damage. The draft Order may not address equality issues properly, therefore leaving it vulnerable to judicial review. The best approach may be to reconsider the criteria for a Chief Constable's certificate. That may involve introducing a simple test as to whether an attack was believed to have been sectarian in motive. The SDLP asks Government to consider the wisdom of such an approach, which would address the serious problem that the Orange Order faces but in a way that is fair to all.

Dr Farry: I join other Members in thanking the Committee Chairperson and staff for the work that they have done over the past few weeks.

My party and I look forward to these matters being both discussed and under the full control of the Assembly in the context of the devolution of policing and justice powers. Until then, there remains the rather cumbersome process of working through Ad Hoc Committees.

I may be in the unique position of being the only Member to have sat on all three criminal damage Ad Hoc Committees in recent months.

11.00 am

Mr Weir: Is the Member making a speech or an addition?

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

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will need that extra minute in order to compensate for the heckling that I am getting.

The draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 is the most straightforward and simplest piece of legislation

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compared with the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 and the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, which have already been considered by the Ad Hoc Committee.

I join with other Members in saying that, sadly, legislation is required in this area. The weekend attacks on Orange Halls in Coagh and Pomeroy were referred to, and there have been other sectarian attacks on property in recent months and years. There has been a marked failure in the insurance system; as a consequence, it is necessary for the state to intervene. Although it is clear that the attacks are sectarian, it is difficult to prove the number of people involved, the nature of the organisation and the degree of planning by the perpetrators. Hence, the current system does not cover events that are happening now.

I share some Members' concerns about the general approach and mechanism that have been adopted to deal with the issue. That is not the cleanest way of doing things. However, given the small sums of money involved — a couple of hundred thousand pounds a year — it would be more cumbersome and expensive with regard to time and resources to do things differently. Therefore, although the draft Order is not ideal, it is, pragmatically, the best way forward. For that reason, therefore, the Alliance Party fully supports the Northern Ireland Office's suggestions.

That said, however, we have concerns. Like others, I have concerns about the sunset clause, which provides for an arbitrary cut-off time. I hope that sectarian attacks are now a thing of the past, and I would like to think that they will be something from the past in three years' time. Being realistic, however, that may not be the case. Instead of the sunset cause, I would support an open-ended process or a simpler process of renewal of legislation without having to go back to square one and drawing up legislation from scratch.

With regard to the equality impact assessment (EQIA), I have concerns about the process that has been followed up until now, which is essentially an extrapolation of the assessment done by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in relation to the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. Fundamentally, however, it is for the Northern Ireland Office to satisfy itself that it has covered the process satisfactorily. The Committee has highlighted those issues in the report's recommendations.

The purpose of EQIAs is to identify where there is differential impact from public policy. They do not act as a barrier to policies being taken forward. There will be a differential impact as a result of the legislation, and, in practice, it will benefit people from the Protestant/unionist community, as most of the attacks that will fall under the legislation are attacks on Orange Halls. Therefore, I am not entirely convinced about what a

fresh EQIA will demonstrate, because policymakers acknowledge that there is a differential impact.

Mr O'Loan: In the final advice that the Committee received from the Northern Ireland Office, it was stated that although owners of halls may be biased — if I can use that word — and more likely to be from the Protestant or unionist community, the users of Orange Halls would not be, as the halls are there for wider community benefit. I utterly reject that argument. If a proper equality impact assessment was carried out, such an argument would be seen to be absolutely unsustainable.

Dr Farry: I am sure that we will have a wider discussion on that point as the debate progresses. I wish to stress a final point in parallel to that issue: there is an issue in relation to the enforcement of the current hate crime legislation whereby sectarian attacks on people and property can be treated as aggravated offences. It is important that the Assembly highlights that that law is not being properly used and that stiffer sentences should follow for those convicted of carrying out such attacks.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I declare that I am a member of the Apprentice Boys. I thank the Committee Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, and Committee staff who have helped to compile the report.

Any attack on a community or on an identity is regarded in this society, and in legislation, as a hate crime — hatred of a people, and hatred so awful that the perpetrators seek to burn people and to exterminate them from the community. The policy of those who wish to destroy the identity of the Orange Order and the community from which it springs is akin to that of Adolf Hitler: burn it, eradicate it, remove it from the earth.

That is why legislation is in place that identifies such crimes as hate crimes, identifies ways of addressing some of that hatred and ensures that compensation is rightly paid to people who have lost so much. I welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland Office has adopted the proposal made by the Democratic Unionist Party at St Andrews and which the party had been making for years; that more, adequate, compensation measures are needed to ensure that vulnerable rural halls are properly protected and that compensation will be provided to those concerned if halls are burnt and destroyed. One cannot expect the police to guard halls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

I am glad that we have seen delivery on a key DUP objective, and that it has won support across the House, even though it is being qualified in some ways. The points made by the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan — that he does not understand that other people play roles in Orange Halls, and that, somehow, a person must be a Prod to walk through the doors of an Orange Hall — are completely erroneous. Were he

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to visit an Orange Hall in his constituency, such as the Protestant Hall in Ballymena, he would see all manner of community activities taking place, such as bowls and Irish dancing, which attract support from across the entire community.

Credit unions have a significant charitable impact on our society, and impoverished people from across the community go to Orange Halls where credit unions are based. When people go in to seek credit, no one asks them whether they are Catholics or Protestants — that is very important. The Member's points are erroneous, and he knows that.

We should accept that the idea of putting in place special legislation is important. The Committee heard critical evidence from the insurance industry, and the Committee thanked the industry for providing it. Insurance representatives told the Committee that premiums are, on average, about £945 a year and, as the report states:

“this is substantially more than the estimate for a similar-type hall in Wales, the north of England or Scotland. Premiums are also about double the amounts that church halls might expect to pay.”

However, insurance representatives acknowledged that were the draft legislation to become law:

“insurance rates for community halls would more than likely reduce.”

There is sound evidence that the premiums that must be paid for halls by those who are hard-pressed and cash-strapped will be reduced. We will see progress being made, so that community halls can be used for the benefit of everyone — and I stress everyone — in the local community.

Like other Members, I oppose the idea of the sunset clause. A simpler measure would be to allow a devolved Minister to decide whether to introduce legislation to remove that clause, rather than having a sunset clause that would be limited to three years.

A year ago, it was hoped that we had seen the last attempts at Hitlerism and attempts to exterminate Orange Halls. Just this weekend, however, as reported in today's 'News Letter', there was an attack on the Orange Hall on the Ballinderry Bridge Road in Coagh, near Cookstown. That was a disgraceful attack, which must be utterly and totally condemned. I hope that, across the House, we will hear some words of condemnation of the recent attacks.

It was very important that the Ad Hoc Committee had its deliberations. Until the Committee started to meet, there had not been any official response to the proposed legislation from some of the most widely affected groups, including the Orange Order. The Committee prompted those people to submit official responses and to drive the process forward.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I urge the Secretary of State to introduce the legislation at Westminster.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak about the proposed legislation, and I declare an interest as a member of the GAA.

It is important that the proposed legislation to deal with the attacks that have been mentioned be wide-ranging, and that it ensures that every possibility is covered, so that community halls, GAA halls and Orange Halls have the right to, and are guaranteed, compensation for the replacement of their facilities.

I condemn without question attacks on Orange Halls, and, in particular, the two recent attacks in Pomeroy and Ballinderry, in my constituency of Mid Ulster. It is important that those community halls be protected, that they be seen as a community facility and as an asset to the community, and that they should not be tampered with, attacked or destroyed. Those halls are a part of the life of our community and the variations in it. Some may not be used in a cross-community way, but they are a part of the structure of the community, and it is important that they be protected by legislation.

Nevertheless, the list of organisations and halls that would be covered by the proposed legislation leaves out GAA halls. I am told that that is because some of them are attached to social clubs that have other money coming in. In many cases, however —

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept that the proposed legislation makes it clear that certain buildings or community halls — those that have a bar — can make enough money to obtain extra insurance premiums, and that that is why the clause is there? It is not a sectarian reason.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: If the Member had waited, I could have explained that situation. I accept his point that the clause is not there for sectarian reasons or for any particular itemisation. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all GAA halls have social clubs or bars. Many of them are just changing rooms, or community halls that are used for keep-fit classes and other uses.

The GAA club at Collegelands, near my home, was attacked recently — it does not have a social club. It just has changing rooms, which the club uses to prepare for matches. The facilities were severely damaged in the attack, but have been repaired and are now open again. It is important that those types of halls have insurance cover against damage, even if they are only being used for cultural and sporting activities.

We want to get to a situation in which none of these halls is being damaged, and no tit-for-tat damage is

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being done. We must get the message across that there must be no more attacks on any community hall or property whatsoever. The legislation must be open enough to take attacks into account, no matter which type of hall is damaged, whether they are used as community halls, for sporting organisations or for cultural organisations such as the Orange Order or the Royal Black Preceptory. Organisations that provide a service to the community should be protected by legislation that is wide enough in its scope to ensure that all of them have the right to compensation if they are damaged.

Mr A Maginness: I thank everyone who participated in the debate and in the proceedings of the Ad Hoc Committee. It was very well attended, and there was good active discussion. It was a lively and, at times, robust debate, which was appropriate when considering the draft legislation in a forensic manner.

11.15 am

I particularly thank Mr Weir the learned Member for North Down for his expert chairing of the Committee; he did so in a helpful manner and brought a degree of professionalism to the task, which is edifying. He also brought much good humour and common sense. He might even make a good Minister for justice, although there may have been a previous bid this morning.

If any good has emerged from today's proceedings, it is the comprehensive and in-depth condemnation of attacks on community halls, and, in particular, attacks on Orange Halls; all Members sincerely condemned such attacks. That is a very important message to go out from the Assembly to the whole community. The recent attacks in Coagh and Pomeroy are in particular to be condemned, and I think that everyone in the House mentioned them.

The report presented by the Chairperson of the Committee — in a dispassionate fashion — represents as best as possible the views of all members of the Committee. There was an attempt to reach a consensus; however, that was not achieved. Nonetheless, there was an understanding of everyone's point of view. There were differences of opinion, but the main objective of the draft legislation is to permit compensation for those who are prevented from obtaining it by the law as it presently stands, and all members were united in the view that that objective should be supported. There were differences concerning what mechanisms would be used to achieve that objective; nonetheless, there was agreement on that general purpose. That is important.

Differences were also expressed about the sunset clause, but the majority of the Committee came to the view that such a clause should not be included in the legislation. Good arguments were put forward for that view: it was thought that the situation that warrants the new legislation was not likely to subside or disappear

in the near future, and, therefore, it was important that the legislation be permanent. There were alternative arguments — the view was expressed that this was a temporary situation that could be met properly by a sunset clause, which would be renewable.

Mr Kennedy expressed his strong opposition to a sunset clause. He regards it as a novel concept and believes that the sanction must remain indefinitely to protect community halls that have been subject to attack. However, a contrary view was expressed by my friend from the SDLP Declan O'Loan and also by Mr Molloy of Sinn Féin. They argued that a sunset clause should be retained because the situation is temporary.

The Committee was divided on that issue, and members could not reach a general view. However, there was unity in that a general hope was expressed that the series of attacks on halls will end permanently.

Mr Farry's view was that the draft Order is a fairly straightforward piece of legislation and that there is a market failure in the insurance system and difficulties with proving evidence of attacks. He said that the present system does not cover those attacks and that that must be remedied. He said that although the legislation is not the ideal way forward, it is the most pragmatic way forward. He generally supported the legislation, but he was not happy with the sunset clause. He felt that an equality impact assessment may not be the best way to progress, because it could be seen as an obstruction to remedying the problem rather than identifying the differing impacts on elements in the community.

It is important to remember that all Committee members were anxious to try to remedy the situation, and they all made a contribution towards doing that. Irrespective of the fact that overall agreement was not reached, goodwill was expressed and a genuine attempt was made to address the problem.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr described the attacks on the halls as a form of hate crime. He condemned the attacks as an attempt to attack the very identity of the Orange Order and to attack those who support Orange culture and those who are from the unionist community. He fully supported the legislation, apart from the sunset clause, which he felt was inappropriate and did not meet the needs of the Orange Order or the community at large.

Mr Molloy comprehensively condemned attacks on Orange Halls and, particularly, attacks on community halls. He placed great emphasis on the fact that all community halls should be given protection. He expressed his view that the draft legislation did not go far enough in order to afford that protection, which also reflects Mr O'Loan's views.

I commend the report to the House, and I commend the work of the Committee and Members'

contributions to the debate. It is an important debate, and much goodwill has been created as a result of the discussions. It is important that the House notes the good work that is contained in the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Assembly.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

1859 Revival Anniversary

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

Mr Simpson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of the 1859 Revival; acknowledges the positive contribution made by the Revival to society; recognises that the positive impact of the Revival is still felt today; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark this anniversary during 2009.

Members know that the dates and commemorations of events can be divisive long after the events themselves. This motion, however, relates to one date and commemoration that can be acknowledged and accepted by Members on all sides of the House. It is worded in such a way as to invite support from all sides. The motion does not mention conversions or the tangible presence of God that swept through society; it does not mention the extraordinary outward physical manifestations that occurred, often because of an overpowering sense of sinfulness; and it does not mention the crucial part that prayer played in the revival or the preaching that took place during that year of grace. However, I am sure that other Members will mention such things.

Some Members have much that they could say, such as the Ulster Unionist Member Rev Robert Coulter, who ministered in one of the churches that felt the full force of the revival. His voice will be one of authority if he speaks in the debate. For my part, I simply wish to lay out the motion as presented.

Next year will be a significant anniversary. Much valuable work has been done by groups such as the Caleb Foundation in lobbying for official recognition of the anniversary; however, more can be done.

The motion speaks of the positive contribution that the revival made to society. The revival had a massive beneficial influence on the levels of criminality. By 1860, crime was reduced. On several occasions, judges in Ulster had no cases to try. At one point, in County Antrim, no crime was reported and no prisoners were held in police custody. In Belfast, a large distillery was put up for auction, two pubs were closed because the publicans had been converted, and a third was closed because of lack of trade. In Ahoghill, drunkenness, fighting and swearing were prevalent. A policeman described it as:

“the worst wee place in the world”.

But what a transformation —

Mr Paisley Jnr: Withdraw. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Simpson: But what a transformation took place. The local presbytery examined the work and noted:

“drunkenness and ... profane language ... had been all but annihilated.”

Before the revival, it was said:

“Bellaghy was the most degraded of Irish villages ... rioting and drunkenness were the order of each evening ... such a place for lying and stealing I do not know.”

However, after the revival, it was said:

“As you pass down the street you hear, in almost every house, the voice of joy and melody.”

No account can be complete without mentioning Coleraine, in the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's constituency. He will not need reminding of the events surrounding the opening of the new town hall and of the occurrences at the school of the Irish Evangelical Society.

In my constituency of Upper Bann, the ‘Lurgan Gazette’ said that the revival:

“has at once arrested the careless and ungodly, and almost put a stop to the drinking customs of the people, spreading a seriousness over the face of society, and leading men to think of the great concerns of eternity”.

However, the events were not simply confined to what is Northern Ireland today. In Counties Monaghan, Donegal, Cavan, Limerick, Carlow and Dublin, the revival's force was felt.

11.30 am

The motion also speaks of the lasting effects of the revival, such as the promotion of sobriety.

The Countess of Londonderry stated that:

“It is impossible not to observe that one result of the much-talked-of Revival has been... the establishment of greater sobriety and temperance.”

A Justice of the Peace witnessed that, in certain parishes, the use of spirits was almost entirely abandoned. It worked a miraculous change in public manners, and was described as:

“the most striking effect produced upon national manners, in our day, in these islands”.

It also had an extraordinary influence on the mindset of the Protestant population, particularly on the involvement of lay people, the rise of mission halls and small ground-level works, and ministries.

Consider the years of violence and bloodshed that the Province has come through. Many have noted that loyalist paramilitaries never enjoyed significant popular support, and one reason for that was the abiding influence of a world view and legacy that was handed down by the revival. There were small independent churches and mission halls in the hearts of Protestant communities in which the high demands of the

scriptures in relation to sin, and our accountability to God were preached. That has had a restraining influence on families and generations ever since — and for that, we should all be grateful.

The motion calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark the anniversary. He could do so by utilising libraries for the setting up of displays; he could liaise with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to help create a revival trail for tourists and produce tourist information literature; he could work with the Ulster Museum to set up a display there, or he could explore the possibility of working in partnership with the BBC on commemorative programmes. No doubt the Minister will have his own ideas. I ask that he ensures that the anniversary does not pass unnoticed or unmarked, and that all sides of the House support the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am happy to support the motion and to hear the introduction by the proposer, who rightly says that we would all be prepared to welcome the motion and to celebrate alongside our Protestant fellow countrymen that great period in their history.

The significant increase of interest in religion is something that some of us who are interested in religion would like to see happen again. I do not know if everyone would be happy at the closing of pubs; but other, more positive aspects of it would certainly be welcomed. As for marking the anniversary of the revival, there should be displays; but the best way to mark it is for us all to reinforce interest in our spiritual lives. It is a wee bit odd that we are discussing what is a very serious, fundamentally-spiritual, issue in a House that is more used to discussing the things of Mammon. We, on this side of the House, support the motion, and we wish you well.

Mr McNarry: It was my privilege and pleasure to discuss the issue of the 1859 revival as the Assistant Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland at our Twelfth of July celebrations this year in the wonderful surroundings of Broughshane. On that glorious day — and it was a glorious day in every respect — the brethren assembled in Broughshane, as they did in every other part of our country hosting and celebrating the Twelfth of July, and were commended to give careful thought on how to advance any worthwhile opportunities that may arise and be taken by the institution to celebrate and commemorate the 1859 revival. I commend the sentiment of the Twelfth of July to the House in association with the motion tabled, which meets with the full approval of the Ulster Unionist Party, and therefore has our support.

I am sure that the Minister was grateful for the ideas that were suggested by his party colleagues on how to

mark the anniversary of the revival. I am sure that they want the Minister to confirm — if they do not, I do — what he intends to do about sponsoring or initiating an event, or events, to mark the anniversary.

I was pleased by the manner in which Mr Molloy accepted the motion. However, the Minister will be aware of the potential for howls of dissension by some people against the motion, if not in the House then outside, for reasons that are best known to themselves. In answering the call of the motion, the Minister could be dragged into the mire of precedent and find himself damned if he does and damned if does not.

I hope that there is a mature debate and a reasoned outcome on an issue that is best judged on its own merit rather than another vocal rendition of intolerance by some people for matters that others — such as me — cherish as part of their Britishness. I hope that that happens in light of the significant role that religious identity played in shaping the history of the British Isles at the time of the revival. The Minister could also consider marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin on 10 July, which is an ominous birth date of great significance and is somewhat fortuitous in its proximity to other celebrations at that time of the year.

I ask the Minister to assure the House that his Department will be able to sponsor a series of exhibitions, conferences and seminars that promote the anniversary of the revival. As the proposer of the motion eloquently stated, the revival brought 100,000 converts into the Protestant churches of Ireland. Edwin Orr noted that the revival:

“made a greater impact on Ireland than anything known since Patrick brought Christianity there.”

By the end of 1860, the effects of the Ulster revival included: strong services; unprecedented numbers of communicants; abundant prayer meetings; an increase in family prayers; unmatched scripture reading; prosperous Sunday schools; converts remaining steadfast; increased giving; the abatement of vice; and a reduction in crime. Such effects would be welcome if a revival happened in our country today.

It is estimated that one million people were converted in the United Kingdom from the beginning of the revival in Kells. Missionaries carried the movement abroad and — fortunately — the consequences of the revival are still felt today and contribute significantly to various recognisable national characteristics that we protect. Those characteristics deserve recognition and commemoration in the year of the 150th anniversary of the revival. I commend the proposer of the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: Naturally, the SDLP supports the commemoration of events that have contributed positively to communities' lives across Northern Ireland. Although it is perfectly legitimate for such commemorations or celebrations to be single identity, it is important that

they are positive, respectful and do not represent a victory for one community over the other. I have listened to Members' contributions, and I assume that a commemoration of the revival would fit those criteria.

However, the SDLP is not convinced that tabling this type of motion is helpful to the commemoration of the revival and the relevant organisations. Despite that, I acknowledge that David Simpson has outlined how he wants the Minister to commemorate the revival. If the organisers of the revival's commemoration seek recognition from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I assume that they will be subject to the same criteria and scrutiny as any other organisation.

It is important that if the Assembly gives its stamp of approval to that commemoration, it gives similar approval to other commemorations and celebrations. I assume that if the motion is passed, similar motions on Catholic events or on those of any other respected spiritual or religious group with a long or recent history that has made a positive contribution to life would also be passed by the Assembly, regardless of whether Assembly Members or the Executive share the ethos or belief system of the group.

My party has been centrally involved in the commemoration of the civil rights movement. I wonder what would have happened had my party tabled a motion to the same effect by asking the Minister to mark that particular anniversary. If the House and the Minister cannot commit to treat all social and religious groups — as described in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — in the same way, surely that discriminates against those groups.

The Assembly's approval of the motion must not be taken as *carte blanche* for departmental expenditure. Any departmental input must be proportionate to the scale of any planned events and commemorations.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the motion that has been tabled by Mr Simpson and his colleagues, and the manner in which he made his proposing speech, which stated significantly how the House can develop such matters.

At the outset, I want to declare my interest not only as a Presbyterian, but as a resident of the Presbyterian parish of Connor. That ought to give me particular insight, although, regrettably, it does not. As I am slightly younger than 150 years old, I am not particularly well informed.

Mr Simpson explained the positive aspects of the 1859 revival. However, there were some negative aspects, which may, perhaps, be acknowledged if one were to examine the matter in detail.

Mr Wells: The Member cannot leave that idea hanging. I hope that he will tell the House what he

perceives to have been the negative aspects of the 1859 revival. I must say that I have not read of any of them.

Mr Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Ford: I am not sure that that will be necessary, Mr Speaker.

The tone in which Mr Simpson introduced the motion and that of the response from, I believe, Mr Brolly, rather than Mr Molloy — although, perhaps, to some people, one member of Sinn Féin who has a grey beard is much the same as another —

Mr Storey: Both members are called Francie.

Mr Ford: Yes, I noticed that. Come on, boys; get your irony.

The tone of those Members' contributions shows clearly that, despite its difficulties, the Assembly can, occasionally, discuss potentially divisive issues in a sensible and moderate manner. For that, we should be grateful.

I acknowledge the fact that Mr Ramsey raised legitimate concerns about whether the House will demonstrate balance if similar motions are tabled on other aspects of our religious history. The proposers of the motion must consider that issue. The way in which Mr Simpson proposed the motion, at least, gives some hope that that balance can be achieved. It is, therefore, rather regrettable that what appears to have been an Ulster Unionist's prepared speech was critical of Sinn Féin, even though the party said nothing of which to be critical in the debate.

Mr McNarry: Rubbish. The Member must withdraw that remark.

Mr Ford: I will give way if the Member wishes me to.

Mr McNarry: Since the Member failed the first challenge that was put to him ably by Mr Wells, I will challenge him now to withdraw that remark or to cite evidence that I delivered a prepared speech to attack Sinn Féin.

Mr Ford: Certainly, Mr Speaker, the physical evidence of what sits in front of Mr McNarry would lend some credence to my point.

To respond to Mr Wells's challenge; the 1859 revival, undoubtedly, had positive aspects as regards commitment to religious life. However, there were times when certain aspects of it ventured into the area of mass hysteria, rather than necessarily ensuring total personal commitment. The Assembly must acknowledge that certain aspects of the revival went in that direction.

11.45 am

No doubt Mr Wells will take the opportunity to argue his case. While the 1859 revival was significant, enhanced the culture of our society and brought about

change, it must also be recognised that problems sometimes occur when movements go beyond their stated aims. The revival was, undoubtedly, a significant and positive experience for many people. Only last night, in my church car park, a discussion somehow turned to the 1859 revival. I assure Members that I did not start that conversation. A colleague who runs a business in Kells pointed out that, as a result of the revival, all five pubs in the village closed down.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: Members in the House who are from the temperance lobby will consider that to be a particularly positive move. My colleague also remarked that, such was the good behaviour of the vast majority of citizens, the Royal Irish Constabulary was on the point of making officers redundant in mid-Antrim. That could perhaps provide a lesson for today. Therefore, many positive elements should be drawn from the revival.

It is somewhat ironic that the grandfathers and fathers of those who led the revival — the Presbyterian laity of mid-Antrim — had led the political rebellion against the forces of the Crown at the end of the preceding century. Perhaps DUP Members are less enthusiastic about that. The establishment of the role of the laity, and not merely the clergy, was significant and positive. It is also slightly ironic that, only this week, Cardinal Brady announced changes in the Catholic Church that will give a greater role to the laity. It could be suggested that lessons from the revival are being learned even before the celebration of its anniversary in 2009.

The Assembly should recognise the positive aspects of the revival and work in the spirit in which Mr Simpson moved the motion. All Members should seek to learn from each other's cultural and religious history. In that spirit, the House should pass the motion and move forward to a consideration of how the anniversary can become a cause for unification rather than division.

Mr Moutray: I support the motion that was so ably moved by my colleague Mr Simpson. This important anniversary celebrates an event that has left an indelible and beneficial mark on society, not only in Ulster but much further afield. David Simpson mentioned Lurgan's experience of the revival, to which I will add further observations from the area. One eyewitness in Lurgan said:

"Congregations are large ... communicants almost doubled ... drunkenness has declined."

The rector of Magheralin Church of Ireland said:

"Morality in every sense of the word is the order of the day. The change indeed is a mighty one."

I could cite many examples from all corners of the Province, all parts of the island and across the British Isles. The motion advocates a sober acknowledgement

of a part of our history that everyone can appreciate. It is about recognising not only the revival's anniversary but also the fact that it brought good to society as a whole.

In Straid, County Antrim, the entire society was profoundly affected by the revival: the cockfighting pit that had been a place for vice of the worst kind became a preaching point, and the profanity and drunkenness that had characterised many lives were set aside.

On the wider scene, six months after the commencement of the revival, the number of prisoners sent for trial in County Antrim was half that in the previous year, and, a full year on, the figure was zero. In April 1860, there were no cases to try at the quarterly sessions in Londonderry or Carrickfergus.

The Church of Ireland Bishop of Down reported a conversation with a group of people that included three magistrates. Their unanimous testimony was that since the revival, public morals had vastly improved, and cases of drunkenness and other vices had greatly reduced. The bishop went on to ask the barrister, magistrates and grand jurymen to what cause they attributed the change. He relates that they each and all at once replied "to the revival".

Many other figures could be added to that list; some have been mentioned during the debate, and, undoubtedly, more will be mentioned before it ends.

Everyone can commemorate the anniversary, regardless of whether they agree with the religious themes that were the hallmark of those days of the revival. As has been mentioned during the debate, the historic event contributed hugely to elevating public behaviour and public morality, reducing crime and fostering basic public decency. At a time such as this, when antisocial behaviour is continuing, community bonds are breaking down and the spiral of crime against the weakest and most vulnerable members of society is ongoing, we should welcome the impact of that great event. Oh that it were like that today.

Throughout the Province, people are preparing to give proper recognition in 2009 to the 1859 revival, and much work has already been completed. The BBC has expressed interest in commemorating the revival and, to that end, has met with organisations such as the Caleb Foundation. The Minister has a keen interest in historical matters, and I urge him to seize this opportunity also. I support the motion.

Mr Storey: I support the motion and commend my colleagues for proposing it. It is often said that many of society's ills emanate from the United States of America and, ultimately, find their way into Northern Ireland. Today is an important day for the United States. Although Members might question the correlation between the United States elections and the 1859 revival, they should recall that a similar awakening occurred in the United States of America in 1858, and many people

concur that its sparks travelled across the Atlantic and lit the embers and flamed the fire in my constituency.

Given that the 1859 revival's genesis occurred in my constituency of North Antrim, I am glad that the motion asks the Minister to consider organising a commemoration. Moreover, my honourable friend from the Alliance Party Mr Ford lives close to where the revival took place. We should remember the events of 1859 with a sense of pride and honour.

Some people view religion as divisive and claim that it is the source of all the world's conflicts. It is the depravity of man's heart that causes today's conflicts. The 1859 revival demonstrated true biblical Christianity at its best and, as a result, people's lives changed. Today, we seek a society that is free of violence and the ills that are mentioned in the Chamber. Members urge Ministers to implement proposals in order to create a well-ordered and well-structured society — bearing the trademarks of what we deem a good society — in which the elderly can live without the fear of crime and young people can expect a bright future. It is impossible to achieve those outcomes without seriously considering the impact of the 1859 revival, during which the gospel was preached. That gospel is not for unionism at the expense of nationalism, or vice versa — it is for everyone. I am glad that, during the debate, Members have welcomed the idea of a commemoration.

I am disappointed — not for the first time — in the attitude displayed by the SDLP. It has exhibited double standards many times, whether it is with respect to the Budget or other matters.

Mr O'Loan: In view of what Mr Storey has said, it is important to state that the Assembly has no function in advocating the cause of any particular religious belief or denomination. The debate is about whether it is appropriate for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to apply some of its resources to marking the anniversary of the 1859 revival. It is not for that Department to take any view on whether the 1859 revival was a good thing or a bad thing, or whether it was of benefit to society in religious terms: that is not the function of the Assembly or the Executive.

However, the revival was a significant historical event; and to mark such an event, it may well be appropriate for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to have a role — but only in that respect.

Mr Storey: The one benefit of that contribution is that I get an extra minute to speak. There was no other substance to it.

It is the responsibility of the Minister and the Department —

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member will probably agree that the logical conclusion that one would draw from

the comments we have just heard from our North Antrim colleague is that any commemoration of St Patrick's Day should be cancelled. I find it astounding that he has just made those comments. The man is atrocious.

Mr Storey: I thank the honourable Member for his intervention.

Mr McNarry: Are you looking for another minute?

Mr Storey: I wonder whether I will be given another minute for that. I will try to squeeze out the time as much as possible.

It is the responsibility of the Assembly and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to commemorate events that have made a significant contribution to the well-being and good of society. That is why the SDLP's comments are reprehensible.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate and I congratulate those who tabled the motion. I am pleased to see it before the Assembly.

I welcome students from Newtownhamilton High School who are in the Public Gallery. They are enjoying the debate and are, I hope, being educated by it.

Anniversaries are important; and 31 October is particularly important as it is the anniversary of Martin Luther's protest which brought forward the Reformation. Some people celebrate the pagan festival of Halloween on that date; however, we should be mindful that Luther did what he did on 31 October, and we should give thanks for that.

According to the 'Encyclopaedia of Christianity':

"the term 'revivals' is a general one, used to describe the movements of awakening that covered all the Protestant territories of Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries... Revivals are seen as counteracting Christian decline, both spiritual and social... by special evangelistic and organizational means".

We do well also to remember that revival does not begin in a place, it begins in the heart.

During the revival the whole of Ulster was caught up in the "movement of God", which began in the parish of Connor in County Antrim. Although it began among Presbyterians, and I am proud to be one, the revival was not limited to them. Many ministers of the established Church and smaller denominations played a significant role. In November 1856, a Mrs Colville, an English lady from Gateshead, arrived in Ballymena on a door-to-door mission to share her faith. Through talking with Mrs Colville, a man named James McQuilken was converted. People saw a change in McQuilken and, over time, that resulted in Jeremiah Meneely, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace being drawn to Christ.

12.00 noon

That was the beginning of the revival. Encouraged by Rev J H Moore, who was the minister of Connor Presbyterian Church, the four young converts began to meet weekly for prayer and Bible study. Those meetings continued from September through the winter of 1857 and into 1858. On New Year's Day 1858, the first conversion that could be related directly to that prayer meeting took place. There were conversions every night after that.

The prayer meetings soon grew dramatically, with many new ones being established. By the spring of 1859, there was an average of 16 prayer meetings every night in the Connor parish alone. Before long, the revival spread to Kellswater, Ahoghill, Portglenone and other places. Soon, almost the whole of Ulster was caught up in the revival, and as the clerk of session of Bessbrook Presbyterian Church, I am pleased and proud to say that the revival was experienced in the Newry presbytery at that time. So many people were caught up in the revival that there was not enough room in the churches. Meetings had to take place in fields and on roads, and they sometimes involved several thousand people.

The impact of the revival was tremendous. One of the results was that churches were overcrowded on Sundays, which is in stark contrast to church attendance in the modern age. Dead, formal ritualism was replaced by direct preaching and praise. The Connor Presbyterian meeting house became too small to meet the needs of the congregation.

Those changes were very positive. One writer claimed that the 1859 revival had six specific characteristics. It had its origin in profound conviction of sin, manifested in vast numbers of people asking for forgiveness of sin. It made for temperance, as we already heard. It worked a miraculous change in manners. It resulted in praise — the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church appointed a day for prayer and thanksgiving to God. Millions of hymn books were sold. The work was mainly brought about through humble and local means.

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

Mr Kennedy: It also made for unity. We should take the opportunity to celebrate that anniversary, which should be remembered for very positive reasons.

Mr G Robinson: At the outset, I declare an interest as a Presbyterian.

The 1859 revival was an event that was not just a religious one — it was an event that changed undoubtedly the very fabric of Ulster society. When 100,000 people are affected by changes in society, those changes must be reflected throughout the entire population. The

changes that society underwent during the 1859 revival are still recognisable in the underlying standards in which our society believes today. An event of that significance is surely worthy of celebration and recognition.

In preparing for my contribution to today's debate, I studied events that occurred in my constituency. There are reports from Limavady of great gatherings, and one account states:

"A gentleman from the Presbyterian congregation of Cullybackey addressed the assembled throng... Multitudes remained till the morning light, alternately engaged in singing and prayer."

That describes a fundamental change in society. In Garvagh, the rector, the Rev Mr Smyth, wrote:

"I have been twenty-seven years rector of this parish, and never before witnessed even the most remote approach to what is now going on. Vice and immorality of every sort lessened to an incredible extent, and oaths scarcely ever heard, or drunkenness seen."

The most extraordinary account of all came from Coleraine. In the Irish Society School in June 1859, a teacher noticed:

"boy after boy slipping out of the classroom. After a while, the master stood upon something, which enabled him to look over the wall of the playground. There he saw a number of his boys ranged round the wall on their knees in earnest prayer, every one apart. The scene overcame him. A strange disorder for schoolmaster and mistress to have to control! The united cry reached the adjoining streets, and soon every spot on the premises was filled."

That event, and another meeting in Coleraine town hall that was attended by a great number of people, can only be described as a peaceful revolution for individuals and for the entire country. It must also be remembered that the revival was not limited by class or creed. From master to servant, the wealthy to the poor, the standards that individuals and society set for themselves were forever changed by the revival of 1859.

All too often, the Assembly recognises tragic or sad occurrences, so it is only right for us to celebrate the positivity of the 1859 revival. Agreeing the motion would be a public acknowledgement of our intention to do that. The motion is deserving of support from all Members of the Assembly, as we have all been affected by the revival. I am delighted to support the motion, and I hope that all Members will do so, in recognition of the historical importance and lasting influences of the events of the 1859 revival.

Mr Paisley Jnr: In the course of the debate, I am reminded of the notorious words that were spoken by the adviser of a former Prime Minister: "We don't do God". As a consequence of modern, western society's attitude towards religion, it was too embarrassing, too touchy a subject, for that Prime Minister to discuss God politically or to be questioned about whether he had ever prayed with the President. However, when that Prime Minister left office, he expressed an interest in setting up a foundation promoting God and religion.

When we, as members of western society, look to the Middle East, we see that, every six hours, society there stops for five minutes to pray. Although we may not worship the same God, there is no doubt that the devotion of the people in the East puts many people in our western Christian society to shame. We, as a Christian society, should learn from that to cherish such things as prayer and how we promote our belief in God. That is why I am more than happy to support a motion that causes us to stop, think and affirm that we, as a society, "do God" and are prepared to recognise the importance of prayer, not only in an individual's life, but in its effect on society.

There is no doubt that the 1859 revival had a profound effect on Ulster and its people. Today, many villages have two churches of the same denomination. The Member for Strangford mentioned that he gave a talk in Broughshane. The fact that there are two Presbyterian churches in Broughshane is a direct result of the 1859 revival — so many people wanted to attend the church there that an even bigger one had to be built in order to contain them.

Many towns and villages — such as Coleraine or Ahoghill — share that history and have more than one Presbyterian church because of the revival's impact. That gives an insight into the architectural history of those villages, which is something that we should encourage the Department of the Environment (DOE) to promote. For example, the first Ahoghill Presbyterian church is architecturally different to the second church because of the urgency to have a mission hall built in order to promote the revival and accommodate its effects.

Similarly, the village pillars at the Presbyterian church in Broughshane were removed because of people thronging to get to church. Such stories should be recounted, because they are part and parcel of the identity and the history of our people. Had the revival happened 10 or 15 years earlier, before the Irish potato famine, I have no doubt that it would have had a profound effect on emigration across the Atlantic and that Northern Ireland's impact on America would have been even greater.

In his contribution, David Simpson was absolutely right when he said that the reason that Ulster did not plunge into civil war in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was because of what happened 100 years earlier. That is an important point.

I ask the Minister what we should do to mark the 1859 revival. What can we do to draw attention to it? There should be some discussions with the Minister about that. Other organisations exemplify how they mark certain events. For example, every year the Royal Mail produces commemorative stamps, covering subjects that include St Patrick and great architectural features in Northern Ireland such as Carrickfergus

Castle and the Queen's Bridge. Therefore, we should encourage the Royal Mail to commemorate the 1859 revival. Recently, the fiftieth anniversary of Her Majesty's ascension to the throne was marked by the production of commemorative stamps. Perhaps a stamp could be produced to promote the 1859 revival.

Telling the story of the revival should be encouraged. Danny Kennedy's recounting of the story of Mrs Caldwell in Ballymena and the impact that that had on young men's lives was fascinating. That story is earthy and rich in history — let it be told. We must provide opportunities and local platforms from which to tell such stories.

Finally, I hope that, late next year, the Minister will hold an event in Stormont that will promote the anniversary, so that we might look to a time when there might be another revival in our country.

Mr I McCrea: This is an important debate, because it brings the remarkable workings of God in 1859 — when he came in power and blessing to his church — to the attention of Members and, indeed, people in this Province. It is estimated that, in one year, 100,000 souls were converted to Christ. That means that 100,000 lives were transformed by the power of the gospel.

I thank my colleagues for proposing the motion. The 1859 Ulster revival affected not only saints and sinners, but society. The revival's presence and power transformed homes and communities throughout Ulster for God and for good. In his foreword to the reprint of Rev John Weir's book, 'Heaven Came Down', Rev Tom Shaw referred to the change that the revival brought to society:

"People returned to the house of God in great numbers for preaching, worship and prayer. Sabbath desecration declined, and the observation of that day was more widespread. At certain periods and places, every day was like a Sabbath as people rallied for prayer."

As other Members said, on many occasions, people simply stopped to pray.

Drunkenness was diminished greatly and, in some cases, it was totally abandoned. The power of the gospel sorely affected the drink trade, so much so that public houses were either shut up or completely deserted. How things have changed. It is recorded that on a single market day in an Ulster town, not one glass of whiskey was sold.

In addition, the use of profane language decreased noticeably. In general, evil habits and customs of every kind suffered a severe blow as a result of the effects of the heaven-sent revival.

Given that the motion refers to the revival's impact on society, I shall quote further about how it resulted in a moral transformation. The then Countess of Londonderry remarked:

"One result of the much talked-about revival has been the closing of public houses and the establishment of greater sobriety and temperance."

The moral good that resulted from the 1859 revival affected every aspect of society, and, consequently, sectarian violence became a thing of the past. Speaking a few days after 12 July 1859, a Roman Catholic magistrate attributed the peaceful manner in which the Orange celebrations took place to the religious movement in northern Ireland. He said:

"the revival now proceeding has extinguished party animosities, and produced the most wholesome moral results."

The Ulster revival resulted in great reductions in crime. The number of prisoners presented for trial at the County Antrim quarter sessions in October 1859 — six months after the revival commenced — was half that of the previous year.

I am glad to say that the revival also came to my constituency — although I was not there, and I cannot think of anyone who might have been there to see it. When the revival came to Cookstown, where market day was previously known for drunkenness, drunken behaviour became a thing of the past.

A pub owner from Tullyhogue was converted at that time. He became a preacher, and Donaghey Congregational Church was formed out of his ministry. Furthermore, a local Presbyterian church in Sandholes had to increase its size in order to cope with the number of people attending its services.

12.15 pm

The motion refers to the lasting contribution of the revival, and its effect can be seen by virtue of the fact that, to this day, Northern Ireland is a country in which the gospel of God's saving grace is preached in many halls and churches.

I, therefore, support the motion and, with other Members, look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on the proposals.

Dr W McCrea: I did not intend to speak on the motion, because I was thrilled and delighted that my colleagues, who are not in the ministry, wanted to inform the Assembly of the great blessing that the revival brought to the Province, not only in 1859, but thereafter.

I was working in my office — I must confess — and I heard Pat Ramsey speak. I was disappointed that he tried to turn the motion into a sectarian issue. In respect of the revival, a visitation of God is one for mankind. It does not matter whether the individual whom God visits is a Protestant or a Roman Catholic or whether he or she is looked upon in the world as wise or ignorant. The Saviour gave the commission to go into the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

Sitting beside Mr Ramsey in the Chamber today is a Member from East Londonderry, and I am sure that he would like to speak in the debate, because there was no place more touched by the revival than the town of Coleraine. People in Coleraine, including everyone from the youngest child, were greatly moved. In fact, a little boy at school was so disturbed that he was sent home, because the staff could not settle him. On his way home, the little boy went into a vacant house and called on God to have mercy on his soul. He returned to school to say that the issue that had troubled him was settled. God started to move in that school, including the upper part in which the girls were educated.

People heard about what God was doing among the children in that school in Coleraine, and they visited its precincts. On doing so, the elderly people and the parents, too, were affected by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This country needs a visitation of God.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: I am not getting into a debate. I am speaking from the heart; I am not speaking for a political debate. Irrespective of what part of the community we come from, we all have to meet God. It would be good, therefore, if we all had a visitation of God upon our hearts; that is something that we all need.

I trust and pray that those Members who appear to be excited about the contents of the motion and who are trying to turn it into something that it was never intended to be remember the social impact that the 1859 revival had on society. Not only did it influence sobriety and change the lives of individuals, it changed homes. Lives were changed for good, which is something for which we should all long.

The society in which we live is broken; it has many broken hearts and broken homes. I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ can heal the broken-hearted, and in healing the broken sin-sick soul, he can heal our homes, families, towns, villages and communities.

That is why history books have been written, and I am sorry that my friend Rev Dr Coulter is not in his place — I can say “my friend” because we are blood relatives — as no one knows more of that history than he does.

The courtrooms of our society were changed because lives were changed. It is almost 150 years since that revival, and it would do this land good to call on God to send us another revival. That is the longing of my heart, and I pray that God will send it right now.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): I welcome the debate and congratulate the honourable Member for Upper Bann Mr Simpson for securing it. He has a deep and abiding interest in historical and cultural matters, especially re-

enactments, which he has had some knowledge of recently. It is appropriate to consider the revival in the wider context of where our society is today.

I will try to incorporate Members' comments into my response. The motion raises three issues: an acknowledgement that the revival made a positive contribution to society; recognition that it had a positive impact, not just then but now; and a request that my Department mark the anniversary during 2009.

The contribution to society was prevalent in a series of comments. Mr Simpson outlined the relevance that the revival had then and continues to have 150 years later, and that was repeated throughout the debate. Mr Brolly referred to it, Mr Ramsey's comments invoked some comment that I will come to later, and Mr Ford also referred to the fact that it was a significant event. A series of supportive comments were made about the contribution that the revival made to society.

Several Members referred to the religious context of the term “revival”. It is a specific period of spiritual renewal in the life of the community. I have no doubt that the social and cultural changes to society that emanated from the spiritual revival were transformational on the wider community. Several Members referred to the fact that churches are testimony to the events that happened 150 years ago and there is no doubt that that transformational effect is still with us, to some degree, 150 years later.

Mr Moutray, with reference to Lurgan and Antrim, Mr Storey from North Antrim and Mr Kennedy from Newry and Armagh referred to the fact that churches noted dramatic increases in attendances at that time, with some churches running services continuously from nine in the morning until 10 at night. Some people may say sarcastically that some churches today just feel like that, but I will not go down that route. Churches in Belfast reported a sevenfold increase in attendances. I have obtained from the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland a photocopy of the record book of Straid Congregational Church, County Antrim, which contains a handwritten report of the actual events of 1859.

A brief extract is all that is necessary to show the impact that the revival had at the time. The following was handwritten by the secretary of the church at the centre of those events:

“I might record many wonderful sessions of this divine work, but every day was a day of wonders — for meetings were held daily and continued all night. At one held on the Lovers Hill upwards of two thousand people assembled — and stood under a pelting rain for two hours listening to the preaching of the Gospel. Many were stricken and waited until dark, seeking pardon in the Saviour.”

Many Members, including Ian McCrea, Ian Paisley Jnr and Dr McCrea, mentioned the open-air meetings that were held. Botanic Gardens in Belfast was the site of a gathering of almost 40,000 people — and,

remember, that was a religious service. Several Members, including Dr McCrea, mentioned gatherings of some 15,000 to 20,000 in Coleraine. That is testimony to the scale of the revival, which has had such a lasting impact.

Other Members mentioned the decrease in the number of public houses at the time. For example, there were 16 public houses in the village of Crumlin, and the owners of 10 of them voluntarily declined to seek a renewal of their licences. Ian McCrea quoted a judge at Downpatrick assizes, a Roman Catholic, who said:

“the revival now proceeding has extinguished party animosities, and produced the most wholesome moral results.”

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Minister has told some fascinating stories. He has probably also read about the events at Harland and Wolff shipyard. Following their conversion, several labourers began to return items that had been stolen from the shipyard. So many items were returned that a new shed had to be built to house them. Again, that fascinating story shows the profound impact that the revival had on our society.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for that point. The more I read and hear about the events of 1859, the more I believe that those involved in the production of films about the more unsavoury aspects of our society would do well to turn their attention to the accurate portrayal of events in our country 150 years ago. In that way, they could provide fascinating accounts of what occurred at the time and give people insight into the underlying Christian ethos of our society.

The motion touches on another issue: the philosophical and social changes that the revival instigated, and their continuing impact on our society. The transformation that the revival wrought on our society is still evident in our community and its strong spiritual backbone. That backbone gave many the strength to cope throughout the dark days of our recent Troubles.

A third issue is whether my Department plans to mark the anniversary of the 1859 revival in 2009. My Department does not provide support to, or for, religious commemorations. However, I can report that a significant exhibition will be held that will include the 1859 revival at a local level. The Mid-Antrim Museum and Arts Centre at the Braid is planning an exhibition for late 2009, entitled ‘Divine Inspiration: Remarkable Objects Reflecting Faith’.

In addition, I am sure that the honourable Members who tabled the motion will be pleased to know that as a result of their motion, the Department has received information about other religious groups that are holding events to mark the anniversary of the revival. Therefore, it is clear that the motion is generating activity that will mark that very significant and notable landmark in our society’s history.

12.30pm

Mr O’Loan: I am surprised by the Minister’s remark that his Department does not do religious commemorations — I will come to that in a moment. Earlier, Ian Paisley Jnr referred to the politician’s remark: “We don’t do God”. Elected Members in any legislature are entitled to have religious views and they are entitled to bring those religious views to bear when they are examining social issues.

However, many Members have been confused in what they have said in the debate. Quite rightly, they have provided evidence of the significance of the 1859 revival — that is relevant, because it is the test of whether the revival was a major social event at the time and deserves to be commemorated as such. Some years ago, I was involved in Ballymena Borough Council’s revival commemorations in which a plaque was put up, marking the initial location of the revival. I attended a related function in the local Orange Hall. It is perfectly proper for DCAL to recognise the revival. However, Members have confused the debate by advocating that DCAL make a contribution in support of the religious beliefs expressed in the revival. It is not the function of DCAL or the Executive to do that.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the honourable Member for that not-so-brief intervention. He will note that I outlined the Department’s approach to matters that have a religious connotation. He also mentioned matters of historical note, which I will turn to shortly. I note his comment that he attended a revival event in an Orange Hall. I am sure that the Hansard report will be examined, because his attendance at such an event seems to contradict his previous comments disputing that cross-community activities take place in Orange Halls. However, I am not going to go down that route, and I will resist the temptation to engage in further banter with the honourable Member.

The Mid-Antrim Museum’s exhibition will examine how significant objects reflect faith, both locally and globally. More generally, the exhibition will explore the challenge of museums’ interpretation of religion. Mid-Antrim is regarded as the spark for the spread of the revival in Ulster and beyond, and I am informed that the museum’s collection includes a number of objects that relate directly to the revival, notably the pulpit associated with Ballymacvea Gospel Hall and Jeremiah Meneely. He was one of the young men who were closely associated with the revival’s origins in Kells and was also referred to by Danny Kennedy.

The Mid-Antrim Museum’s exhibition will include material on the revival and other objects that reflect local religious traditions. The exhibition will be augmented by items that have been loaned from the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, which holds a

remarkable collection of rare religious books and manuscripts from across the world. A key aim of the exhibition is to promote greater awareness of cultural diversity and religious issues in contemporary society. In that context, it aims to support good relations in mid-Antrim and the wider community.

It is up to local museums and libraries to decide what historical exhibitions they stage. However, I urge those institutions not to miss a great opportunity to inform the public by promoting an important aspect of our culture and heritage. I also suggest that anyone who wishes to commemorate the revival should contact their local museums and libraries to establish what information is available and what can be done.

I warmly welcome the debate, the participation of Members and the exhibition that will be held next year. It is a fine example of a local museum carrying out its mandate of developing a local issue and staging an exhibition that can draw people from outside the area into the debate. I hope that other local museums and libraries in Northern Ireland become involved.

The legacy of the 1859 revival is that the Christian values that were promulgated remain relevant today. They are reflected in the way in which people treat one another and in the new immigrants who have chosen to live in our community. It is in everyone's interest not to lose sight of such a monumental and historic event. When they are attributed to a religious revival, society as a whole must warmly welcome reductions in crime and in disputes in the home or in society.

Mr Wells: I find it astonishing that the only Member who is an authority on the 1859 revival, Rev Bob Coulter, has not spoken. Previously, he has not only spoken but written on the revival. It is inexplicable that, having been in the Chamber, he was not able to speak. I am sure that the Ulster Unionist Party could have found a slot for a man of his ability to have spoken during the debate.

Mr McNarry: I wish to correct that point. Rev Coulter is not in the Chamber, and the Speaker will confirm that I have apologised for his absence. Rev Coulter was unable to speak in the slot that the Ulster Unionist Party requested. That is unfortunate, but it was Rev Coulter's decision.

Mr Speaker: I confirm that Rev Dr Robert Coulter was due to have spoken but withdrew his name because he had to leave.

Mr Wells: Had he been able to stay, I would have taken an intervention from Rev Coulter.

The debate's recurring theme has been the profound influence on Ulster society of the 1859 revival. Its influences can be seen to this day in the form of churches, in the fact that Northern Ireland has a much higher number of evangelical Christians than many

other parts of the world, and in the fact that Northern Ireland society holds higher moral values on many issues than the rest of the United Kingdom. An obvious case is the 1967 Abortion Act, which was not extended to Northern Ireland because of that difference in moral principles, many of which stem from the 1859 revival.

I congratulate Mr Simpson on his excellent introduction to the debate. He praised the work of the Caleb Foundation and, in common with other Members, he described the influence of the 1859 revival on his constituency and beyond. Members heard examples from Limavady, Coleraine, Londonderry, mid-Ulster, north Armagh, east Antrim and County Down. Members have described the enormous impact of a movement that changed the lives of 100,000 people and, in many aspects, Northern Ireland's history; as well as extending its influence much further, into North America and the rest of the UK. Mr Simpson also spoke about the resultant huge drop in crime and the decline in drunkenness. Today's Northern Ireland needs another revival that will create a similar trend, because society is breaking down radically because of the unwinding of the influence of the 1859 revival.

In a very brief contribution, Mr Brolly welcomed the motion and said that the best way forward was to reinforce interest in spiritual lives. Surprisingly, I find myself in agreement with him.

Mr McNarry made the useful point that it is 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his theses on the door of Wittenberg Church. That is also important to remember — there is a coming together of two important historical events that affected the lives of almost everyone in Northern Ireland. Mr McNarry made a valid and important point when he said that the 1859 revival was the most important spiritual awakening in Ulster since the days of St Patrick.

I was surprised at the comments of Mr Pat Ramsey the honourable Member for Foyle because he is one of the good guys — one of the few good guys in the SDLP. *[Laughter.]* I have worked well with Pat on many important issues — yet he tried to pour cold water on the debate and dampen support for the commemoration. I, unquestionably, expect that from his colleague Mr Dallat. *[Laughter.]*

Unlike others, I am prepared to let Mr Dallat intervene if he wishes to defend himself. However, to compare the 1859 revival with the civil rights movement is totally unfair. The Member must admit that the civil rights movement was not religious and that it had totally different connotations for the people of Northern Ireland. I am sure that Pat Ramsey will reflect and repent on what he said today.

If I was surprised by Mr Ramsey's comments, I was shocked by those of Mr Ford. He said that there were

some negative aspects of the 1859 revival, and the only phrase that he could come up with was mass hysteria. The revival was not about mass hysteria — it was about thousands of people whose lives were blighted by sin, drunkenness, profanity and immorality, turning to the Christian way and living sober, upright lives. What is the downside of that? That is what is needed in today's society. I am surprised that Mr Ford did not stay in the Chamber to hear my criticism, as I forewarned him of it.

The Member for Upper Bann Mr Moutray highlighted the profound influence of the revival on Upper Bann, Lurgan and Portadown. It was extraordinary that antisocial behaviour declined dramatically, and there were no court cases relating to such behaviour in Londonderry and Carrickfergus.

Mr Storey was more parochial and stated the importance of the revival in his constituency of North Antrim. In fact, the 1859 revival was based on the fervent prayers of a small group of people meeting in Kells and Connor, which are in the honourable Member's constituency. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those people. They changed lives forever.

Mr Kennedy mentioned Martin Luther King and gave us an interesting and useful definition of revival. He spoke about the revival's profound impact on south Armagh, Newtownhamilton and Bessbrook. He made the valid point that revival does not start in society or in institutions; it starts in the hearts of individuals who recognise their sinful condition. His was a positive, useful contribution. He also mentioned the fact that churches in his area were so crammed that new churches had to be built. That indicates the sheer scale of the revival.

George Robinson — never one to miss a chance to be parochial — mentioned Limavady and Garvagh, but I must point out that the revival went beyond his constituency. However, it certainly made a profound impact on East Londonderry.

Ian Paisley Jnr was rightly critical of Members who tried to pour scorn on the motion. He mentioned the importance of Broughshane and the effect of the revival on that small community. To this day, there are many godly people in that village, and that can be traced back to 1859.

There are people alive in Northern Ireland today who knew people who were involved in the 1859 revival. The revival did not happen that long ago — elderly people in our Province can still recall meeting people who were caught up in it.

It has been a very measured and useful debate. I understand that the Department cannot fund events, and I respect that. However, if organisations come up with interesting ideas for events, they should be able to apply for funding from DCAL.

I would like to add to Ian Paisley Jnr's point and make a couple of suggestions of my own. The idea of producing a stamp to commemorate the 1859 revival is excellent, and it should be put to Royal Mail immediately, because the lead time on such issues is quite lengthy.

A special service of thanksgiving could also be considered in some suitable locality, such as Broughshane, Straid, Kells or Connor, on the appropriate date to commemorate this important event. A Member to my left has just suggested that Coleraine town hall would be an appropriate venue for holding such an event. Queen's University or the University of Ulster could host an academic conference on the effect of the 1859 revival on society. The experts could then convince the Mr Ramseys and Mr Fords of this world that the 1859 revival was a good thing. It was good for society, and we can trace its influence over the past 150 years.

12.45 pm

Perhaps commemorative plaques could be affixed to properties associated with the revival. I understand that the house in which the first series of prayer meetings was held has, unfortunately, been demolished, but the original church is still there. Perhaps the Minister should erect plaques to commemorate the first meetings. A book to commemorate the revival and to update our understanding and knowledge of the important event could also be considered.

I wish to thank the honourable Members for their contributions. Unfortunately, I do not have time to comment on the views expressed by Rev William McCrea and his son Ian. This debate has been useful. Let us hope that it will stimulate our society to commemorate, rightly, this important event, and maybe Mr Ramsey and Mr Ford will cut the ribbon of the opening exhibition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of the 1859 Revival; acknowledges the positive contribution made by the Revival to society; recognises that the positive impact of the Revival is still felt today; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark this anniversary during 2009.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at lunchtime today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.46 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Levy on Plastic Carrier Bags

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

Mr McKay: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports, in principle, a levy on plastic carrier bags and notes the French Government's decision to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags by 2010; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward legislation, as a matter of priority, to introduce a levy on plastic carrier bags and to develop a plan to phase out their use.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a motion of great importance, because we must do all that we can to give the public the opportunity to change its behaviour with regard to the environment. In particular, we must draw attention to the waste and the eyesore on the landscape that plastic carrier bags have become.

Each adult goes through hundreds of plastic carrier bags every year. They are an eyesore on our streets, our waterways and our beaches. On average, we use each plastic bag for only 12 to 20 minutes before they are disposed of. In the marine environment, plastic-bag litter is lethal, and kills many birds, seals and other wildlife every year. I am sure that many Members have seen photographs of the damage that such litter causes to animals, including seals and other forms of wildlife that are common to the coasts of County Antrim and County Down. Many members of the public feel that action must be taken in order to ensure that such incidents come to an end.

Plastic carrier bags and excess packaging are not bad for just the environment; they are bad for our pockets. Studies that were carried out just last year established that excess packaging, as well as plastic carrier bags, cost the average family about £470 a year, which is a stark statistic. All levels of Government must take action in order to ensure that there is a reduction in the amount of packaging and plastic that is used.

We began to use plastic bags for consumer goods in only the 1950s; it is clear that there was no need for them before then. Many people believe that we can work towards a situation in which we will not be reliant on

plastic bags. Consumers recognise that non-biodegradable plastic bags are not a necessity, which is why the public are in favour of a plastic-bag levy and are willing to change their behaviour in order to ensure that we live in a clean and waste-free environment.

There are examples of Governments taking action in order to reduce plastic-bag waste. The Government in Bangladesh have identified plastic-bag litter as one of the main causes of flooding and blocked drainage, and they have imposed an outright ban on the use of plastic bags.

There were 10.5 billion plastic bags in use in France in 2002. As a result of the positive and proactive approach that was taken by the French Government, that figure had been reduced to 2.1 billion in 2007, representing an 80% reduction in the use of plastic bags in France. The French are still being proactive in that regard and are examining other ways to reduce excess plastic packaging. The authorities in China, on Corsica and in San Francisco have taken the more radical measure of outlawing plastic bags in large supermarkets. Plastic-bag levies are already in place in Italy, Belgium and Switzerland, and most supermarkets in Germany and the Netherlands have introduced similar levies.

Of course, the introduction of a levy on plastic bags in the South has been a great success story. In the Twenty-six Counties, the levy had an immediate effect, with use, per capita, decreasing overnight from an estimated 328 bags to 21 bags. Reduction in the consumption of plastic bags has been considerable — estimated at more than 90%. There has also been a decrease in excess of 95% in plastic-bag litter. In the South, the aim has been to encourage consumers to move to re-useable bags and boxes, and they have, by and large, changed to those alternatives rather than use plastic bags only once.

Members are well aware of the examples of some of the larger stores and supermarkets that have already introduced levies in the North. IKEA has introduced levies, as has Marks and Spencer, which has shown a very good example by introducing a five pence charge for plastic bags in the North. That has resulted in a 70% reduction in the use of plastic bags, and the final outcome of that initiative has been the raising of £80,000 for a local charity, which must be commended.

The levy is primarily about influencing consumer behaviour; reducing the use of plastic carrier bags, and encouraging people to re-use bags rather than simply using them on one occasion and disposing of them, leading to the immense environmental damage of which we are all aware.

Evidence shows that the introduction of the levy in the South has resulted in a fall of over 95% in plastic-bag litter. Those who do not recognise what has occurred in the South as a success story are kidding themselves.

I have seen some of the counter claims, pointing to an increase in the sale of bin bags. That is a bizarre example to point to; I have never seen anyone go into a shop to purchase goods carrying a bin bag.

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate the Member's point — that people do not go into supermarkets with black bin liners. However, the issue with respect to bin liners is the re-use of plastic bags at home. Rather than re-using plastic bags, which they do not have, people are using bin liners to dispose of rubbish from their homes, and that is the cause of the increase in the purchase of bin liners from supermarkets, which runs contrary to the objective of reducing plastic bags in general.

Mr McKay: One must point to the statistics, and those from the South show clearly that plastic-bag litter, and litter in general, has reduced dramatically — by 95%. One cannot argue with those figures.

Governments across Europe — in France, Germany, Italy, and even across the water — are getting to grips with the issue. They are considering ways to reduce the use of plastic bags and to change consumer culture. Therefore, the onus is on the Minister of the Environment here to use his initiative and to be proactive on the issue, because it is one that the public, by and large, support. Measures need to be taken to phase out the use of plastic bags, and the Minister of the Environment needs to do something constructive rather than stand up in the Assembly and make jokes.

Members need to see action being taken on environmental issues; something which has not happened so far. To date, the Minister has not been an effective Environment Minister — in fact, he has been more of an “embarrassment Minister” as far as my party is concerned, and, indeed, as Members on the opposite side of the House also admit in private.

The onus is on the Environment Minister to take action on the issue, because it is one that has cross-party support and the support of the wider public. I urge him to take action and not to sit on his hands, as he usually does.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank both colleagues, and members of the Committee, Mr Boylan and Mr McKay, for bringing the motion before the Assembly for debate.

The issue of a levy on plastic carrier bags was first raised by the Committee for the Environment in March, when it asked the Department to provide an update on any plans by the Minister to consider the introduction of a levy, or tax, on plastic bags.

In her response, the then Minister, Minister Foster, said that her officials had been considering several options to reduce the local environmental problems

that are caused by discarded plastic bags. She conceded that a levy was one option, but she said that she wanted to consider all the issues before consulting in due course. At that time, she had no plans to introduce either a levy or legislation.

At the same time, however, the Chancellor announced in his Budget speech that legislation would be introduced to impose a charge on single-use carrier bags if sufficient progress were not made on a voluntary basis by the end of the year. As a result, key major retailers introduced a voluntary target of a reduction of 25% in the use of such bags by the end of 2008. If achieved, that would lead in practice to a reduction to 12.4 billion of the number of bags that are used across the UK.

However, in June 2008, the Department of the Environment acknowledged that, without further incentives, the voluntary approach would not deliver the reductions that it wanted. The Department told the Committee that Northern Ireland had agreed to participate in an amendment to the UK Climate Change Bill in order to provide enabling powers to require retailers to impose a charge on single-use carrier bags but that it would use those powers only if it became necessary.

That approach must be compared with that which has been taken down South; indeed, Mr McKay referred to that. In 2002, the introduction of the plastic-bag levy had an immediate effect on consumer behaviour. Usage of plastic bags decreased instantly from an estimated 328 bags a person to 21 bags a person. That was a reduction of more than 90% of the 1.2 billion bags that were estimated to have been given out each year at retail outlets. The knock-on decrease in litter created by plastic bags resulted in a similarly dramatic reduction of over 95%. Before the introduction of the levy, plastic bags accounted for 5% of litter; at 0.22%, they now account for barely any litter.

A recent pilot by a major retailer demonstrated similar success in changing consumer behaviour in the North. In the past 12 months, Marks and Spencer successfully trialled charging for food carrier bags in over 50 of its stores throughout the North and in the south-west of England. The trials resulted in customers' use of food carrier bags being reduced by over 70%, and, in the process, it raised over £80,000 for Groundwork. That money is now being used for that organisation's work in partnership with local communities to link economic and social regeneration through the environment.

The issue is, of course, not only a recent concern. In 2002, during the previous Assembly mandate, the Committee for the Environment sought legal advice on the possibility of Northern Ireland's introducing its own levy in the absence of a similar approach in GB. The Committee concluded at that time that the levy was within the competence of the Assembly.

As a constituency MLA, I look forward to the Minister introducing proposals to the Committee that will help our countryside to be improved and to look clean, green and welcoming. I, therefore, look forward to the Minister bringing detailed proposals in that regard to the Committee. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: I welcome the opportunity to debate this important topic. Despite some of the cheap jibes that were made by the Member who moved the motion, I thank him for proposing it.

The DUP recognises that there is a serious issue to be tackled. We have some reservations about the wording of the motion, and I will come to that later. However, that does not negate the need to take action on the subject. As has been said, plastic bags present a growing and serious problem, particularly because of the impact that they have on the environment of beaches and the effect that they have on beach wildlife, for example. Although the introduction of biodegradable bags may be beneficial to the environment in the long term, it would create short-term problems with litter.

Members have identified the impact that plastic bags have, but it would be wrong not to mention the fact that a considerable amount of work has been done on the matter — we are not operating in a vacuum.

2.15 pm

Patsy McGlone talked about the approach that was taken on the issue of plastic bags in Great Britain. We must ensure that we progress along similar lines. Across the UK, 22 major retailers and six trade associations, which are the main providers of plastic bags, agreed to a voluntary scheme with the Government to reduce plastic bag usage. Some of the by-product of that voluntary co-operation has been quite significant.

Mr McGlone also mentioned the Marks and Spencer scheme, which has led, by way of a voluntary agreement, to a large reduction in plastic bags. The DUP diverts slightly from the motion on that point. The issue must be tackled clearly and strongly. In principle, there must be a culture change among consumers, and that must happen in co-operation with major retailers. A levy should be used as a last resort. A more productive route exists that must be tried, at least initially, by major retailers. We must test that route to its conclusion before we can decide whether a direct levy or tax is required.

Mr McGlone also spoke about the introduction of a tax on plastic bags in the South. That levy was imposed at a time of economic affluence. This side of the House is loath to move beyond voluntary arrangements to enforce a compulsory levy at a time when there is a level of recession. That would be an extra tax for people to pay.

Questions remain over the efficacy of a compulsory levy. How will it be enforced? Will it create a level of

bureaucracy? Will the tax cost more to collect than it would generate? We must try to work collectively towards a system that sees the plastic bag as a thing of the past. I agree with Daithí McKay in that regard. That process involves convincing people to find alternatives. We are loath to see a compulsory levy imposed at this stage.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. I am slightly confused by some of his comments, because they seem to contradict the DUP's position. It was not so long ago, in the 'Belfast Telegraph', that the Member for South Antrim William McCrea said that he would be extremely supportive of a tax on plastic bags. At that time, he said that we would raise the matter at the Assembly when it resumed. Clearly, the DUP is divided on the issue of a tax on plastic bags.

Mr Weir: Clearly, our party is not divided on the issue. Let us remember when those remarks were made.

We must search for a situation that removes the need for plastic bags from society. At this stage, we are keen to ensure that no additional financial burden is placed on the consumer by way of a compulsory tax. We must bear in mind the financial situation. The best way forward is a voluntary scheme. To that end, we are keen to see co-operation across the Chamber on a set of proposals that can capture the full support of the House. The proposals should not be based on enforcing a compulsory burden, but on moving to a voluntary system and creating incentives.

We urge the Members opposite not to support the motion, but to seek agreement on a cross-party motion, which would carry the support of all Members of the House. That is a much more productive way in which to tackle the issue.

Mr McClarty: Some might argue that in light of some of our current problems, this is a trivial matter. It is true that we face many pressing issues, which must be addressed by a functional Executive. However, I contend that the issue is of much importance. In the past 50 to 100 years, we have done untold damage to our natural habitats because of our ever-increasing throwaway culture.

Plastic bags have contributed to decades of rubbish creation, and have done untold damage to our environment and wildlife. They are a relatively recent phenomenon, having being introduced in 1957. Today, however, around a million plastic bags are used across the world every minute. The average working life of a plastic bag, as we have heard, is about 12 minutes, and it is estimated that everyone in the world uses around 300 plastic bags annually.

The effect of plastic bags on wildlife can be devastating. It is estimated that more than a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals and sea turtles die every year from mistakenly eating or becoming entangled

in plastic. There are approximately 46,000 pieces of plastic floating in every square mile of our oceans.

Closer to home, I am sure that many of us have seen, after the recent floods, numerous plastic bags washed on to the banks of our rivers. That highlights the fact that we do not often see the real extent of our problems. Plastic bags do not biodegrade, but break down into toxic pieces that can contaminate our waterways and soil. It is, therefore, vital that, in order to protect our natural habitat, we take appropriate action to reduce the number of plastic bags in our landfill sites and countryside.

Plastic bags that litter our countryside can also have a detrimental effect on tourism. There is nothing more discouraging or off-putting than seeing plastic bags stuck in fences and hedges, or floating in streams in our countryside. In Europe, particularly in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Italy and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, there is some form of levy on the use of plastic bags. The Republic of Ireland has placed a tax on plastic bags since 2002, which has resulted in a 90% drop in consumption — approximately a billion fewer bags are being used there each year.

So far, the United Kingdom has opted for a more voluntary process, with major retailers often encouraging their shoppers not to use plastic bags. That approach is to be commended, but a more uniform scheme must be considered in order to make the required impact. There have also been calls for an outright ban on the use of plastic bags. As the motion states, the French have decided to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags by 2010. That is a commendable action, but we must fully explore what is most appropriate for Northern Ireland, taking into consideration the powers of the Minister and the Executive.

There is a real need for a more uniform approach to reducing the number of plastic bags in circulation in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that we take the correct action. The amount of waste that we produce and dump is unprecedented in human history. Plastic bags form a significant toxic and fundamentally unnecessary part of that waste, and we should do all that we can to reduce their number. We must take into consideration initiatives that have been taken elsewhere in Europe and throughout the world, and implement the most appropriate action here in the Province. That may mean working within a UK-wide framework.

The Minister has stated his controversial opinions on some aspects of environmental policy. The main thrust of the motion, however, is sensible and necessary, and I look forward to the Minister's response and elaboration on some of those issues. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: I congratulate Daithí McKay and Cathal Boylan on securing the debate, and I wish to be clear that the United Community group supports the motion

as introduced. Mr McKay has comprehensively outlined the case for action — and not just voluntary action. Patsy McGlone, speaking as Chairperson of the Environment Committee, stated that the previous Minister of the Environment had been minded to go along with a voluntary approach across the UK as a whole. It is clear that that voluntary approach has not succeeded in meeting the need to deal seriously with the scourge of plastic bags.

I noted with some amusement that in his international comparisons, Daithí McKay referred not only to action in advanced western nations such as Denmark and Ireland, but to the action that was taken by Bangladesh. If Bangladesh, with its limited economic development, can recognise the need to get rid of plastic bags, surely that should be appreciated in this region.

There has also been action in Australia and the UK. However, although voluntary action has achieved a certain amount, it has failed to address the plastic bag problem properly. That is why the motion requires support and why the Department of the Environment's expressed preference for voluntary action is inadequate.

All the EU directives on landfill, packaging or packaging waste show a clear need to get rid of plastic bags in a methodical and organised manner and show that voluntary action is inadequate.

When he made an intervention earlier, Simon Hamilton spoke about people buying bin liners if they could not get free plastic carrier bags. That makes the case for comprehensive action, because if people have to buy bin liners, they will be less inclined to use them than they would the plastic bags that supermarket checkout girls — and they are mostly girls — dish out by the dozen, regardless of whether they are required. That is why comprehensive action is required.

The action of certain major retailers to try to reduce the use of plastic bags is welcome, be that the charging regime introduced by B&Q in Scotland and Marks and Spencer in Northern Ireland, or the reduction of the price of bags for life. A bag for life is not the solution — the solution is for people to get one, two or three bags for life and use them. There is no point in someone getting a bag for life and not using it or being reluctant to use it in a rival supermarket. Supermarkets should be told that there is competition, and if that means taking a Co-operative bag into ASDA, so be it.

The voluntary initiatives are good and deliver a certain amount, but the culture change that Peter Weir and others mentioned is unlikely unless there is compulsion for it to happen. For example, household recycling rates demonstrate that although easy voluntary activity and encouragement achieve a certain amount, they eventually reach a plateau; we cannot make the further gains that are required by appealing to people's better nature.

There is no compulsion on anyone to pay a plastic-bag levy. The solution is to make plastic bags unavailable — customers should take a bag for life with them or use a cardboard box if the supermarket offers that alternative. To say that a plastic-bag levy is a further tax that cannot be avoided in a time of difficulty does not stack up — anyone can avoid the tax on a plastic bag by ensuring that they have an alternative method of carrying their shopping home.

The experience in the Republic is most telling on the issue of litter. Due to their lifespan, some plastic bags still decorate hedgerows in the Republic, but the situation is far worse in Northern Ireland. That can be remedied only by getting rid of plastic bags, not by considering biodegradable bags.

A private Member's Bill in Scotland has not made progress, so we can take action to be ahead of the rest of the UK and use the example of plastic bags to demonstrate our commitment to deal with the scourge of pollution.

Mr Hamilton: The motion is one for which I have tremendous sympathy. The volume of plastic bags that we use is a cause for concern, not just due to their inappropriate use of scarce resources or because they do not degrade and so pollute our countryside, but because they contribute to the death of many birds, sea mammals and other creatures.

I represent Strangford, which takes its name from the biggest sea inlet in the entire British Isles. Strangford Lough has almost every available environmental designation and accreditation for wildlife, birds, and so on. Therefore, I see clearly the problems that the misuse of plastic bags causes.

When a tax on plastic bags was introduced in the Irish Republic, I was drawn to the idea. Many people were understandably attracted to the idea, particularly when, initially, the tax reduced the number of plastic bags that supermarket shoppers used. I do not deny that a problem that must be tackled seriously exists. However, the question is whether a Government-led tax or levy is the answer.

2.30 pm

That question is particularly pertinent now. In the current economic climate, I am uneasy about the introduction of a tax on businesses or individuals. Given the emerging pressures on our Budget, the cost to introduce and implement such a levy may be difficult to absorb. Evidence from a report that the Scottish Parliament's then Environment and Rural Development Committee produced outlines the costs that would likely be incurred were a plastic-bag levy introduced. Set-up costs were estimated at between £3 million and £4 million. Ongoing yearly costs were estimated at around £3.5 million. Many of those are fixed costs. Therefore, it is not simply the case that, because it is

smaller than Scotland, Northern Ireland's costs should be only a third of Scotland's costs. Northern Ireland would incur many of those same fixed costs.

Northern Ireland has had time to examine the success of the Irish scheme. Although there has been a reduction in the use of bags —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree with the wise words of the former Committee for the Environment member Mr Gardiner, who said that the plastic-bag tax in the Irish Republic did not work because, after an initial dip in their use, plastic-bag use began to rise? That is not a route that the Assembly wants to go down.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. The analysis that he attributes to Mr Gardiner is a wise one. During an earlier intervention that I made in the debate, I said that the increase in the purchase of bin liners, nappy sacks, and so on, demonstrates that people do not reuse the plastic bags that they get in supermarkets but buy alternatives instead.

Obviously, the Assembly recognises the problem. Initial sympathy for implementation of the Irish scheme, and of schemes in continental Europe, was down to the fact that, until then, little evidence existed that showed that supermarkets recognised the problem, or that they would do anything to deal with it. Since then, however, as a result of political pressure, supermarkets have rolled out various voluntary schemes that have, to different extents, started to work. Most supermarkets now provide degradable bags. Sainsbury's, for example, has introduced compostable bags and bags that are made of recycled plastic.

Tesco and Marks and Spencer have introduced schemes. Indeed, Mark and Spencer's scheme was piloted in Northern Ireland to great success. Both of those schemes have resulted in a significant drop in the use of plastic bags. The National Trust, which introduced a charge for its plastic bags, has reported a 90% drop in use. IKEA was mentioned earlier in the debate. Lidl, which has a growing market share, has always charged for its bags, leading one comedian to remark that its bags cost more than its beans.

Voluntary schemes are, therefore, in place. Time is needed to determine whether they will work. Those schemes have at least been implemented, but they may not work to the extent that we would like. Some of them are quite new and fresh. Let us see whether they work.

The Minister must keep the matter under review, and the Assembly must allow itself time to determine whether the voluntary schemes are working. The Minister should retain the necessary power to implement a levy, should he believe that to be appropriate at any given time. Whether or not a levy is imposed, the issue

requires, above all, a culture change in society that should be led by retailers and backed up by Members as individuals, never mind as political representatives.

I concur with my colleague Mr Weir that, in tackling the problem, the Assembly should, only as a last resort, move away from encouraging voluntary measures to imposing a compulsory Government-led levy.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to talk about a levy on plastic bags, and I thank my colleague for helping to table the motion.

The previous Minister of the Environment suggested that imposing a tax on plastic bags was an option for the Assembly. I welcomed that statement, and I hope that the present Minister takes it on board.

Plastic bags are more than a blight on the environment. If the Assembly is to take the issue of waste management seriously and try to address it, new ways must be found to decrease, reuse and recycle plastic as part of an overall strategy. From manufacture to disposal, and as Members are only too aware, plastic carrier bags have an adverse impact on the environment.

Whether in the countryside, cities, towns or villages, plastic bags create an unsightly mess, as they cling to hedges, trees, lamp posts and telephone or electric cables. Some schoolchildren are present in the Public Gallery, and I commend schools, councils and others on their initiatives to address the problem of litter. However, that is only one measure to reduce the visual impact on the environment, and incentives and legislation must be considered to address the wider issue.

Plastic bags must be taken into account when developing an environmental waste strategy, because they take between 400 and 1,000 years to decompose in landfill sites. The Minister is aware of the burden that local councils will face in years to come. During previous debates in the Chamber, he was quick to pass on that burden to the super-councils of the future, but the Assembly has a responsibility to examine the issue now. The resin used in the production of plastic bags means that Sinn Féin is totally opposed to their incineration.

Some Members mentioned that plastic is a menace to marine life, whether fish, seals or birds, and mentioned the effect on their areas. On a recent visit to Strangford Lough, MLAs saw at first hand the impact on marine life.

It is time to act to reverse the scenarios that I outlined, and the motion to deter the use of plastic bags should be the first course of action. The average shopper uses eight bags every week, and I suggest that the average family uses even more. Many major retailers already recognise the need to reduce, and eventually eradicate, the use of plastic bags. Some charge for bags, others are well on their way to doing so, and some provide recycling options. Many major stores encourage their

customers by giving out reusable, eco-friendly bags, and that is welcome. By ensuring that a levy is imposed that will make all customers of every shop think twice about using plastic bags, the Assembly can help those stores and send a message to others to follow suit.

Members know about the scenario in the South, some European countries have committed to the introduction of a levy to combat the scourge of plastic, and others have decided on a complete ban. Although a levy alone cannot solve the problem, it could go some way to doing so. The Assembly must take the first step to combat a major scourge on the environment by supporting the motion, and I ask the House to do so. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: This is yet another take-note debate in a legislative Assembly that is neither making laws nor functioning properly. Ironically, that is mainly because of the party to which the motion's proposers belong. Let us not forget that we should be making legislation to enact change.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that if the issue of plastic bags were a priority, the party opposite would enable an Executive meeting to take place in order to secure action, rather than proposing an empty debate?

Mr Beggs: I agree entirely; pretend politics must end. Members were elected to a legislative Assembly, not to a talking-shop Assembly that is hamstrung by mutual veto.

Although the text of the motion is somewhat contradictory, on balance, I support its sentiments. It notes, with approval, the French model of an outright ban, while simultaneously calling for the introduction of a plastic-bag levy.

The motion is timely. The leaves are falling off the trees, and, in the hedgerows, evidence of the damage caused to the environment by plastic bags is blatantly obvious. Other Members have said that approximately one trillion plastic bags are produced and disposed of each year. Less than 1% are recycled — disposal is cheaper. That issue must be researched. Perhaps there is a need for a tax to change that. Financial pressures do apply.

Over time, plastic bags break down into smaller, more toxic petro-polymers that eventually contaminate soils and waterways and enter the food chain. The effect on wildlife can be catastrophic: birds become terminally entangled, and the World Wildlife Fund estimates that almost 200 different species of sea life — including whales, dolphins, seals and turtles — die after ingesting plastic bags that they mistake for food.

Even our Environment Minister must acknowledge the consensus and address this well-known problem. In recent years, towns in the UK have, effectively, banned the sale of plastic bags through community action. Furthermore, education is vital. Some people — myself

included — now decline plastic bags when offered one at a shop counter. Everyone can, individually, take action and drive progress — it is not solely the responsibility of big Government. I pay tribute to the voluntary action of tens of thousands of citizens who support the concept of a bag for life by reusing plastic bags or environmentally friendly bags.

The Republic of Ireland must receive credit for being the first country to introduce a plastic-bag tax, which is a measure that has, undoubtedly, influenced people's behaviour. However, the Assembly should not simply copy that. Although that measure caused plastic-bag usage to decrease to approximately 85 million a year, that figure had risen to approximately 115 million bags by 2005 and continues to rise.

At the other end of the spectrum, the 'Daily Mail' has championed the idea of banning plastic bags completely, citing the example of the impending ban in France in 2010. However, the practical reality of imposing a nationwide ban on plastic-bag production must be considered carefully. Will the law of unintended consequences come into play? What carbon footprint and transport costs will alternatives create? It is important that the Assembly consider how any ban would affect the carbon footprint. Such issues must be considered before an ultimate judgement is reached.

Her Majesty's Government have been pressuring retailers to change and encouraging voluntary action. However, we must determine whether that voluntary action is working. Perhaps the Minister can update the House on its progress. The motion calls on the Minister to introduce legislation to introduce a levy. However, the Assembly does not have tax-raising powers, and that area may have to be worked through. I am not ruling it out.

Although I support the motion — as all Members should — the Assembly must do more than talk about the issue. It must take action, enact legislation and educate people to use plastic bags sparingly or avoid using them at all.

2.45 pm

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the motion and commend Daithí McKay and Cathal Boylan for proposing it.

Unfortunately, as other Members mentioned, the present debate is merely a discussion because the Executive is not meeting. Therefore, we may not have the action that we should have had if all the Members of the Executive were behaving responsibly.

When the Minister attended the Environment Committee in July, he indicated that he intended to hold a consultation on plastic bags in the autumn. We are now heading into winter, but I hope that the Minister will stick to his word and not make a U-turn on this

important issue. That would only add to the list of DUP U-turns that so exercise Mr Jim Allister.

Plastic bags, we have been told, are used in the great majority of cases for only five or 10 minutes. In all cases, however, they can take hundreds of years to decompose. Therefore, this is an important issue. I support the motion, and my party supports a levy on plastic bags similar to that which operates in the Republic of Ireland. It is time that we followed the Southern example. As we heard from the Minister yesterday, the environment recognises no borders. Neither hares, nor birds nor fish recognise the border.

This is another example of an initiative that should be conducted on an island-wide basis. "Reduce, reuse and recycle" is an important strategy that reduces the amount of waste that goes into landfill, and there are many other successful initiatives. However, the levy on plastic carrier bags is the one that has been most successful. It is a very simple initiative, introduced, I believe, in 2003 by the Irish Government — the first Government to do so. Despite the concerns expressed by some DUP Members, the levy has hurt no one. It was introduced at the rate of 15 cents on each plastic bag, and now stands at 22 cents. Retailers supported the scheme and the public were enthusiastic about it.

When the scheme was introduced, it was calculated that every inhabitant used more than 300 plastic bags per year. After the levy, surveys showed that usage was reduced to five plastic bags per capita per year. The scheme is administered through the VAT system in the South and operates easily. After the first five months, and after costs were accounted for, it showed a return of €3.5 million. That money goes into an environment fund which supports a range of initiatives, including research and development into waste management, promotion of environmental awareness, and education and training programmes.

People here have watched what has happened in the Republic of Ireland: they have seen the scheme succeeding, and accept that plastic bags have a negative impact on the environment. The unsightliness and ugliness of plastic bags, the harm they cause to wildlife, and the dangers to livestock — all have been referred to. The public are, therefore, ready to play their part in contributing to a cleaner environment and to reducing waste.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up, and I am glad that he did not recommend passports for the Irish hare.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I welcome the debate. I suppose that it is a sign of the change that has taken place in Northern Ireland that the party that used to be more interested in plastic explosives is now interested in plastic bags. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Minister. You cannot say that.

The Minister of the Environment: My remarks are on the record now anyway, so I can get on with it. *[Laughter.]*

During the debate, Members talked about the need to change peoples' behaviour and attitudes to ensure that waste is reduced. Some said that I, the Executive or the retailers should do something about that. However, at the end of the day, it all comes down to personal responsibility, of which I see fine examples as I look around the Assembly Chamber. As Members listen to and engage in this debate, they might take a drink of water from a glass — except the Members from Sinn Féin. Instead of using glasses, which are reusable receptacles, those Members use plastic, throwaway cups — the type of material that pollutes the environment. That is the very type of action that the proposer of this motion said that he wants people in Northern Ireland to do less.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Minister. You are behaving badly today.

The Minister of the Environment: I thought that I would get a few things off my mind before I start talking about the issues.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister confirm that he is using a reusable speech? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: None of my speeches are reusable by anyone. Most people would not want to use them again anyway. *[Laughter.]*

The issue is a serious one. As I drove here this morning, I saw that someone had thrown out a bag of rubbish instead of waiting for the bin man to arrive at their home. For approximately 100 yards down the road from where I live, the hedge was littered with plastic bags that had been blown there by the wind. That is the type of problem that plastic bags cause. Members have highlighted the impact that plastic bags have on the environment, the countryside, wildlife, farm animals, etc, and the Assembly should deal with that issue.

Members' speeches contained numerous themes. Some asked what I and the Department are doing to address the problem. I noticed that the proposer of the motion talked about the need for the Department and for me, as the Minister, to be proactive. Perhaps he should do his homework before he proposes motions, or he should at least check some of the facts that are available. As the Chairman of the Environment Committee and Mr Gallagher pointed out, I have discussed this matter with the Environment Committee. As far as I can remember, the proposer of the motion attended that meeting.

At that meeting, I made it clear that I and the Department had taken a number of actions. The Department, the UK Government and other

Administrations across the United Kingdom have entered into an agreement with retailers. Through voluntary action, we aim to reduce plastic-bag use by 25% by December this year. A course of action has been put in place. One of the initiatives that will help to achieve that target is for retailers to implement bag-for-life schemes. As several Members mentioned, some retailers have already implemented such schemes.

The fact is — and I have already made this point with regard to the behaviour of the proposer of the motion and his plastic cup, of which I thought I should remind him —

Mr Boylan: The cup is recyclable.

The Minister of the Environment: It does not matter whether the cup is recyclable, although I do not believe that it says on them that they are biodegradable. However, that can be checked, and if the Member has misled the House I am sure that he will be prepared to apologise for it.

The Member for South Antrim David Ford said that, although people sometimes feel good that they have done their bit for the environment by buying a bag-for-life, they often fail to use it. However, of the 40% of shoppers who bought bags-for-life, only 12% regularly used them. Therefore, although it is important for people to perform such good actions, we must ensure that their behaviour is changed in order that we see a real benefit from those actions.

Had Mr McKay been listening when I attended the Committee for the Environment, he would know that I made it quite clear that I asked the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Minister in the United Kingdom to include Northern Ireland in the Climate Change Bill [HL]. That would give the Assembly the power to make enabling legislation in order to introduce regulations to deal with the plastic-bag issue if and when we saw fit, by imposing levies if necessary. Therefore, it cannot be suggested that my Department has not taken action.

The Department has spent money on engaging people in order to change their behaviour and attitudes, through activities such as going into schools and offering an education process. Bryson House has carried out some excellent work on that issue for the Department. As part of the waste management strategy, a senior information officer is due to be appointed by the Department in approximately one month's time, and that person will implement a communications strategy for dealing with waste management.

Therefore, the Department has not been dilatory. However, as the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs pointed out, even if the enabling legislation was available, no legislation or regulations could be introduced because of the actions of the party opposite. I believe that it was a colleague of the Member in the party opposite

who asked why I did not have at least some consultation on the issue. The Member well knows that before I can begin consultation on any piece of legislation or regulation, I must get it passed by the Executive. However, the Executive is not meeting, and the reason why the Executive is not meeting is, of course, because Sinn Féin is in a bit of strump at the moment —

[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order; the Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of the Environment: I do not mind Sinn Féin Members shouting at me. I would be worried if they were not shouting at me because I would think that I was saying something wrong.

My Department has taken action on the issue, and, as Sinn Féin Members know, for new legislation — not administrative action — to be introduced, consultation has first to be agreed by the Executive. However, because the Executive is not meeting, there are many pieces of legislation that cannot be consulted on.

Furthermore, when action is taken, it must be effective. Three courses of action have been suggested in the debate. The first, as mentioned in the motion, is the ban on plastic bags that was introduced by the French Government. That ban, of course, applies to only non-biodegradable plastic bags. Information and legal advice provided to my Department indicates that such a ban would be illegal under EU legislation. I could bore Members with all the details of that, but I am not going to — it is article 18 of the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive.

3.00 pm

Given that I am not a Europhile of any sort, there might be some attraction for me to introduce a measure that would defy EU regulations. However, according to the legal advice that we have received, banning plastic bags would not stand up to EU law.

Much has been said about the success of the levy on plastic bags in the Irish Republic. Although plastic-bag usage there initially fell, we must consider the facts since then. Following that initial fall, usage has increased by approximately 50%. The Republic's levy has gathered revenue amounting to €110 million, which, at 15 cents per bag, equates to 733 million plastic bags. Therefore, the levy has not been effective in reducing the overall number of bags used. Indeed, the revenue raised by the tax increased from €7 million in 2002 to €17.5 million in 2004. I thank the Member for Upper Bann Mr Gardiner, who, as the Ulster Unionist Party's environment spokesman, included those figures in a press release.

The evidence does not clearly demonstrate that imposing a levy produces a permanent effect. There may be an initial effect because, at such a time, there is likely to be a lot of advertising and media attention

— communication was mentioned by the Member for East Antrim and several Members from my party. If we are to engender real change, we must change the culture, so that someone who brings water into the Chamber will use a glass rather than a plastic cup.

Similarly, this morning, I bought two books in a shop and, automatically, the girl handed me a plastic bag. I did not require a plastic bag, and I did not take it, but —

Mr Kennedy: What sort of books were they?

[Laughter.]

The Minister of the Environment: I can assure the Member that they were not the sort of books that would be sold in a brown paper bag. *[Laughter.]*

It is in such matters that an attitudinal change must occur. I am not sure whether the voluntary agreement will work. All I can say is that, so far, the evidence demonstrates that, at least, it has had some success. Shops that have attempted to implement voluntary agreements — and which, consequently, are pushing the issue — have reported a drop in plastic-bag usage of approximately 40%. It remains to be seen how such initiatives will develop in the long term, but we will monitor the situation.

Nevertheless, regulation always has costs attached. My philosophy for Government is that the least amount of regulation that we impose on people, and the more that we can bring people along and persuade them to do the right thing, the better. Regulation is irksome, it sometimes brings unintended side effects and, as the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton said, it is not without costs. The Member indicated that regulation for the plastic-bag tax would cost approximately £3.5 million.

I have no doubt that I, and my Department, will return to this matter. There is no easy answer to the problem; no one-off requirement will deal with it, and measures other than the simple approach outlined by the proposer of the motion are required. Despite Mr McKay's scepticism, I wish to make it clear to him that my Department has been proactive. We take this matter seriously, and we will use whatever means we can — including, for example, this debate — to get the message across to the public that they should attempt to use carrier bags that are more sustainable and less polluting to the environment.

Mr Beggs: The Minister said that we should not rule out anything. Does he accept that a tax on bags should not be ruled out and that such a tax might well form a useful tool, along with education, in changing the behaviour of individuals? Furthermore, does he agree that we must ensure that we do not waste valuable resources or pollute the environment?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member knows that I have difficulty with taxes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have difficulty with time. The Minister's time is up.

The Minister of the Environment: I will not rule out anything, but I have informed the House of the difficulties that I have with the approach that the Member has suggested.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It has been a colourful debate. I thank Mr McKay and Mr Boylan for tabling the motion and Members for their contributions. Everyone agreed that plastic bags are a scourge on the environment, particularly on marine life. Sinn Féin has pushed for a levy on plastic bags for a number of years with successive direct rule Ministers, such as Mr Rooker and Angela Smith, and with Dermot Nesbitt, Arlene Foster and, now, the current Minister of the Environment.

Daithí McKay mentioned the many countries that have introduced levies and other initiatives to reduce the number of bags that are used. Mr McKay suggested the South of Ireland and France as good models for us to follow.

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee, Patsy McGlone, also said that the South of Ireland was a good model to follow. He said that the levy in the South had led to a 90% reduction in the number of carrier bags distributed. He also said that many retailers in the North have reduced the number of plastic bags by 70% through their own initiatives.

There were many contradictions among the DUP Members, particularly in the —

Ms S Ramsey: — Front Bench and Back Benches. *[Laughter.]*

Mr W Clarke: It seems that they have lost touch with district councils and district councillors. I tabled a motion in Down District Council to introduce a levy, and it was supported by MLA Wells, who is also a member of that council. As a member of NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association), Peter Weir will know how all district councils feel about the issue. I am sure that Sammy Wilson has backed such a motion as well.

Peter Weir mentioned the damage to wildlife and marine life, and he said that he favoured the implementation of a voluntary approach. He stated that consumer behaviour had to change, and he is reluctant to impose a levy. Mr Weir also talked about the current financial situation, and he said that it would be wrong to impose a levy at this time. Bearing in mind how long it takes to progress legislation, only God knows what situation the economy will be in by the time any law is in place.

Not only are plastic bags and excess packaging bad for the environment, they are bad for one's pocket. Studies that were carried out last year show that excess

packaging costs the average family £470 a year. Excess packaging hits the pocket.

Simon Hamilton was also concerned about the damage that plastic bags cause to wildlife. He said that he was uneasy about introducing a levy and that supermarkets were rolling out their own voluntary schemes. He mentioned the initiatives that Lidl and IKEA, for instance, have introduced, and said that time was required to judge their effectiveness.

Cathal Boylan said that a previous Minister had said that a tax on plastic bags was an option. He also said that councils and schools should be commended for their approach. Councils are leading the way. The Assembly is supposed to be introducing the legislation to take along councils, but councillors and councils are telling us the way to go. The tail is wagging the dog.

Roy Beggs talked about the damage that plastic bags cause to wildlife and the environment. He said that education was required and that individuals can take more action by refusing a plastic bag when offered.

Tommy Gallagher stated that we should follow the South of Ireland and introduce a levy; he said that the public was ready for that.

David McClarty said that, over the decades, we have destroyed our environment through our throw-away culture. He was also concerned about the damage caused to marine life and said that we must look at best practice throughout Europe for a solution in the North of Ireland — and not just for plastic bags.

David Ford said that a voluntary solution was welcome, but that it did not go far enough. He said that those consumers who take their bags and boxes with them when they do their shopping would not feel the effect of a levy. I hope that I have covered everyone — I will now give the Minister a go. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: I would have been disappointed if the Member had not.

Mr W Clarke: I will not be too hard on him. The Minister was seeking a 25% reduction in the use of plastic carrier bags and, if I took him up correctly, he was talking about that happening voluntarily. He also talked about a bag-for-life initiative and said that education was the key. However, I am disappointed with that response. The Minister had an opportunity to send a clear message that the North would follow what the South of Ireland had done and lead the way on the issue throughout the world.

As I said earlier, the issue does not involve just the present Minister; it involved his predecessors, including Mrs Arlene Forster. They have done nothing and, judging by what I heard from the opposite Benches today, it looks as though nothing will be done. It appears that the Minister is content to rely on voluntary agreements with large retailers.

It has been widely accepted that the legislation in the South was hugely successful in reducing the use of plastic carrier bags, in changing public opinion and in promoting a responsible attitude to waste. A plastic-bag levy in the Twenty-six Counties was supported by the public and the same would happen in the North. Several retailers charge for food carrier bags in their stores throughout the Six Counties, which has led to a reduction in the use of plastic bags and raised more than £80,000 for Groundwork to use in environmental projects.

Although such initiatives are welcome and should be encouraged, we can only match the reductions made in the Twenty-six Counties by introducing a levy. Local authorities across the Six Counties have passed motions in support of a levy on plastic carrier bags. The public — and schoolchildren — are taking the lead on the issue. We are asked continually to reduce, reuse and recycle, yet the Minister, who should lead by example, will not even consider introducing legislation — or even drawing it up to introduce to the Executive. It is all very well for him to say that the Executive are not meeting; however, he should go to the Bill Office and do the paperwork, which should take him some time.

The legislation could create employment for businesses to expand and for community initiatives to develop. If the only opposition to the motion is based on job losses and the credit crisis, can we assume that the Minister and his party colleagues support the motion in principle? Will the Minister investigate the potential for job creation, business expansion and the benefits to the community? Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports, in principle, a levy on plastic carrier bags and notes the French Government's decision to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags by 2010; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward legislation, as a matter of priority, to introduce a levy on plastic carrier bags and to develop a plan to phase out their use.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Forest and Woodland Targets

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

3.15 pm

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The motion calls on the Minister to provide information. Unless I am missing something, there is no sign of any Minister of any kind on the opposite Benches. Can you advise us what will happen at the conclusion of the debate when the Minister should be called to respond?

Mr Deputy Speaker: A message has been sent to the Minister, so if the Member wishes, I will wait until she appears.

Ms S Ramsey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has just arrived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wells, you will be pleased to hear that the Minister has just arrived.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the limited target set in the Programme for Government for increasing the area of forest and woodland; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that are in place to achieve the 2006 Forestry Strategy target of doubling woodland cover in the next fifty years.

I am pleased that the Minister has rushed from her maternity bed to be here, and I thank her for her attendance.

The motion focuses on the targets set in the Programme for Government and by the Executive for forest and woodland cover. As I understand it, tree cover in Northern Ireland accounts for only 6% of the total landscape. That figure is low, particularly when compared to mainland UK, where tree cover is 12% — double that in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I am told that the European Union average is an impressive 44%. However, at some stage, I want the Minister to confirm whether the figure of 6% for Northern Ireland is accurate. Perhaps we are working with out-of-date figures. Where do the figures come from? Are they based on a yearly census of woodland or forest cover in Northern Ireland?

It is not enough to simply implement a plan to double Northern Ireland tree cover in 50 years. It is a huge undertaking. The successful implementation of the scheme will require impeccable planning, training, investment and regular monitoring to achieve the targets that are laid down.

Figures released show that, under the Programme for Government commitment, 550 hectares a year will be planted by 2011, which means that, overall, 1,650 hectares will be planted between 2008 and 2011. That target is not only insufficient, but it shows a lack of the desire that is needed to ensure that the potential of the overall scheme is recognised. Figures from the Woodland Trust show that in order to meet the commitment in the Northern Ireland forestry strategy to double woodland cover over 50 years, 1,740 hectares a year would have to be planted. That is over three and a half times the figure of 550 that is suggested under the Programme for Government commitment.

Therefore, it is not sufficient to opt for a slow start of planting 550 hectares a year, with the hope of an increase over time. Such an approach puts the Province on the back foot from the outset. Compare those figures to, say, those for the Republic of Ireland, which is on target to increase its tree cover from 10% to 15% within 10 years. By contrast, the scheme in Northern Ireland is somewhat lacking. The scheme must be considered as part of an overall picture, and its potential advantages must be studied in detail to determine what impact it could, and should, have for the people of Northern Ireland now and in the years to come.

If successfully implemented, the scheme will not only provide the people of Northern Ireland with recreation areas that match that of the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe, but, more importantly, it will play a major role in the campaign to renew our habitat. As Members, we must accept the responsibility that has been placed upon us by the people. We must lead in a positive manner, not only on issues concerning the economy and social concerns, but as defenders of Northern Ireland's natural surroundings, which bond our people in a spirit of appreciation and thankfulness for the beauty around us. It is imperative that the Department plays its role in accepting the leadership challenge by taking action now to address the very relaxed attitude to the scheme and allow it to reach its full potential.

Although it is vital that the people of Northern Ireland as a whole should benefit from the scheme, it is also very important that the individuals who can make the scheme a real success understand the benefit that it will bring. There is no doubt in my mind that farmers, in particular, could be the key deliverers of the scheme. As Members will be aware, without the help and co-operation of the farmers, it will not only be improbable that the targets will be achieved; it will be impossible to achieve them.

It is imperative that a scheme aimed at increasing woodland cover benefits farmers and the agricultural economy. The farming community must be involved in the process, but one-off payments are not enough. Ongoing financial support must be given to the farming community. A scheme will fail if it is implemented merely

with the aim of providing more trees. It is paramount that any scheme contributes positively to the long-term financial sustainability of the agriculture sector and the wider economy, and that it has major positive effects on the environment.

Farmers have an important role to play in the implementation of any successful scheme. That is highlighted by the interesting fact that the area of forestry and woodland could be doubled if theories on extensive farming practices were promoted nationally. However, that may not produce the type of forestry and woodland that is appropriate to the forestry industry or that would benefit the Northern Ireland population by providing leisure facilities and environmental improvements. Our aim is to create an overarching scheme that will benefit all sectors and all people.

Other parts of the industry can benefit greatly from some of the schemes. The forestry sector has traditionally made a large contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. For example, many people in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone are employed by Balcas, a timber production company. However, that company's production plant has been reduced to a three-day working week by the ongoing downturn in the economy. An efficiently run scheme could ensure that there is a large enough supply of wood to maintain employment levels in the forestry sector. It could also keep companies such as Balcas in a high supply of natural timber.

The global demand for hardwoods is greater than the supply of the necessary materials. A change in planting patterns from coniferous trees to broadleaved trees — which produce hardwoods — could help to make Northern Ireland's hardwood production more globally competitive. There is a growing realisation that more action needs to be taken to address global warming effectively. The introduction of carbon credits could have an extremely positive impact in the Province. Northern Ireland could become more competitive if we were to introduce carbon credits and implement a scheme to increase tree planting — one that is more significant than the annual planting of 500 hectares of woodland.

I ask the Minister to clarify whether Northern Ireland's new planting targets form part of the United Kingdom Government's strategy to reduce CO₂; and if not, why not? Other Governments, including the Republic of Ireland's Government, incorporate woodland expansion into their mechanisms to reduce CO₂. The Minister and her Department should examine that matter urgently. The EU has banned carbon trading, so woodland owners could lease the scheme until 2013. Indeed, a number of Whitehall committees on climate change are considering the feasibility of a trading scheme for woodland carbon trading. Will the Minister confirm what stage that consideration is at and whether state bodies such as the Forest Service will be able to benefit from a potential trading scheme?

The implementation of a successful scheme would be incredibly beneficial to the economy and environment of Northern Ireland and to the health of its people. Access to forest recreation areas would allow members of our community to experience better physical and mental health. It would also enhance our natural surroundings and benefit the agriculture sector. The Minister has heard the voice of the people today. She must respond positively in order to address the problems that are so evident; failure to act is not an option.

Mr Irwin: Figures for forest cover in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and Europe make the case for doubling Northern Ireland's forest cover over the next 50 years appear too simplistic. Forest cover in Northern Ireland stands at little more than 6%. In Scotland, that figure is 15%; in Wales, 12%; and in England, 7%.

The availability of land and population density each play a role in calculating targets for increasing woodland cover. The spread of rural dwellings in Northern Ireland reduces the opportunity for large-scale forestation, in comparison with other countries. Northern Ireland is a compact land mass in comparison with mainland Great Britain and other EU countries.

The Programme for Government sets a target to increase forest and woodland cover by 1,650 hectares by 2011. That will not achieve the 2006 forestry strategy target of doubling Northern Ireland's woodland cover, but the incentives that are available for landowners to consider planting must also be taken into account. The Forest Service's annual report states that it will review the opportunity to promote grant-aided woodland expansion. It is within those grant-aided schemes that I believe the Forest Service has the best chance to encourage landowners to consider tree planting.

The current local drive to promote the use of alternative energy sources is another way to encourage an increase of forest cover in Northern Ireland. However, planting trees for energy creates the problem of rotation. Once the trees are planted, they are harvested within a short time, compared to long-term coniferous planting.

I concede that the target to double woodland cover in 50 years is ambitious, but increasing that cover every year is no less important, and I welcome any initiatives and strategies that encourage planting. However, any such initiatives must represent a feasible long-term commitment for landowners.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I hope that she and her baby are well.

Sinn Féin supports the motion, and I thank the Members responsible for bringing the issue of forestry and woodlands before the Assembly. The debate highlights the issues, but will bring about no real change. The opportunity for change will be presented when the

Forestry Act is amended. It must be understood that Irish farmers have a great affinity with working the land and that it is up to the Government to offer assistance and create the conditions for farmland to be converted to forest, thus doubling woodland by 2050.

Elements to be considered in a new forestry Act, to be presented early next year, are central to my contribution to the debate. Forests must become multifunctional and relevant to all our lives. Many more people must be able to use them for recreational activities and earn a living from them. Forests must be developed to provide renewable energy opportunities. Timber production is essential, but the Forest Service must be flexible about social and recreational use. The first forestry Act in more than 50 years will give the Executive, Departments and agencies the legislative authority to deliver forestry management that is fit for purpose in an ever-changing world.

I am proud to represent South Down, which is home to the majestic Mourne Mountains and, at their foot, Donard Demesne. There are several ancient and long-established woods in the area — from the native oak wood of Rostrevor, overlooking Carlingford Lough in the south of the county, to the exceptional beauty of Tollymore and Castlewellan forest parks. However, even those majestic assets are not being developed to their full potential, particularly in respect of activity tourism and, specifically, mountain biking — a recreational industry that is a multimillion-pound success story in Wales and Scotland.

There must be a coherent approach to developing the North's environment and biodiversity, and the foundation of that must be the preservation and expansion of woodlands. The Woodland Trust states that the North of Ireland:

“is languishing at the bottom of the European tree league. We have less woodland than almost any other country, with woods here covering a mere six per cent of the landscape, compared to the European average of 44 per cent.”

The trust adds that the North of Ireland has lost 273 ancient and long-established woods since the 1960s, due to a lack of legislative protection.

We must ensure that collectively we do not allow any other long-established forests to disappear from this part of the island. I find it difficult to envisage how a long-term strategy for forests and woodlands in the North of Ireland can advance without consideration of the impact of climate change and sustainable development.

3.30 pm

We must take a strategic approach to forests and maximise their use — develop them as carbon sinks or use them to develop biomass as a source of renewable energy. We need the leadership to move the issue forward in a holistic fashion throughout all Departments. We

need to create the conditions to generate business for rural areas.

There is a need to promote healthier lifestyles to improve the poor health statistics in some parts of the region. Lack of regular exercise is known to contribute to the high incidence of circulatory disease in the North. It is widely recognised that woodlands have healing properties for people who are recovering from mental-health problems.

All Departments must be involved in the development of forests. More woodland, especially closer to residential areas, would offer a valuable setting to promote well-being. Furthermore, learning opportunities can be developed around woodlands to improve educational achievement and skills.

Go raibh maith agat. We are merely borrowing our forests from our children, so there is a great responsibility on us to hand them over to future generations in a healthier condition than when we received them and in a better condition than they are now in. All stakeholders should come to the table — timber producers, renewable energy business groups, sports groups, youth organisations and representatives from the tourism and environmental sectors.

Michelle Gildernew, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in response to a question from your good self, a LeasCheann Comhairle, stated:

“The Forestry Strategy sets out a long term aim of doubling the area of forest, from 6% to 12%, by 2050. This will be achieved primarily through afforestation of privately owned agricultural land supported by funds made available under the Rural Development Plan.

The Forestry Strategy recognised that landowners commitment to farming means that forests are likely to expand slowly at first. However, as the impact of Common Agricultural Policy reform grows and the benefits of woodland become more apparent, we expect to see the demand for growing trees to increase.”

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

Mr W Clarke: That is the crux of the matter. We must persuade the farming community to embrace woodland expansion and develop opportunities for them to utilise timber production. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her attendance. I was at another event earlier, and the Minister was there as well; she has certainly hit the ground running after her big event.

On 23 September, members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development heard a presentation from Premier Woodlands. I freely admit that until I heard that presentation, I had merely a passing interest in woodlands. However, the presentation gave us food for thought about the future of our woodlands, and we learned that in Northern Ireland, as other Members have said, there is only 6% woodland cover, which is very low. Indeed, we are listed among the least-forested

regions in Europe. The European Union average for woodland cover is more than 30%.

The reasons for our lack of tree cover could be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century when Lord Mountjoy had all the woodlands in Ulster cut down to deprive those who were opposed to English rule of hiding places. We are reaping the consequences of his scorched earth policy to this day. Lord Mountjoy felled thousands upon thousands of large native trees, such as oak, elder, elm and alder, to construct wooden forts — some of them in the Members' own territories — bridges and castles. However, it is more than 300 years since Lord Mountjoy roamed around Counties Armagh, Down, Monaghan, Tyrone and elsewhere, so we must move on to a more modern era.

In the last century, many ancient woods were cleared of noble trees and replaced by fast-growing conifers, needles and all. That was considered progress in the early twentieth century, and it took almost a further century to realise the devastating consequences of such programmes. However, let us look at Northern Ireland as it is today from a forestry and woodland point of view. When compared with what is happening in the Republic, we lag far behind despite being offered the same European support. The Government of the South avail themselves fully of the EU woodland grants scheme and the farm woodland premium scheme.

The programme here is open to challenge. Indeed, Premier Woodlands has expressed some reservations about the likelihood of the Forest Service achieving its target of doubling the acreage under trees by 2050. The Minister's response to the question that is posed in the motion in the names of Mr Ken Robinson, Mr Elliott and Mr Armstrong on the Department's strategy on forestry and woodland targets will be very interesting.

We were told that, under the terms of the rural development programme, the Forest Service must differentiate between full- and part-time farmers in order to comply with the terms of the farm woodland premium scheme, with full-time farmers being offered up to £300 a hectare and participating part-time farmers being offered £100 a hectare. Should there be a difference? After all, we are talking about planting trees and woodlands, not about who should be encouraged to plant them. It is possible that part-time farmers will be most keen to plant trees, whereas full-time farmers — most of whom live in the hope of better days ahead on the farm and a future in food production — will, understandably, be reluctant to use good, productive land to grow trees and provide woodlands. Part-timers do not have such interests.

Ongoing work will lead to the introduction of a new forestry Bill for Northern Ireland in the next 12 months. Although I welcome that, I have concerns about some of the proposals that are being mooted for inclusion in

the Bill. The Committee was told that the new Bill will allow the Forest Service to acquire land that adjoins existing woodland by use of the compulsory purchasing process. I, for one, would not agree to such a measure, nor could I accept the proposal that would give the Forest Service total control — again, by compulsory methods — of sporting and gaming rights in forested estates.

If ever there were a case of a lack of vision and of the proposers not seeing the wood for the trees, compulsory measures would certainly fit the bill. Compulsory-purchasing diktats will inevitably be challenged by landowners; farming unions; groups, such as Premier Woodlands; and the politicians who have genuine rural interests. I say to those who are dreaming up such schemes: forgo the compulsory-purchase route, as pursuing such methods will meet with stern challenges from many different sectors and will prove futile.

The new forestry Bill for Northern Ireland should offer the opportunity for this generation to make good the failings of the past, but it must not become a Government-versus-farmer Bill. Should that materialise, it would serve only to stifle the reinstatement of our woodlands to the level that we wish to achieve and to leave for future generations to enjoy and benefit from.

Mr Ford: I congratulate Mr Elliott and his colleagues on securing this debate. I welcome the motion, and my group will certainly support it. I also welcome back the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and wish her and her family all the best. That is a prelude to saying a few rude things about the Department's activities.

The Woodland Trust's recent report, 'A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland', clearly sets out some very challenging proposals, which ought to be noted not only by the Department of Agriculture, but by the whole Executive, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and by the Assembly — not merely those Members who have agricultural interests — because it is absolutely clear that there is much to do. If a new Bill is to come before the Assembly next year, there is much that the Department ought to consider for inclusion and that the Committee may need to amend as the Bill progresses.

I will highlight a few points about that, and I will try not to repeat the general points that have been made by other Members. The fact that we now have an ancient woodland inventory gives us some opportunity to start to look seriously at the conservation of that environment as well as the issue of the major strategic expansion of woodland cover.

In that respect, I was a little disappointed when I received a written answer to a question earlier this year, which related to a line in target 10 of the sustainable development strategy — which is an OFMDFM responsibility, not purely a DARD responsibility —

with the Programme for Government commitment to the doubling of woodland cover over 50 years. The answer was rather similar to that given to a Member for East Londonderry, and, if I was trying to ingratiate myself with you, I would say it was an answer to your question, Mr Speaker.

The particular bit that concerned me was the Minister's statement that:

"the Strategy acknowledged the strong commitment that farmers had to continuing farming, which meant that forests would only expand slowly at first."

There is genuine concern that, if the current level of planting is less than one third of that which is required to meet the long-term strategy, there must be serious questions as to whether the long-term strategy is viable in any sense. It would be appropriate for the Executive to re-examine that objective and state whether it is realistic. Is it purely window dressing to state a target for 2050, which, given current trends, not only will not be met, but will not be met by a significant distance?

Five hundred and fifty hectares a year, or the target of converting an additional 1,650 hectares by March 2011 — which was highlighted in an answer to an additional question that I submitted — are a long way short of the 1,700 plus hectares that would be required if progress were to be made every year. The Minister's answers raise major issues.

Today, I received answers to some other questions that I submitted, and which caused me further concern. I asked whether the Minister would restore all planted ancient woodland sites under the Forest Service's stewardship as part of the commitment to arrest biodiversity decline. The response was:

"The Department cannot restore all plantations on ancient woodland sites because there is insufficient evidence of an economic, social or environmental requirement for such a target and there are no clearly defined means by which such a target could be achieved."

What is the point of having a biodiversity strategy if a key element of the biodiversity of the region — the limited amount of ancient woodland that remains to us — is not to be protected and preserved, and if the responsible Department states that that does not tie in with any of its strategies?

Similarly, to be told in another answer that a previous publication, 'Northern Ireland Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth':

"reflects an appropriate balance between the many views expressed during the policy review",

when it will also fail to meet long-term targets, does not make a significant addition. Furthermore, to be told that even though legislation is coming:

"The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has no plans to afford absolute legislative protection to ancient and long-established woodland."

suggests to me that although there may be a driver for commercial forestry in DARD's Forest Service, there is little commitment to cross-cutting sustainability targets, which are supposed to be part of the Executive's programme.

That is also shown by the failure of OFMDFM to evaluate its sustainable development targets, and it means that the Executive have to make considerable progress before they can address the terms of the motion. I trust that if the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development cannot respond for OFMDFM, she will at least give us some greater reassurance than has been given so far in her answers to various Members.

Mr Shannon: When I think of trees, I associate them with country sports and with shooting. I am well known in the area that I represent as a keen shooting sportsman, although I will confirm on record that the rumours of my shooting 20,000 Argentinian pigeons in three days, while making me one of the greatest living marksmen in the world, are unfounded. My shoulder could not take the action.

As a member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and the Countryside Alliance, I know it to be true that the preservation of habitats and environments is often overlooked as an essential part of the ethos of country sports enthusiasts. Shooting contributes some £10 million of conservation work annually, with corresponding benefits to wildlife and to eco-tourism.

A substantial amount of conservation work is undertaken by shooters. In my area, Strangford Lough wildfowling —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member must return to the motion. He is upsetting Mr Wells.

Mr Shannon: There are primary conservation issues for people involved in the shooting sports. I say that because those are the people who plant trees, nurse them and look after them.

Laust minth tha Wudlan Trust lanched ther vision fer wudlan in Norlin Airlan o' hoo they baleev tha Executiv shud velye, bring bak an widen oot our wudlan heritage. Tha furst lanch wuz weel tuk in, an they er noo lukin tae big oan tha momentum gethered, an tha Wudlan Trust his bin in touch wi me aboot this debate tha dae.

Last month, the Woodland Trust launched a vision for woodland in Northern Ireland, which detailed how it believed the Executive should value, restore and expand our woodland heritage. Fortunately, the launch was well received, and the Trust wishes to build on the momentum that has been gathered. I have been contacted by the Trust, as have other Members, about today's debate.

The Woodland Trust's manifesto asked the Executive and their agencies to deliver on their promise to double

woodland cover in the next 50 years. Unfortunately, neither the target that was set in the Programme for Government nor that of Northern Ireland's sustainable development strategy will double woodland cover in 50 years. That is where the problem lies.

The contradictions within the current policy are deeply troubling. I support today's motion, and the call for a more coherent approach that values the Province's natural heritage.

3.45 pm

Other Members have spoken about our existing trees — they may also be aware that the Executive intends to bring forward new forestry legislation in spring 2009. That will be the first new forestry legislation in more than 50 years, and could give the Executive, the Departments and the relevant agencies legislative authority to deliver forestry management that is fit for the new challenges of the twenty-first century. Today's debate therefore assumes great importance because it could build awareness of some of the shortcomings of current policy and legislation, before any new legislation is brought before the Assembly.

Does the Minister recognise that the doubling of woodland cover can be used to mitigate the effects of global warming? I am sure my colleague Jim Wells will speak on that issue. If the Minister recognises that — which I believe she does — will she accept that extra effort is therefore required? Additional payments should be made to landowners who wish to plant new, native, broadleaved woodland adjacent to existing ancient and long-established woods, as other Members have mentioned. People must be encouraged to plant and care for trees on their land — and they must have an incentive to do so.

Mr Easton: Does my colleague agree that any new forests that are planted should consist entirely of the deciduous, native types of trees that currently grow in Northern Ireland? Does he also agree that councils, as well as private landowners and farmers, should be included in the process of encouraging the growth of forests across Northern Ireland?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention; his comments are well made, and I wholeheartedly support them. There is a role for councils to play in that process, alongside the landowners and farmers.

I am privileged to live in the Ards Peninsula, which is an area of matchless beauty, as many Members will agree. Having read correspondence from the Woodland Trust, BASC and Countryside Alliance, I, along with my father, planted some 2,500 to 3,000, broadleaved trees on our own farm. That was all part of the effort to address the carbon footprint. Other developers in that area have done likewise, such as at Carrowdore Primary School, where the developer, Paul O'Prey, very kindly did the same thing. Many sectors can work alongside

one another, and it is important that they do so. Not for nothing are trees called the lungs of the world. More trees create a better natural habitat, particularly for small songbirds.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to grasp the issues and ensure that the new legislation stresses the need to plant more trees, and to make sure those are broadleaved trees — not the conifer or leylandii types, which grow quickly, but do not produce the same valuable habitat. I urge the Minister to combine and co-ordinate the numerous sectors that are involved, and to bring Northern Ireland to the standard that we should reach.

Mr Wells: I believe in climate change, and that the vast majority of it has been caused by man — let me make that very clear. I also believe that the planting of trees can bring enormous benefits in reducing the impact of climate change, because trees are one way of removing carbon from the atmosphere. We as a society cannot lecture the indigenous people of the Brazilian rainforest or the Congo about their destruction of woodlands if we do not protect what we have, and restore what we have lost — and we have lost so much.

Someone asked me the other day whether there are tree-felling licences in Northern Ireland — I said that there are; they are called chainsaws. There is no protection whatsoever for our native trees in Northern Ireland — if it is not the subject of a tree preservation order, or situated in an area of special scientific interest (ASSI), woodland has absolutely no protection whatsoever. The mad axe man can strike, and woodland can be removed, and society is much the poorer for it. Steps must therefore be taken to protect what we have in the Province.

I was present at the launch at Belfast Castle of the Woodland Trust's inventory of ancient and long-standing woodlands in Northern Ireland. The very least we should do is to protect every square inch of that woodland. That can be done through ASSI designation; through the cross-compliance regulations of the single farm payments scheme, as implemented by the Department of Agriculture; or through tree preservation orders. It is absolutely essential that the small fragment of ancient woodland that still exists — which is tiny in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe — be given immediate protection.

We cannot afford to lose any more of our woodland, much of which has been so needlessly destroyed through development, agricultural intensification and neglect over the past 200 years. Some of those trees were standing when King Billy came to the Boyne — he might have tied his horse to some of them. Therefore, the trees must be protected at all costs.

I applaud the fact that all Members who spoke expressed more or less the same views. I got involved in the debate because the proposed changes to the Forestry

Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 provide a wonderful opportunity to get the legislation right. The Assembly will be involved more or less from the beginning of that process, and we have an opportunity to make certain that the law in Northern Ireland on the protection and promotion of woodlands is the best anywhere in western Europe. Therefore, I will listen with interest to the Minister. I am sure that she will give us a sneak preview of what is coming.

One aspect of tree protection that cannot be covered by changes to the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 is the vexed subject of tree preservation orders (TPO). I could write a book about tree preservation orders in South Down; they are among our most abused legislation. The Planning Service, which is the implementing authority for tree preservation orders, must, under TPO, immediately designate and give protection to all outstanding woodlands, not only those that are under threat of being felled.

When making an appeal to planners to designate an area under TPO, I find it frustrating, particularly in places such as Newcastle, to be told that there is no immediate threat. In such cases, all the locals know that the land is for sale and that a developer is waiting to pounce. Inevitably, the residents are ignored and it is only when the chainsaws move in that the planners start to act. That cannot be allowed to happen; we must identify all our important woodlands and protect them immediately.

When someone does step out of line and chop down important scenic woodland in an urban or a rural area, the full rigour of the law must be brought to bear on them. The courts can impose a fine of £30,000 for each tree if someone transgresses. To date, fines of only £200 or £500 have been imposed, which are no deterrent to a developer, given that land in Newcastle was, at one stage, selling at £1.25 million an acre. A fine of £200 for tearing down trees will not deter anyone.

Even more important, a clear signal must be sent out to developers that they will not be allowed to benefit one inch by their abuse and destruction of the tree cover. A developer who clears a five-acre patch of ground by chopping down trees should not be allowed to develop that land. That would send a clear signal to rogue developers that they cannot do that. Last Easter, a developer did exactly that at Myrtle Lodge in Newcastle, and he must never be allowed to benefit from his vandalism.

Mr Savage: I support the motion. In 2006, the Forest Service of Northern Ireland, a subsidiary body of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, produced a strategy for sustainability and growth. Although it was produced under direct rule, the document committed the Department and the Forest Service to a policy of forestation, and it suggested that

the rate of growth at that time of 500 hectares per annum was insufficient and that, at that rate, it would take a century of growth simply to achieve parity with forestation in Britain.

However, the report suggested that funds would not be available for an increase in afforestation projects until a review of the rural development regulations was completed in 2013, although some modest increases might be made through the single farm payment scheme. Despite that, the Forest Service's report for the financial year of 2006-07 included an afforestation target of only 500 hectares per annum. That target was set to increase to only 550 hectares in the following year. That rate of growth means that DARD is on course to fulfil its targets in the Programme for Government to increase the area of forest and woodland by 1,650 hectares by 2011.

In late September 2008, the charity Woodland Trust published 'A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland', which, among other concerns for woodland and forests in Northern Ireland, recommended the original target that was set by the 2006 forestry strategy of doubling the level of woodland coverage over 50 years.

According to the Woodland Trust's report, that would mean the planting of 1,740 hectares of new woodland a year. If that were to continue at the current rate, the level of woodland covered in the next 50 years would be only one third higher than it is now, and it would take a further century to achieve the targets set out in the forestry strategy. It is clear that there is an inconsistency between the woodland creation target set in the Programme for Government and that held in Forest Service's 'Northern Ireland Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth', which was published in 2006.

The Woodland Trust has asked the Executive and their agencies to deliver on their promise to double woodland cover in the next 50 years. That is a long time. The contradictions that exist in the current policy concern me. I want to know how that issue will be addressed. A single approach, which all agencies understand, is needed. In the end, that will achieve the desired target.

Now is the most appropriate time for discussion and debate on the issue, because the Executive intend to introduce new forestry legislation in spring 2009. Bearing that in mind, I ask those who are involved in the framing of that legislation to take note of the debate and its outcome.

In conclusion, I reiterate the point that other Members and I made about the limited target set in the Programme for Government for increasing the area of forest and woodland. I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that are in place to achieve the 2006 forestry strategy targets of doubling woodland cover in the next 50 years.

At present, a big issue faces those of us in the farming industry. The prices offered to farmers for their produce are anything but healthy. I ask the Minister, and all those concerned in the industry, do we produce food or wood? Those are serious thoughts. We need food to feed people, but we need wood for other things. The Department and the Committee must address those questions.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Ken Robinson, Tom Elliott, and Billy Armstrong for tabling the motion, which raises the important issue of increasing woodland areas. That is one of the Government's policy aims for forests, and it is an issue that deserves open debate. In response to George Savage's comments, my Department will examine the debate to assess whether to include in the forestry strategy any issues that were raised today. If I do not cover any issues because of time limitations, I am happy to respond to Members in writing.

I recognise Members' concerns, and I welcome their support for increasing forest areas to allow people to benefit from the wide range of opportunities that forests can provide. During the past year, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of forests and Balcas, a major wood-processing company in my constituency, which Tom Elliott mentioned.

I was impressed by how woodlands are managed, in order to provide a wide range of benefits. Those include the large scale production of timber for use in wood processing, which generates a growing and vibrant industry that generates jobs and wealth in the rural economy; forest parks and recreation areas, where people can relax and enjoy the forest setting and learn about the natural environment; the conservation and enhancement of our remaining semi-natural woodland; the provision of favourable habitat for species such as the red squirrel, and for birds of prey such as the merlin and the hen harrier, which live in new plantations; and the capacity of woodland to help to offset carbon emissions and assist in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Willie Clarke mentioned the potential of tourism. Forest Service welcomes opportunities for its forests to contribute to the development of mountain biking. Although it is not directly responsible for the sport, it is very willing to engage with representatives. Forest Service is already engaged with several stakeholder groups to implement development.

I have been very impressed by the technology, innovation and investment employed to grow and manage woodland, which eventually produces mature trees for the timber market. Those, in turn, can be converted into a variety of useful wood products. The success of that development is the result of a long-term commitment of Government to the forest sector, and

close co-operation between Government and the wood-processing industry in recent years.

4.00 pm

In encouraging the development of forests, and in co-operation with a wide variety of organisations and individuals, I am aware of the growing role that our forests play in providing recreational opportunities and in the conservation of important natural habitats. Other agencies in my Department have done quite a bit of work on this subject, both at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, (AFBI). Last week, AFBI held a very successful conference on the food v fuel debate, and the potential for renewable energy sources from woodland.

Before addressing the issue of the woodland targets set in the Programme for Government, I will outline the background to our aim of doubling the area of woodland over the next 50 years, as stated in the forest strategy, 'A Strategy for the Sustainability of Growth'. The Department's responsibilities for forestry are discharged under the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953. The emphasis of that Act and its predecessor was to encourage the formation of new forests. In 1940, there were 18,500 hectares of woodland; by 1959, that figure had risen to just under 30,000 hectares; by 1970, there were 52,000 hectares of woodland, and by 2007, there were just under 87,000 hectares of woodland covering 6.4% of land area. The increase in forest cover was largely achieved by public-sector afforestation, with conifers, peat boglands and wet mineral soils in the uplands, as was required within the Act. The aim was to provide an adequate reserve of growing trees against a period of national emergency.

Tom Elliott queried the adequacy of departmental inventories. We maintain an accurate and detailed inventory of woodland managed by the Department, and it is updated on an annual basis. Currently, that covers approximately 70% of forest area in the North. We recognise that there are some limitations in the current approach but will consider using other available data and information to allow us to fully capture details on a more long-term basis.

The Forest Service also acquired the demesne land of several estates containing areas of older, mixed woodland, which provided a valuable element of diversity of tree-type and landscape. The Act also allowed the Department to devote some of its resources to developing forest parks and recreation areas, and to set aside grounds for conservation purposes.

The general emphasis of Government policy has changed over time from treating forests as a strategic resource to an economic resource. That change in approach also coincided with greatly improved farming conditions. Land then became too expensive

for state afforestation, and the rate of forest expansion declined. In the 1970s, for example, the average cost to the Forest Service of acquiring land was between £50 and £260 per hectare. In the 1980s, that figure rose to between £500 and £1,200 per hectare; in the 1990s, it reached between £950 and £3,200 per hectare. Prices per hectare so far this decade have reached between £3,800 and £4,900. As Members can see, the rising cost of land has made it more difficult to justify its acquisition for forestry investment.

In more recent years, very high land costs have made land acquisition almost prohibitively expensive. In addition to that, in the early 1990s, the Government became committed to playing their part in conserving biodiversity. Policy was developed to prevent further afforestation of boglands, which were recognised as a threatened habitat on a global scale. Since 1987, greater emphasis has been placed on securing increased participation from private landowners. That has been achieved by providing them with direct grant-aid under the woodland grant scheme, and additional annual payments under the farm woodland scheme and its successors. Between 1987 and 2008, just under 12,400 hectares of private woodland has been established, mostly on mineral soils and at an average rate of 590 hectares per year.

Commercial development of public forests was encouraged by creating the conditions for private industry to become responsible for most of the timber harvesting. As a forest matured, and as increased volumes of timber became available for industrial use, innovative approaches to timber-marketing gave the industry the confidence to invest in new sawmills and to find sustainable markets for home-grown timber. That increased the value-added contribution that forestry makes to our economy. It doubled the area of privately owned woodland, and by the increased use of broad-leaved species, introduced a valuable element of diversity to our landscape.

As I said, forest now covers 6.4% of land area. I recognise that that is much lower than the 10% in the rest of Ireland, 12% in Britain and 33% in Europe, which is a point that many Members raised in the debate.

Against that backdrop, Forest Service carried out an extensive policy review based on the following key issues: how to obtain the best value from the Forest Service estate; the need to secure a balance of public benefits from forests through environmental improvement, public access and timber production; and the continuing scarcity of forest in the North compared with other countries.

In March 2006, the future direction of forest policy was published, and it reflected the responses of the many organisations and individuals who responded to the consultation paper on the Forest Service review.

The conclusions reached were stated as the vision and aims for forestry, and the vision was:

“To meet the forest needs of present and future generation through improved sustainability of forests and an increased rate of afforestation.”

The aims included:

“Provide those owning land with the information and the means to consider afforestation as a realistic alternative land use ... Encourage forest growth to provide timber, biodiversity and access opportunities”.

That vision has many similarities to the strategic plan for forestry in the South, which seeks to maximise the contribution of forestry to national socio-economic well-being on a sustainable basis that is compatible with protection of the environment.

David Ford raised several points about encouraging biodiversity, and our aims seek to protect and enhance the environment. The forest standard, under which we operate, requires us to deliver a programme of habitat restoration, conservation and environmental enhancement, and social engagement, as well as ensuring economic viability. For example, Forest Service accepts the principle of restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites and has recently developed a strategy for the management of Forest Service woodland identified on the ancient woodland inventory.

We have sought to encourage the establishment of new native woodland through a publication of the booklet, ‘Native Woodland Definitions and Guidance’, earlier this year. We also engage with a wide range of organisations in relation to forestry and the emerging issues of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. We have worked with the processing industry to develop renewable-energy opportunities from forests, and we will continue with that work.

The forestry strategy also referred to a programme of afforestation, and the strategy indicates a desire to:

“see the area of forests double so that the people ... will have access to the same level of forestry benefits as are available in”

Britain.

“While it is desirable that this should take place quickly, in practice progress depends on the willingness of landowners to plant their land and may well only be achieved over the next 50 years or so.”

The strategy states that a wide range of woodland will be encouraged, including:

“traditional coniferous and broadleaved plantations as well as new energy plantations”;

That expansion will be primarily through the conversion of private agricultural land to forest using funds made available under the rural development programme; that:

“the rate of afforestation is likely to parallel the rate of change in the agricultural sector”,

which in turn will be influenced by common agricultural policy reform and agricultural economics, which will be influenced by the state of the economy as a whole; and that the commitment of farmers to continue farming:

“means that forests are likely to expand slowly.”

However, the strategy adds that as confidence about the impact of common agricultural policy reform materialises and the advantages of growing woodland become more apparent, the demand for afforestation schemes is expected to increase.

The public service agreement (PSA) target for new afforestation over a three-year period, ending in March 2008, was 1,500 hectares, at an annual rate of 500 hectares. The total area planted in that period was 1,693 hectares. Therefore, the current PSA target has been increased to 1,650 hectares of new woodland over a three-year period ending in March 2011, at a rate of 550 hectares per year. That is a challenging target to achieve in the current economic climate, and it is acknowledged that the rate of planting will need to increase threefold to achieve the long-term aim of doubling the forest area in the next 50 years. However, our strategy anticipated a slow beginning, and my Department will renew its activity to encourage woodland expansion.

The Department will continue to offer capital grants and annual payments to encourage farmers and landowners to consider forestry as an alternative land use and to enhance existing woodland under the rural development programme for 2007-2013. Under the programme, funding is available for forestry measures of up to £16 million over the programme period. Grants are available for the establishment of both conventional woodland and short rotation coppice plantation for an energy end use.

In addition, some landowners and farmers will be eligible for the farm woodland premium scheme, comprising annual payments for up to 15 years, in order to compensate for agriculture income foregone.

Tom Elliott questioned the level of support in the North compared with that in the South. P J Bradley also raised that point. The principal difference between the schemes in the North and those in the South relates to programme funding. In the North, forestry schemes are funded through the rural development programme, but in the South, forestry grants are funded wholly through the Irish Exchequer. That means that the South's payment rates are not restricted by the same maximum allowable rates to which those in the North are bound under the rural development regulation. For example, in the South, aid of up to 100% is available for the establishment of forests, compared with our maximum of 70% under the rural development programme. In its review of opportunities to promote

grant-aided woodland expansion, the Department will note the range of support that is available in the South.

The Department will improve the publicity and marketing of the forestry grant schemes through its recently produced publicity and marketing strategy, which aims to maximise the awareness of farmers, landowners, advisory and educational bodies and their understanding of the schemes. That will be achieved through the provision of case studies, information leaflets, press articles and open days that demonstrate the benefits of woodland ownership and that will be an opportunity for interested landowners to discuss their proposals with staff from the Department's Forest Service.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Sorry, I do not have time.

Forest Service will also update its indicative map — which is published on the Department's website — that indicates where new woodland planting could make the best long-term use of land and those areas where, for environmental reasons, there may be a presumption against new woodland planting. The document will continue to be developed to target new woodland planting where it will be most environmentally and socially valuable.

Finally, Forest Service will review opportunities to promote grant-aided woodland expansion during the current business year. Its focus will be to identify the main barriers that affect woodland expansion on farmland, as well as ways that those can be overcome.

Other issues were raised during the debate; for example, P J Bradley expressed concerns about compulsory purchasing powers. Obviously, the Department's proposal is that new powers will be used sparingly and proportionately and will comply with normal compulsory purchase procedures and controls.

Mr Wells raised several points. Although I found his contribution interesting, many of his comments need to be addressed to his party colleague the Environment Minister. In response to a point that he made about forestry, I hope that the forestry Bill will contain provisions to regulate the felling and regeneration of woodlands by means of a licence. Formal detailed instructions will be issued on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister must draw her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will.

Government's long-term commitment to forestry has generated 950 rural jobs, and, annually, it provides £24 million of value added to the economy through primary-wood processing. In addition, forests attract around two million day visitors annually. About one

fifth of Forest Service woodland is designated for statutory conservation purposes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Minister. You have done well.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: OK. My Department will respond to any points that I have missed.

Mr McCallister: I join other colleagues in welcoming the Minister back to the Assembly. I thought that the Minister for Regional Development would respond to the debate. He is in charge of roads, an area in which work is done within the same timescale — at least a century is needed for anything to be done.

In his opening remarks, my colleague Mr Elliott discussed at length the importance of woodland and the need to increase its density in order to achieve health benefits for people. Other Members made that point when they referred to recreational use of forests and the importance of those areas for the whole of Northern Ireland: environmentally; as a habitat for wildlife; and, indeed, to help to protect the planet — and not just from Sammy Wilson.

Of course, Mr Elliott made the important point that it is not only improbable, but impossible, to achieve targets at the current rate of progress. The Assembly must do much better and raise its game; otherwise, it will not come close to achieving those targets. Mr Elliott also spoke encouragingly about the scheme because of the difference that it makes to the economy.

He and the Minister represent the same constituency, and Mr Elliott mentioned a company there that makes an important contribution to an area that does not always attract other jobs. It is important for the Assembly to help such companies to provide employment and to maintain recreational areas.

4.15 pm

Mr Irwin of the DUP talked about the Programme for Government, grant-aided schemes, how best to improve woodland cover, and renewable energy.

Mr Clarke from Sinn Féin referred several times to how the Executive should do this, that and the other. Unless I am mistaken, the Executive have not met for a while, and, therefore, they are unlikely to do much at the moment. The Assembly must get a grip on that problem; the Executive must get back to work. They must take their rightful place and show leadership not only on this issue but on a vast range of other matters. Mr Clarke mentioned South Down, where people are fortunate to have some high-quality forests, particularly for recreational purposes. Mr Clarke and Mr Elliott mentioned that forest parks are hugely beneficial to physical and mental health, and it is important to recognise them as great assets.

By virtue of P J Bradley's contribution, the debate covered a period from 400 years in the past to 100 years in the future. He managed to include information on why so many forests were cleared 400 years ago — it was good of him to mention that. He went on to talk about the rural development programme and questioned the different payments received by full-time and part-time farmers. Although I did not hear the Minister respond to Mr Bradley's question, I am sure that when she and her officials read the Hansard report, they will pick that up.

Mr Ford of the Alliance Party talked about the challenging nature of the proposals. As he outlined the targets, he made some useful points about how ancient woodlands must be looked after and protected. He referred to the failure of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, although the Minister is probably not at liberty to talk about that Department.

Mr Shannon talked about the benefits of woodland to wildlife, although presumably he was referring to the wildlife that he has not shot out of the sky — I was surprised that he used the word "target". He made serious points about the recreational and sporting benefits of forestry throughout the world, and he also mentioned the contribution that sport makes to the economy.

Mr Wells, as the Minister pointed out, disagreed with his party colleague the Minister of the Environment when he announced that he believes in climate change.

Mr Beggs: He has come out.

Mr McCallister: Is he allowed to use that phrase?

Mr Wells's position sets him at odds with the Minister of the Environment. However, he spoke passionately not only about the environmental impact but about how to protect forestry. He suggested using some of the existing mechanisms, such as ASSIs, part of the single farm payment or tree protection orders. He also raised the issue of rogue developers not being allowed to use land that has been cleared.

One drawback of holding the debate at the same time as a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is that my party colleagues Mr Savage and Mr Elliott, having made their contributions, had to return to that meeting.

Mr Savage talked about the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953, and I am disappointed that the Minister did not give more details as to what any amendment to that Act would entail.

Mr Wells: I had hoped that the Minister would have taken the opportunity to indicate the nature of the new legislation, which will form the bedrock of a strategy to protect our woodlands. I am, therefore, taking this opportunity to express my slight concern that she did not do so.

Mr McCallister: I agree with Mr Wells; such information would have been useful.

Thankfully, the Minister did not delve as far into the past as P J Bradley; had she done so, her 15 minutes would have been insufficient. However, she gave the House a fair old history lesson, outlining how we have reached this stage. She mentioned the 1940s and 1950s, which were times of national emergency, and she detailed private landowners' increased participation in 1987. Although that information was interesting, I, like other Members, wanted to hear about the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision for making a difference and for achieving the Programme for Government's targets. The policy of printing and distributing leaflets in the hope of arousing interest seems like wishful thinking.

The Minister said that forestry schemes in Northern Ireland are funded through the rural development programme, whereas those in the Republic of Ireland are funded directly by the Irish Exchequer. I would have liked the Minister to have said whether she will propose policy changes at Executive meetings — if those meetings recommence — or whether she will seek funding. I would like to know the direction in which the Department sees such policies going. Will the rural development programme be enough to enable targets to be achieved? The House requires information about the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision and about how it intends to achieve targets rather than wishful thinking lacking in firm substance. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the limited target set in the Programme for Government for increasing the area of forest and woodland; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that are in place to achieve the 2006 Forestry Strategy target of doubling woodland cover in the next fifty years.

Adjourned at 4.23 pm.

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