
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 19 January 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order from the Member.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to make two points of order. The first relates to the debate on the Financial Assistance Bill that took place last Tuesday, 13 January. During the debate, Mr Declan O'Loan made remarks about my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin's role at a meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that had taken place the previous week. Will the Speaker check the Hansard reports of that Committee meeting and of Tuesday's debate to determine the accuracy of those remarks?

My second point of order relates to the education debate on 13 January, during which Mr Mervyn Storey made remarks about my party colleague Cairiona Ruane. He said that she had "put on her educational balaclava." I consider those remarks to be unparliamentary, and I ask the Speaker to check the Hansard report of that debate.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for her points of order. On the first point, I will review the Hansard reports and come back to her.

On the second point of order, I have studied the Hansard report of the debate on the closure of rural schools on Tuesday 13 January. Yet again, I find myself reminding Members of the standards that are expected during any debate in the House. Members should know by now that direct, unsubstantiated allegations of criminal behaviour against another Member are highly unparliamentary.

The comments that were made directly about the Minister of Education fell short of the moderate or good temper that is expected in the House and were, at least, very discourteous. However, I do not consider that they crossed the line into unparliamentary language. I have repeatedly warned Members, and I do

so again, to take care about what they say about each other to ensure that they do not cross that line. I say that to every Member of the House, because debates can become heated, and sometimes things are said that, on reflection, should not have been said. I again remind Members on all sides of the House to be mindful of their language.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, will you clarify how you came to the conclusion that any of my remarks could have implied criminal behaviour? Where did you get that assessment of the issues that I raised or the statement that I made, which I have no difficulty with and will repeat? I find the sensitivity of the Members opposite astounding, bearing in mind their past and what they were engaged in for 40 years. All of a sudden they have become very sensitive about allegations and things that are said in this House.

Mr Speaker: I did not accuse the Member of making allegations of criminal behaviour. I was making a general point to Members concerning what they say and do in the House. I was not accusing the Member of accusing another Member of criminal behaviour.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Education Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement about the outcome of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in education sectoral format, which was held in the Mont Clare Hotel, Dublin, on 10 December 2008. I represented the Executive as Minister of Education, along with junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson. The Irish Government were represented by Batt O’Keeffe, Minister for Education and Science. This statement has been agreed with Jeffrey Donaldson and is made on behalf of us both.

A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a thabhairt maidir le cruinniú de chuid na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid na hearnála oideachais. Tionóladh an cruinniú sa Mont Clare Hotel, Baile Átha Cliath ar 10 Nollaig 2008.

I will summarise the main points from the meeting, ranging across all the agreed areas of education co-operation. The North/South Ministerial Council endorsed proposals for future work on education underachievement, which will focus initially on interventions to support parents and families in helping their children with education and on challenges facing children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Tabharfaidh mé achoimre ar na príomhphointí a ndearnadh plé orthu ag an chruinniú, thar na réimsí comhaontaithe ar fad maidir le comhoibriú san earnáil oideachais.

The Council noted the positive report from the successful first joint conference on numeracy, which I attended. The areas identified in the report for further development, including possible collaboration in the areas of mathematics in initial teacher education, are under consideration by the two Departments.

We welcomed the establishment by the Department of Education of a task force on Traveller education, jointly chaired by Irish Traveller Catherine Joyce and Dr Robbie McVeigh, which will bring together a wide range of stakeholders across the island; the proposal to hold a North/South conference on best practice in Traveller education in March 2009; and the proposal to hold a peer learning event in March 2009 on the subject of school attendance.

On the issue of teacher qualifications and teachers’ superannuation, the Council noted the collaborative work on the portability of teachers’ pensions; the seminars for student teachers to provide information on the Irish language qualification requirements for teaching in Southern schools; the communication and co-operation between the inspectorates of both Departments of Education in relation to the professional development of inspectors; and the collaborative work on leadership development issues and the joint research project on how best to attract and develop new school leaders.

Thug an Chomhairle dá haire an tuarascáil dhearfach d’éirigh as an chéad chomhdháil ar uimhearthacht ar éirigh go hiontach léi agus a raibh mise i láthair aici. Tá breithniú á dhéanamh ag an dá Roinn maidir leis na réimsí a sainithníodh sa tuarascáil a raibh tuilleadh forbartha de dhíth orthu, lena n-áirítear comhoibriú féideartha i réimse na matamaitice in oideachas tosaigh na múinteoirí.

We also welcomed the findings of a study on the North/South student teacher exchange programme, which has been a great success in developing greater knowledge of each other’s education system and curriculum.

I now turn to special education needs. The Council noted the further progress that has been made in the past six months on the services provided by the all-island Middletown Centre for Autism, including the development of the centre’s training schedule for the current academic year. We also noted the completion of the centre’s detailed consultation with parents and other interested parties on how its services can be best provided.

We noted the main conclusions and findings of the consultation exercise, which will be published on the centre’s website. Some 90% of those who responded agreed with the centre’s residential approach. We noted that the centre is developing, with key partners, the important processes and criteria for referral to, and attendance at, the centre. In addition, we noted that a planning application had been made for the main rebuilding and refurbishment programme, and welcomed the completion of the refurbishment of the office accommodation.

Chuir muid fáilte roimh thorthaí an staidéir a rinneadh ar an chlár malartaithe ábhar múinteora Thuaidh/Theas, ar éirigh go hiontach leis maidir le níos mó eolas a fhorbairt ar chóras oideachais ar churaclam an dá limistéar.

The Council also welcomed plans by the two Education Departments to organise jointly an autistic spectrum disorders conference in November 2009.

I now turn to school, youth and teacher exchanges. The Council welcomed the ongoing commitment to

cross-border school, youth and teacher exchanges as a means of fostering mutual understanding and exploiting opportunities for mutual benefit. We also welcomed the work programme for the North/South Exchange Consortium, which will support the work of the two Departments in developing a joint approach for the management and funding of educational exchanges. The Council will consider at a future meeting a report on progress achieved.

Mar fhocal scoir, shocraigh muid gur chóir an chéad chruinniú den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid na hearnála oideachais a thionól in Aibreán/Bealtaine 2009.

In closing, we agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should take place in April/May 2009. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): As Chairperson of the Committee, I want to ask the Minister about her references in today's statement to the Middletown Centre for Autism. The Committee for Education heard directly from Gary Cooper, chief executive of the centre, and his senior colleagues, at its meeting on 8 October 2008. We received a detailed written response to follow-up questions from Mr Cooper and the Department on 12 November and 14 November 2008.

The Minister said in her statement that the Council noted the further progress that has been made in the past six months on the services provided at Middletown. However, one of the Committee's major concerns was: why the delay in providing the key assessment and learning support services for children and young people until spring 2010?

It was announced in 2002 that the Middletown centre provided those services. With estimated annual running costs of £3.5 million, and several million pounds being pumped into the centre over the past seven years, I will ask again: why will the centre not be fully operational to provide its key services for yet another year? I note the Department's written response to the Committee for Education last November, which said:

“it is regrettable that the centre has been subject to delay”.

In her reply to my question, can the Minister inform the House precisely how much public money — resource and capital — has been spent to date on the Middletown project, and when will we really see delivery on an issue that has been dragged on for far too long?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Thank you for that question.

The decision to establish the Middletown Centre for Autism jointly was endorsed by the North/South

Ministerial Council at its education sectoral meeting on 11 April 2002.

12.15 pm

The project was initially delayed because the vendors were unable to sell until April 2004. The property was then purchased in June 2004. Following the purchase, the project was delayed while the Department of Education carried out an extensive revised economic appraisal, which was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel in July 2006.

I take no responsibility for that delay; it happened under a direct rule Minister. Members know that I believe that the centre is a very important project. One of the first visits that I made as a Minister — with deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness — was to the centre. I am very impressed with the centre's work.

The two Education Departments, along with the integrated design team, have been progressing matters pertaining to the rebuilding and refurbishment programme. The centre has provided training courses since December 2007 and a research function since the summer of 2008. The assessment services cannot come on stream until the completion of the building programme in spring 2010.

However, next year will see the modelling of the two-day education assessment service for children and young people with autistic spectrum disorder. The centre is developing a three-year corporate plan and a business plan, which will be made available once approved. All Members are aware of the importance of providing services for children on the autistic spectrum. The Middletown Centre is a centre of excellence.

Funding for the purchase and running costs of the Middletown Centre has been provided on a 50:50 basis by the Department of Education in the North of Ireland and the Department of Education and Science in the South of Ireland. The Department of Education spent £1.5 million on the purchase of the property. The running costs of the centre are estimated at approximately £3.5 million per annum and are shared equally between the two Departments.

The refurbishment costs are being considered by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) as part of an updated economic appraisal. The Department of Health and Children in the South also funds half the therapy and day costs. I hope that no Member believes that funding should not be provided for children who deserve to attend the centre. In fact, I know that Members will join me in wishing the centre all the best in the wonderful work that it is doing. The amount of money involved is relatively modest, given the services provided in what is a very exciting project.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agaibh, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. My West Belfast constituency contains many children from the Travelling community. What provisions are available for children from the Travelling community, including Roma? Sometimes many of those children are left to their own devices for far too long.

The Minister of Education: I welcome the Member's focus on Traveller and Roma children, who are among some of the most disadvantaged children throughout the island of Ireland.

The common funding formula resulted in schools receiving £983 per Traveller child for 2008-09. In the same year, earmarked funding of £364,000 was provided to education and library boards for the education of Traveller children. Therefore, a total of more than £1 million was provided as additional funding for the education of Traveller children in the North of Ireland, 92% of whom do not have formal qualifications. That is a staggering number of young people from any ethnic group, and a figure about which I am very much concerned.

My Department recognises the need to build a more co-ordinated approach to Traveller education; therefore, the creation of a centralised service is a high priority. I have established a task force on Traveller education that brings together representatives from statutory and non-statutory bodies from all of Ireland. They will help the Department to develop an action plan that will be a catalyst for real and lasting change in the education of children from the Traveller community. The task force will build on current engagement with the voluntary sector in order to explore how the statutory sector and organisations that support the Travelling community can work together in an effort to ensure better educational outcomes.

As I said in my statement, a North/South conference on good practice in Traveller education is scheduled for 11 March 2009. That will be aimed primarily at educationalists. Relevant non-governmental organisations will also participate. The conference will raise awareness among principals and teachers of a range of good practice, and encourage the associated changes in schools.

Updated guidance, in the form of a school circular, will be provided to schools in 2009 on the education of children from the Travelling community. After it has been considered by the Task Force on Traveller Education, the circular will be issued to schools for consultation. As I said, Catherine Joyce, who is an Irish Traveller, co-chairs that task force with Dr Robbie McVeigh.

I am also aware that Roma children are enrolled in some schools in the North. Although there is no census information on those children, from next year there will be a "Roma" category in the annual school census,

which means that we will be able to obtain a more accurate picture of where they are enrolled. Many Roma children have never been to school, and those who are enrolled in schools have attendance and significant attainment problems.

Roma children also have language requirements, for which my Department is already providing funding, because they are classed as having English as an additional language (EAL). We are also planning additional funding for the incoming year, in recognition of the barriers to learning that Roma children face, which are similar to those that Irish Traveller children face. That means that schools with such children will obtain additional funding under two separate categories — Roma children will be classed as both EAL children and children from the Travelling community. In the past, Roma children were not entitled to free school meals, and all Members will agree that no children should go hungry in our classrooms. Therefore, we have put in place interim arrangements to ensure that Roma children get a meal during the school day.

Mr B McCrea: Before I ask my question, is it in order to raise a point of order?

Mr Speaker: No, it is not. However, the Member can raise it when questions to the Minister on her statement have finished.

Mr B McCrea: I will do that, Mr Speaker.

We are in a strange situation in which the Minister's answers to questions are longer than her statement. One might be forgiven for thinking that the Minister had a little bit of prior information about the questions.

The Minister cited the developments on educational underachievement in the Republic of Ireland, which has a comprehensive education system. Is she aware of an Irish Government report that states that one in 10 children still leave school without basic reading and writing skills, which rises to one in three children from disadvantaged communities? Given those statistics from the South, will the Minister agree that academic selection is a red herring that has nothing to do with tackling educational underachievement? Will she also admit that her efforts in the past 18 months have been a waste of time, because they have failed to address the real issues that our communities face?

The Minister of Education: Educational underachievement is unacceptable, wherever it occurs on this island. One reason why I place educational underachievement at the top of my agenda for North/South Ministerial Council meetings is that I want to see all children on this island get access to the best possible education. We must ensure that we do not leave any child behind and that every child gets a fair chance. If children do not get a fair chance in Mayo, Galway, Cork, Derry, Donegal or Belfast, we must do

something about that. Children get one chance in life, and we must ensure that every barrier to opportunities for children is removed. I would appreciate if the Member listened to my answer to his question.

With regard to the use of academic selection, if any Member thinks that it is acceptable that 12,000 young people leave school without GCSEs in English and maths or Irish and maths, I do not share that view. I will not be a Minister who presides over educational apartheid. If Members are happy that 92% of the Travelling community leave school without any formal qualifications, let it be on their consciences, because it will not be on mine. My party and I will take every possible step to ensure that the best possible education system is in place for Traveller children, Roma children and all children who face barriers. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I was asked whether I thought that I had wasted my time — absolutely not.

The debate that we have been having in recent months has been crucial. Thankfully, there is no more 11-plus — it is gone. I hope that we can reach agreement on the matter, and I will do everything that I can in order to ensure that we can reach agreement in the House. However, if we cannot do so, I will issue guidance. I will not stand idly by and watch while our children are failed. We should not compare educational underachievement in the South with that in the North. We should celebrate children who achieve and ensure that those who are not achieving have the opportunity — that they richly deserve — to do so. We have failed generations of young people, and that cannot continue.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I heard an echo of the former Taoiseach Jack Lynch when the Minister said that she would “not stand idly by”.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas atá déanta ag an Aire inniu, agus gabhaim buíochas léi as. Ach mar sin féin, tá ceist nó dhó agam di. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an bhfuil aon dul chun cinn déanta aici maidir le cúrsaí a chur ar fáil i gcoláiste oiliúna anseo sa Tuaisceart do oiliúint in-seirbhíse múinteoirí agus do oiliúint ábhar oídi sa cháilíocht Gaeilge atá riachtanach i gcoláistí sa Deisceart.

I thank the Minister for her statement, which I welcome. Has she made any progress in providing in-service and initial teacher-training courses for the Irish-language qualification that is necessary in the South? Has she made any provision for such courses in a training college in the North of Ireland?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. As the Member knows, a review of Irish-medium education is taking place, and there have been major consultations on it. I am sure that the

Member’s party has made a submission to the review, and, if it has not, I urge it to do so. All the submissions will be studied carefully, and we will introduce a programme for every aspect of Irish-medium education.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. To follow on from Dominic Bradley’s comments about teachers’ qualifications, a seminar will be held to provide information on the requirements for the Irish-language qualification. Did the Minister get any sense that, in the South, those requirements may eventually be relaxed slightly rather than done away with?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. As the Member knows, teachers from here who wish to teach in the primary sector in the South but who do not hold the requisite Irish-language qualification — an scrúdú le haghaidh cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge — are granted provisional recognition as teachers by the Department of Education and Science, and they are allowed five years in which to acquire the qualification. On attainment of that qualification, they are then recognised in the South of Ireland as being fully qualified. Provisionally recognised teachers are placed on the appropriate point of the salary scale, and they are entitled to qualification allowances.

In the case of post-primary schools, the Irish-language requirement applies only to teachers who are employed in Gaeltacht schools — where every subject is taught through the medium of Irish — and to teachers who teach any subject through the medium of Irish. I am sure that Members will understand that in the South of Ireland, the Irish language is taught in the same way as the English language and that many different subjects are taught through the medium of Irish. It is a key part of the curriculum, and children learn in a bilingual way from the moment that they start school.

We have done everything that we can to ensure that no one is disadvantaged, but we must respect the native language of a country at the same time.

Mr McCausland: In the Minister’s statement, she said that she would treat children from the Travelling community as children for whom English is an additional language. What was the basis for that decision? What research has been carried out on the competence of children from the Travelling community in the English language and in the language that is traditionally associated with that community, which, I think, is either Cant or Shelta?

12.30 pm

The Minister of Education: Plenty of research has been done on the subject of English-language education for Traveller children. The Member will be aware that the Travelling community was a key focus of a recent Equality Commission conference. Report after report has shown the serious disadvantage that

the Travelling community experiences. Education in the cultural traditions and language — Cant — of Traveller children is now a part of the curriculum in order to avoid the racism that the Travelling community faces in Ireland, North and South. I take the matter very seriously.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I especially welcome the work that is being done on educational underachievement. What were the main outcomes of the discussions that took place at the most recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin, a Dhaithí. Appropriately, the most recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in the education sectoral format was held in Dublin on 10 December 2008 — International Human Rights Day. At that meeting, Ministers endorsed proposals for future work on educational underachievement. That work will focus initially on interventions to support parents and families from disadvantaged backgrounds in helping their children to face educational challenges.

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

We noted the positive report from the successful first joint conference on numeracy, which I attended, along with Seán Haughey TD from the South of Ireland. The areas that were identified for further development in the report included possible collaboration on mathematics and initial teacher education. The two Departments are considering those issues, but it was useful that that conference focused solely on numeracy and mathematics. It brought together some of the best minds on the island, North and South, to develop strategies to deal with poor numeracy.

We welcomed the establishment of the Task Force on Traveller Education. A follow-up conference on best practice in Traveller education will take place in March 2009, and a proposal has been made to hold a peer learning event in the same month. Some good work has been done on leadership. We all know that school leadership and the role of principals is very important, and we are putting a huge amount of energy into implementing the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommendations on school leadership and on how to tackle some of the issues.

Mr Ross: I wish to return to the subject of educational underachievement. We know that it is an important issue, particularly in Protestant working-class areas; however, the biggest barrier may be educational aspiration. In discussing the matter with her counterparts in Dublin, or even looking to GB for an example, does the Minister now recognise that, where geographical criteria are used for admissions to

schools, the evidence backs up the fact that parents who have more money can buy houses that are closer to the most popular schools, and children from disadvantaged areas lose out more than they would under a system of academic selection?

The Minister of Education: First, I am glad that the subject of educational underachievement is now firmly on the agenda. When I came into this post many months ago, people were talking about a world-class education system, without focusing on educational underachievement. Thankfully, how to deal with that is now on the agenda. Thankfully, the 11-plus is gone. I welcome the fact that we are now considering how our children will transfer from primary education to post-primary education.

I have brought proposals to the Executive, and I have made no secret in the House of my views on academic selection. I say to those who are concerned about a postcode lottery, let us look at the lottery that currently exists. In the past, I gave Members statistics on children from areas such as —

Mr Storey: The Malone Road.

The Minister of Education: The Malone Road or Hillsborough, for example. Those areas would be viewed as affluent, and they would not appear at the top of the Noble index or be considered under new targeting social need. I also gave Members statistics for the Shankill Road, the New Lodge and other parts of the North.

Those statistics are very worrying. I welcome Mr Ross's question about how we will ensure that the new proposals do not recreate the postcode lottery that currently exists. That can be achieved in a couple of ways. We should keep families and communities together, which is a good way to build strong communities and to make sure that children are not bypassing local schools.

Members will be aware that in the proposals that I brought forward, a very small number of free school meals is provided in the grammar school sector, and a much higher 19% in the secondary sector. Therefore, because I have listened to what Members said, my proposals look at social justice criteria in order that the number of children getting free school meals is spread fairly right across the school system, thereby avoiding a situation in which some schools have 34% and 58% of children getting free school meals, and some schools have 0%.

Mr McCallister: Despite the Minister's update on progress at Middletown, is it not the fact that it is unlikely that children will be at the centre before 2010, and that given her High Court humiliation over contracts, that deadline may be put even further back?

What has been the staffing cost at Middletown since 2005? It hardly takes hundreds of thousands of pounds to put a programme together. However, that is all that seems to have been achieved at Middletown so far. Given all the consultations that the Minister alleges that she has had – and there are concerns about the centre, the numbers attending and its location – has she made any concrete arrangements for health cover?

Finally, is the Minister willing for her Middletown folly to be the subject of a full debate in the Chamber?

The Minister of Education: It worries me when I hear constant criticism of a centre that will be for our most vulnerable children. It worries me greatly, and I am very disappointed that some Members are trying to diminish the centre. This is a key centre of excellence for our children —

Mr McCallister: How many?

The Minister of Education: Excuse me; there is no need to interrupt. I did not interrupt you.

The centre will provide key services for some of our most vulnerable children. I am very surprised to hear that the Member may have concerns about location. The Member comes from the constituency of South Down. Surely, it is his role to ensure that services are located not just in the Belfast area. I hope that the Member will read the Bain Report on the issue of decentralisation.

The qualification must be made that some people think that there is a problem with the centre's location. I believe that the location is very good; the centre is strategically located so that children can travel to it from all parts of the North and the South. It is very good that we have that centre in the North of Ireland.

Mr McCallister: What about the funding?

The Minister of Education: I have already provided the funding figures. The four key services to be provided by the centre are a learning support service, an educational assessment service, a training and advisory service, and an autism research and information centre. The centre will be multi-disciplinary and operate in support of local services, but will not offer a primary referral service.

This may be news to the Member, but the centre has already begun to deliver training courses. Approximately 360 education professionals have been trained. A planned training schedule of almost 30 training sessions, delivering training to education professionals and allied professionals, statutory and voluntary, is in place for 2009. Research has commenced on data collection for internal analysis by the centre and a review of literature on diet and its impact on autism. That was one of a number of research issues that were identified during the centre's public consultation. The education assessment and learning support services will come on

stream when building works are complete, which is expected to be in the spring of 2010.

With regard to the North/South dimension, the Southern Government's Department of Health and Children and Department of Education and Science are funding the centre. Unfortunately, in the North, only the Department of Education is providing funding.

Mr Attwood: I refer the Minister to the final section of her report to the Assembly, which deals with school, youth and teacher exchanges. I am concerned about that section because, as she is aware, a proposal was made during the first mandate to create a trust in which the work of the British Council, the Youth Council and Léargas would be integrated in order to maximise North/South educational exchanges.

Since the current Minister took up her position, an economic appraisal and a review of that proposal have been carried out, but the Minister has not come to the Assembly to explain what is happening with that proposal. Where is the review that arose from the economic appraisal? Is the Minister concerned that a good model for joined-up educational exchanges on this island — the proposal for a trust — is in jeopardy and that a lesser model will be put in place?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, an unprecedented amount of North/South work has been carried out at all levels. I outlined the amount of work that is going on, and I will continue to do North/South work, as I do British-Irish work.

During the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, we welcomed the work programme for the North/South Exchange Consortium, which will support the work of the two Departments in developing a joint approach for the future management and funding of educational exchanges. At a future meeting, the NSMC will consider a report on the progress that has been achieved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Francie Brolly.

Mr Molloy: Thank you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Francie Brolly.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat. Does the Minister agree that teachers who move either way between North and South should be able to transfer their pension benefits?

The Minister of Education: I agree that teachers should be able to transfer their pension benefits. It must be ensured that there is maximum North/South mobility, and it is in everyone's interest that that happens. That has been on the agenda, and we are waiting for a report on the obstacles to mobility and how we ensure that across all sectors — not only the education sector — there are no barriers to teachers moving from North to South or from South to North.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Francie — watch my lips — Molloy.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement, particularly for the detail that she provided on the autism centre and the work that has been done there.

What process has been put in place to assist teachers to attain the qualification for teaching Irish in the South of Ireland?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. As I said in an answer to an earlier question, a review of Irish-medium education has been completed, and an extensive consultation has taken place. The Department will study all the proposals in detail and will then introduce its final proposals.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Tom Elliott.

Mr Elliott: Thank you. I am just glad that I am not called Francie Elliott.

The Minister's statement mentioned the seminars for student teachers to provide information on Irish-language qualification requirements. I also noted Mr Lunn's half-hearted request for a relaxation of that measure. Is it not time that the Minister tried to impress on, and strongly lobby, her Southern counterparts that it is time to abandon that outdated policy and practice and to develop a policy that is much more reflective of a shared future and positive co-operation?

The Minister of Education: I am not sure that I understand the Member's question. Is the Member suggesting that the practice of speaking Irish be abandoned, or that children in the South of Ireland should not be entitled to their rights? I welcome the fact that children in the South of Ireland and, increasingly, in the North of Ireland who do not go to an Irish-medium primary school can learn Irish in primary school. As Members know, I put in place an optional primary languages programme for Irish and Spanish, because children learn languages far too late in the North.

12.45 pm

In the South, thankfully, children learn two different languages from the moment they enter primary school. It is a pity that children here do not learn languages earlier. However, I have remedied that to some degree. The Irish language is the native language of Ireland; it is a beautiful language. I take seriously my duties under the Good Friday Agreement and European legislation.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Assembly is striving to achieve a more lively debate at Question Time. Will you bring to the Speaker's attention the suggestion that we adopt the same rules for questions on a Minister's statement? After all, they are also questions. To facilitate a more

interactive engagement with the Minister who makes the statement, Members should not read prepared questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I will report it to the Speaker and he will respond at a later date.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. A particularly good example of what Mr McCrea referred to occurred during the Minister's reply. I asked a useful question — *[Interruption.]* Such is the nature of SDLP Members' questions. However, in response to my question, the Minister repeated part of her report verbatim.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order; the Member is supposed to be raising a point of order.

Mr Attwood: This is a point of order — the Minister repeated, verbatim, the second last paragraph of her statement. Therefore, further to what Mr McCrea has said, I ask the Speaker to consider whether it is in order for a Minister who is not in a position to answer a question to concede the point and to provide a written answer to the Member who asked it. It is not acceptable that, in reply to a question, a Minister should read out her statement a second time. What is the point of asking questions if that is the standard of reply?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. He has made his point well, not only in his own opinion, but in the opinion of others. The point will be brought to the Speaker, who will respond in due course.

Nonetheless, it is a convention of the House that if several questions are put to the Minister by a Member, the Minister may choose to answer one, two, all, or only a few of the questions put.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order. I thank you for your clarification of that convention, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, the point is that the reading out, verbatim, of a statement already before Members is not answering the question. The purpose of these proceedings is the furnishing of answers to questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As previously stated, the Speaker will respond at a later date.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Amend Standing Order 64

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allocated up to one hour for the debate and up to 20 minutes for the Committee Chairperson to move the motion and to give his winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

In Standing Order 64, delete “all” and insert —

“64. MATTERS OF JOINT CONCERN: OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO COMMITTEES

Where a matter may be of concern to two or more committees (“the relevant committees”) it may be dealt with by —

- (a) one of the relevant committees disposing of it, in accordance with Standing Order 64A;
- (b) the relevant committees sitting concurrently, in accordance with Standing Order 64B;
- (c) an ad hoc joint committee established for that purpose, in accordance with Standing Order 64C.”

64A. MATTERS OF JOINT CONCERN: DISPOSAL BY ONE COMMITTEE

(1) The chairpersons of the relevant committees shall consult and agree which committee the matter should fall to for disposal. Where they are unable to agree, they shall make their views known to the Business Committee which shall rule on which committee the matter should fall to for disposal.

(2) The committee to which the matter falls for disposal shall seek the views and establish the interests of the other relevant committees before arriving at any conclusions and may invite the other relevant committees to carry out the consideration of any stated issue and provide it with a draft report.

64B. MATTERS OF JOINT CONCERN: COMMITTEES SITTING CONCURRENTLY

(1) The relevant committees shall consult and agree that the matter be disposed of by the relevant committees sitting concurrently.

(2) The procedures normally applicable to committees shall continue to apply to concurrent sittings, save that the relevant committees shall, as far as practicable, operate as a single committee. While operating as a single committee, they shall, for example, deliberate and consider any evidence together, produce a single set of minutes, and prepare any reports together.

(3) The chairpersons of the relevant committees shall consult and agree that—

- (a) one of them shall act as chairperson and another as deputy chairperson, or
- (b) the posts of chairperson and deputy chairperson shall be rotated between them.

The chairpersons shall prefer that a person not act as chairperson at the concurrent sittings if he or she is of the same party as a Minister (including the First Minister and deputy First Minister) who the concurrent sittings may advise or assist.

(4) Where the chairpersons of the relevant committees fail to agree on one of the alternatives set out in paragraph (3), they shall

make their views known to the Business Committee which shall rule on the matter.

(5) For the avoidance of doubt —

(a) a person acting as chairperson at a concurrent sitting, who is a chairperson of one of the relevant committees, shall not be regarded as breaching any prohibition in Standing Order 48(13) or 51(10);

(b) a quorum shall be present at a concurrent sitting if there is a quorum present for each of the relevant committees;

(c) all questions at concurrent sittings shall be decided by a simple majority of all members present; voting shall be by a show of hands unless otherwise requested by a member of a relevant committee.

64C. MATTERS OF JOINT CONCERN: ESTABLISHMENT OF JOINT COMMITTEE

(1) The relevant committees shall consult and agree that the matter be disposed of by the establishment of an ad hoc joint committee.

(2) Save as is set out below, the ad hoc joint committee shall be established in accordance with Standing Order 53.

(3) Membership of the ad hoc joint committee shall be drawn from the memberships of the relevant committees.

(4) The ad hoc joint committee shall appoint its own chairperson and deputy chairperson, and if it fails to do so, it shall make its views known to the Business Committee which shall rule on the matter.”

In June 2008, the Committee on Procedures brought before the Assembly its ‘Report on Committee Systems and Structures’. That report was approved by the Assembly and included a recommendation on joint Committees. The Committee has been working on a Standing Order to give effect to the recommendation and the result is the motion Members have before them. It covers the current provision in Standing Orders for overlap of Committee business. As currently written, Standing Orders allow for one way in which Committees may deal with overlap of business. The amendment to Standing Orders provides for three ways in which that may be done.

I wish to outline some of the processes used in developing the motion to amend, which is for approval by the Assembly today.

In accordance with the provisions and principles of the proposed motion to amend, the Committee held in-depth discussions over a significant number of meetings. The Committee on Procedures takes its remit seriously, and it examined each of the three proposed options against a number of operational and procedural criteria. Those include what permissions, if any, are required to establish chairing arrangements; arranging meeting rooms; membership of Committees and proportionality; quorums; and criteria for voting and decision-making.

After making initial policy decisions on those and other matters, the Committee drew up the first draft of the motion to amend, which was subsequently

amended several times as the Committee sought to improve its clarity and readability. Before tabling the amendment, the Committee also consulted with — and took the opinion of — the Chairpersons' Liaison Group, and it also worked closely with the Speaker and the Business Committee. Therefore, the Committee has put substantial effort into ensuring that the proposed amendment is as good as it can be, and for that I thank the Committee for its time and commitment.

The proposed amendment has four parts, and I will explain each in turn. Proposed new Standing Order 64 is a gateway provision that allows Committees three options when dealing with matters of joint concern. One Committee can take the lead — as per the provision in current Standing Order 64 — or it can act jointly through one of two new provisions.

Proposed new Standing Order 64 specifically sets out not to create a hierarchy, but to allow maximum choice. Committees do not have to use one option above the others, and the options are not mutually exclusive, meaning that it may be appropriate to begin by using one option and then to move to another. The whole idea is to allow for maximum choice and the greatest flexibility, but once a route or option has been chosen, the relevant Committees must abide by the rules that govern that option.

Proposed new Standing Order 64A is a reworked version of the current Standing Order 64, which deals with the overlap of Committee business. It is important to point out that the essential principles and provisions in the current version will not be altered by the amendment. However, the Committee has made some editorial and grammatical amendments, such as replacing the words “affected committees” with “relevant committees.” Another editorial change is the replacement of the term “A committee taking the lead” with:

“The committee to which the matter falls for disposal”.

Those editorial changes address any concerns that one Committee may have a superior or lead position over another. The Committee on Procedures has also taken the opportunity to remove some duplicate and surplus wording and believes that this amendment is clear and, more importantly, can be read and understood more easily by Members, staff and the public.

The next part of the proposed amendment is proposed new Standing Order 64B — “Matters of Joint Concern: Committees Sitting Concurrently”. The provisions in that are new and allow two or more Committees to meet together and operate as one Committee, with the procedures applicable to Committees also being applicable to the concurrent sittings. The text of the proposed amendment in proposed new Standing Order 64B(2) gives some examples of how such procedures would apply, such as producing “a single set of minutes”. The list is not

definitive and is provided as an example and to help to avoid confusion. Other procedures and powers such as those that are contained under section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and that deal with the powers for Committees to call for persons and papers also apply, and no permission, other than the agreement of the relevant Committees, is required to enact that option.

Provision has been made that the Chairpersons of the relevant Committees can agree between them that one will act as Chairperson and the other as Deputy Chairperson, or that they can agree to rotate the post between them. In making that decision, the Chairpersons are asked to be guided by — but not strictly held to — the provision that it is preferable that the Chairperson is not of the same party as the Minister. That provision is set out in Standing Order 48(5), which deals with Statutory Committees, and suggests that it is preferable but not mandatory that the Chairpersons are not of the same party as the Minister.

If there is no agreement on who will chair the concurrent meeting, the matter will be referred to the Business Committee, which will decide the issue. The Committee on Procedures does not envisage that happening very often and expects that the Chairpersons will be reasonable on that issue.

The Standing Orders on Committees do not allow a Member to be a Chairperson of two Committees, but that provision has not been enacted for concurrent meetings. The proposed amendments to Standing Order 64 would not work were that provision to be enacted.

Standing Order 64B(5) lists a number of provisions. Members will note that this Standing Order is introduced by the phrase “For the avoidance of doubt”. That is stated because those provisions are all self-evident and arise from the fact that the same procedures will apply to concurrent meetings as apply to a single Committee meeting. The provisions are included to emphasise that point and to ensure that there is no doubt about issues such as the quorum and voting.

I hope that I have explained the proposed Standing Order 64B. It may be useful for Members to recall that, during a survey, a majority of MLAs indicated that they were very supportive of such a provision. That support was based on an understanding that concurrent sittings would provide better scrutiny. An example may help to make things clearer. The Budget process and the Programme for Government are closely linked and interwoven, yet they are scrutinised separately by the relevant Committees. The proposed provision would allow for joint — and, hopefully, even better — scrutiny.

Another example could involve a hypothetical Bill on matters relating to children. Such a Bill might cut across two or more Committees, which, in the interests

of efficiency, may decide to take evidence together. It is up to the relevant Committees to decide to meet concurrently — if they do not want to do so, they cannot be forced.

The final draft amendment, Standing Order 64C, allows for the establishment of ad hoc joint Committees. It has been included to allow, specifically, for issues that may cut across three or more Committees. If three or four — or even more — Committees are involved in an issue, they may not find it physically possible to meet concurrently due to a lack of suitable meeting space or the unavailability of members. In other cases, it may be considered more effective to set up an ad hoc joint Committee because the issue may be of such importance, may need such in-depth consideration or will take a long time to complete.

An ad hoc joint Committee would operate in exactly the same way as an ad hoc Committee that might be established under Standing Order 53, with the following two exceptions. First, the relevant Committees would have to agree that an ad hoc Committee is required. The relevant Committees would then make a request to the Business Committee, which would bring a motion for the creation of an ad hoc joint Committee to the Assembly for approval.

Secondly, ensuring proportionality of membership was very important for members of the Committee on Procedures, and the proposed amendment provides for the Business Committee to establish the membership of the ad hoc joint Committee and ensure its proportionality by drawing on the membership of the relevant Committees. That will result in the expertise and knowledge of each Committee being brought to the ad hoc joint Committee.

The ad hoc joint Committee would appoint its own Chairperson and deputy Chairperson. Otherwise, as I said earlier, the same rules and procedures as those in Standing Order 53 would apply. As Members are already familiar with Standing Order 53, I see no reason to go into detail on it now.

I shall illustrate the provision and principles in draft Standing Order 64C by the following example. Imagine the possibility of establishing a national park for Northern Ireland. Such a matter would fall for scrutiny across many Committees. However, the establishment of an ad hoc joint Committee would allow for fuller and better scrutiny of the matter than if it were divided among the different Committees.

I trust that I have outlined the rationale behind the motion to amend. I look forward to hearing what my colleagues will say in relation to the matter.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin supports the motion. I acknowledge the work of the Chairperson in steering the Committee through this particular piece of work.

I also acknowledge the work of the Committee Clerk and her staff in taking the Committee through the issue, as outlined by the Chairperson. We feel that it is an appropriate change to Standing Orders, which will allow for more efficient and appropriate scrutiny. Rather than have two or three Committees undertake the same work, it will allow them to work in a joint fashion. With that in mind, we support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

1.00 pm

Mr O’Loan: I also support the motion, and I thank and congratulate the Chairperson of the Committee for the manner in which he has conducted the discussion of the issue. Equally, I thank and congratulate the Committee Clerk, who has served the Committee very well in this matter.

This is a useful addition to the scrutiny procedures of the Assembly. Once the measures are put in place, I hope that they will be used, particularly in the case of joint Committee working. That will prove to serve the interests of the Assembly well.

Lord Morrow: I do not wish to add to what has been said. I thank Members for their support. I believe that this will be a very useful amendment to our Standing Orders, and I commend it to the House. I also wish to record my appreciation, as Chairperson, to the Committee Clerk and to those who have assisted the Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 64, delete all and insert -

“64. MATTERS OF JOINT CONCERN: OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO COMMITTEES

Where a matter may be of concern to two or more committees (“the relevant committees”) it may be dealt with by –

- (a) one of the relevant committees disposing of it, in accordance with Standing Order 64A;
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(2) The committee to which the matter falls for disposal shall seek the views and establish the interests of the other relevant committees before arriving at any conclusions and may invite the other relevant committees to carry out the consideration of any stated issue and provide it with a draft report.

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(3) The chairpersons of the relevant committees shall consult and agree that—

(a) one of them shall act as chairperson and another as deputy chairperson, or

(b) the posts of chairperson and deputy chairperson shall be rotated between them.

The chairpersons shall prefer that a person not act as chairperson at the concurrent sittings if he or she is of the same party as a Minister (including the First Minister and deputy First Minister) who the concurrent sittings may advise or assist.

(4) Where the chairpersons of the relevant committees fail to agree on one of the alternatives set out in paragraph (3), they shall make their views known to the Business Committee which shall rule on the matter.

(5) For the avoidance of doubt—

(a) a person acting as chairperson at a concurrent sitting, who is a chairperson of one of the relevant committees, shall not be regarded as breaching any prohibition in Standing Order 48(13) or 51(10);

(b) a quorum shall be present at a concurrent sitting if there is a quorum present for each of the relevant committees;

(c) all questions at concurrent sittings shall be decided by a simple majority of all members present; voting shall be by a show of hands unless otherwise requested by a member of a relevant committee.

64C. MATTERS OF JOINT CONCERN: ESTABLISHMENT OF JOINT COMMITTEE

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(2) Save as is set out below, the ad hoc joint committee shall be established in accordance with Standing Order 53.

(3) Membership of the ad hoc joint committee shall be drawn from the memberships of the relevant committees.

(4) The ad hoc joint committee shall appoint its own chairperson and deputy chairperson, and if it fails to do so, it shall make its views known to the Business Committee which shall rule on the matter.”

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Reducing the Number of Government Departments

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

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of ensuring that the maximum amount of public spending is directed at front line services; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals to reduce the number of Government Departments.

I declare an interest as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which has taken an interest in the subject in the past.

This is one of the most important issues that the Assembly will debate during this term; the ongoing need for efficiencies in government and a particular need, in this case, for a reduced number of Government Departments. I do not want to dwell on how we got to where we currently are; everyone knows that the creation of 10 Departments was a carve up between the then biggest parties, the UUP and the SDLP, who were basically out to serve their own interests. The legislation permitted up to 10 Departments to be put in place, and they took full advantage of that by putting those 10 Departments in place.

The DUP has consistently supported the reduction of that number, and now that the roles are reversed and we are the biggest party, we are consistent in our support for that reduction. That stems partly from the fact that there is an utterly disproportionate number of Government Departments in Northern Ireland.

We have a population of just over 1·7 million; yet we have 11 Government Departments. Scotland has a much bigger population — around 5 million — and it has reduced its number of Government Departments from nine to six. I do not think that anyone would say that Scotland is not a country that is governed well; in many cases we use it and some of its procedures as examples of best practice within devolution. We should take lessons from that. In many ways, I think that the argument is made by making that point alone.

Another devolved region can do what we do, but with significantly fewer Government Departments. I think that that makes the case, and there is almost no need to elaborate further.

There are two principal reasons to look at a reduction in the number of Government Departments. The first concerns resources, and now is absolutely the right time to consider that. These are difficult economic times, and there are pressures on every budget. As many resources as possible must be released for front line services. Any sane and rational person can see that the duplication required in order to sustain 11 Government Departments is unnecessary; only six or seven Departments are necessary. Such a move could release significant savings for the public purse.

Mr B McCrea: I am supportive, in principle, of what the Member has said, but the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has the responsibility for this matter. Will that Department reduce its number of junior Ministers? Will it reduce its number of ministerial advisers? Will it reduce its number of civil servants? If OFMDFM is going to do all that, when will it start?

Mr Hamilton: Hopefully, it will start after the Member votes for the motion. Then, OFMDFM can get stuck into the issues that he raised.

Mr B McCrea: I am voting for the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I am very glad to hear that. I noticed the Member's comments in the 'Irish Times' this morning, which, in supporting the motion, represented an olive branch. However, that is contrary to the views of some of his colleagues — I will perhaps come to that later.

Releasing precious resources for front line services could easily be achieved by reducing the number of Government Departments. However, this is not simply about resources; there is also the important aspect of creating a more effective system of government in Northern Ireland. In my travels, I have found widespread support for that from various sectors, and it is an issue that I come across on a regular basis.

I have spoken with members of the community and voluntary sectors who point to issues such as women's groups having to deal with three or four different Departments on certain matters. They also point to the difficulties that community and voluntary groups have faced in respect of regeneration. That point has been echoed in discussions that I have had with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, which provided the example of a group in Belfast, which included traders, that had to work with seven Government Departments — and, probably, the council — to deliver a single project. That is utterly unacceptable; the cross-checking and auditing that that requires is just not appropriate in this day and age.

The Business Alliance strongly supports the need to reduce the overall size and structure of the government in Northern Ireland. Perhaps I am condemning myself, but in 'The Irish News' today, an editorial stated:

"There can be no real doubt that we have many more MLAs and ministers than can be completely justified in a fairly small jurisdiction."

Indeed, even the Alliance Party has regularly gone on record as supporting the reduction of the number of Government Departments. There is widespread support for that measure politically, and within key areas such as the business, community and voluntary sectors. The need for a reduction in Government Departments is echoed repeatedly by those who are experiencing the bitter reality of having to deal with so many Government Departments; there is too much support for this motion to be ignored.

I have noticed some criticism of the motion, and I am surprised by some of it. Principally, that criticism has emanated, I am sorry to say, from the Ulster Unionist Party. Over the weekend, comments that I made elsewhere managed to raise the ire of Reg Empey. I now know what Denis Healey meant when he said that he had been savaged by a dead sheep. I do not regard Reg Empey's opposition as very Conservative; it is, perhaps, more the policy of a wide boy liberalista.

Mr B McCrea: For the record, as it may temper the debate, the Ulster Unionist Party will be supporting the motion. We fully support efforts to streamline government and to make things more efficient. That has been a manifesto commitment, and we are happy to support the motion. The Member does not need to go on about not having our support; he has it.

Mr Hamilton: Wonders will never cease. I did not realise just how effective the power of my argument was. I thank the Member for his support.

I notice that some of Mr Basil McCrea's colleagues are not present. I hope that his message gets back to them. I noted that at the weekend, his party leader made some disturbing comments that were critical of the motion. Mind you, it is not the first time that the Member has diverged from the views of his party leader.

I am glad that the Ulster Unionist Party now adheres to what, I would have thought, were its instinctive principles; not, of course, those that it demonstrated during the late 1990s, but its instinctive principles for smaller and more effective government. I welcome that. Indeed, I recall that the Ulster Unionist Party started the process of the review of public administration back in 2000. There was much fanfare at its party conference at that time, which I recall because I was there that day. I was surprised to hear Councillor Empey say yesterday that, as with most reorganisations, it will cost millions of pounds and will take at least three years to settle down. He did not seem to have that view in 2000 when the review of public administration was proposed.

Criticism has also come from the perspective that reduction of the number of Government Departments will harm inclusiveness somehow and will be a power

grab by the DUP and Sinn Féin. Nothing could be further from the truth. The motion's objective is to reduce the number of Government Departments in order to deliver effective and efficient government for Northern Ireland's people, who have craved that.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way if the Member bears in mind that my time is limited.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. When Mr Hamilton talks about reducing the number of Departments, does he accept that that can be effective only if the number of civil servants is reduced? How many civil servants is he prepared to make redundant?

Mr Hamilton: I am on record as saying that the public service's objective is to deliver services; it is not a job-creation agency. The motion's objective is to deliver better services. I have said from the outset that better services are the absolute objective. How they are to be achieved is a matter for the review to determine.

There are notions that reducing the number of Departments represents a power grab and will be detrimental to inclusiveness. No one is owed a position. A person must get support from the public in order to get a position in Government. It is important to bear in mind that inclusiveness may not be a requisite of any system of government that might exist in the future. Certain criticism that has emanated from different quarters on that matter shows that some people are still more interested in accumulating power for themselves than in the better exercise of that power.

Therefore, the motion — which is backed up, of course, by the Programme for Government's commitment to review the number of Government Departments — is sensible and has sound objectives. I hope that it will gain widespread support in the Chamber, as it has in the business sector and in the community and voluntary sector. I urge Members to trot through the Aye Lobby with me to vote in favour of the motion, which will be well received in the community.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "services;" and insert

"notes that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) has unanimously agreed that issues around efficiency and the number of Government Departments would be part of its programme of work and asks that the AERC addresses such issues; agrees to establish a new Assembly standing committee to focus on controlling the cost of government; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to review and report on the administrative savings to be achieved from the various measures and proposals associated with the review of public administration; and to bring forward proposals to the Executive and the AERC to streamline management and reduce overheads of Government Departments including options for more shared services and policy support, reducing tiers of bureaucracy, reconfiguring Departments and reducing their number."

The amendment retains the premise of Mr Hamilton's motion, namely:

"That this Assembly recognises the importance of ensuring that the maximum amount of public spending is directed at front line services;"

Everyone wants to achieve that. To that end, the Assembly must constantly control and curb the costs of government in order to ensure that it does not consume money, resources, and dedicated time and talent that could be much better deployed on front line services. For that reason, the SDLP considers Mr Hamilton's motion to be limited in what it asks the Assembly and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to do.

The motion simply asks the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to do something that is already in their power. It is entirely within the competence of their office to come to the Assembly and to propose a redistribution of the functions of Departments, including a reduction in their number. Therefore, an Assembly motion that gives the First Minister and the deputy First Minister such a power, competence or right is not required. To simply call them to bring forward their proposals is, perhaps, a criticism of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for not having done so already, given the time that they have been in office.

Mr B McCrea: I want to pick up on the Member's point briefly. Is it not the case that legislation dictates that the matter is OFMDFM's responsibility and that it alone should take action? The sooner it starts to do so, the better.

Mr Durkan: That reinforces my point. That responsibility is among the statutory powers and functions of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

1.15 pm

OFMDFM has the power not just to reduce these things but to make proposals that the Assembly can then determine on a cross-community basis. There is, therefore, no need for a motion from the Assembly to do that.

However, the Assembly should not say that the cost of government is simply a matter for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister or the Executive. Our amendment seeks to point out that there are wider and deeper roles, responsibilities and issues concerning the cost of government than just the number of Departments. Therefore, if we are serious about dealing with the cost of government, we should be tackling it at all levels and on all fronts. That is what our amendment does.

The amendment addresses the issues that are the responsibility of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and points out those issues that are the

responsibility of the Assembly and the Executive. It also points out that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has already unanimously agreed to look at issues of efficiency, including the possible reduction in the number of Government Departments. When that Committee has already signalled that it wants to do that, it is important that we give it the necessary encouragement to do so, and, at the same time, to encourage the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to bring their ideas and proposals about a possible reorganisation of Government Departments to the Executive Committee and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Our amendment is not saying that there should be no reduction in the number of Government Departments. Rather, it is asking: what is the right context in which to explore that issue alongside other issues concerning the cost of government?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept that we are beyond the time of looking at these issues and that it is time for action? The benefit of our motion is that it allows the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give impetus to an ideal to which everyone signed up in the Programme for Government. Let us get on with delivering that rather than merely doing more talking about it.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for making that point, which seems to suggest that the motion is a criticism of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for not having moved on this issue before now. Although it was in the Programme for Government, various manifestos and all sorts of other statements, they still have not moved on the issue. Therefore, when the Member says that it is time for action rather than merely looking at the issue, I take that to be a criticism of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

The Assembly needs to ensure that it is not merely calling on Ministers to make moves that will, on a one-off basis, hopefully contain some of the inbuilt costs of government. We, as an Assembly, need to ensure that we will permanently interrogate and confront the cost of government. That is why our amendment proposes that the Assembly should have a new Standing Committee, modelled on the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which will permanently interrogate the cost of government and be able to call in and challenge representatives of various Departments on the amount of money that they are spending on their own administration and overheads.

It is the Assembly's job constantly to scrutinise Government and to ensure that money is going to front line services and not being consumed by the system. It would be a dereliction of duty if the Assembly displayed a lack of interest in the cost of Government,

did not use its scrutiny role and merely questioned Ministers on the matter now and again.

The Public Accounts Committee has shown through the good work that it has done that it can call in Departments in ways that individual departmental Committees cannot always do. However, although the Public Accounts Committee does very good work, it tends often to deal with secondary and tertiary government budget-holders and rarely the Departments themselves. The Public Accounts Committee rarely challenges Departments in a significant and strategic way on what they are spending, internally and centrally, on the cost of government. That is a missing element of the Assembly's scrutiny. Therefore, our motion calls on the Assembly to address that by agreeing to set up a permanent Standing Committee to scrutinise the cost of government. We are serious about carrying out that scrutiny permanently, and not on just a one-off basis.

Mr P Maskey: The Member acknowledged the good work of the PAC, but is the scrutiny of Departments not the job of the scrutiny Committees?

Mr Durkan: In some ways, it is the job of the scrutiny Committees, but I believe that the scrutiny Committees cannot do that job adequately. Even though the PAC strays into other Committees' areas of responsibility, its work effectively complements the scrutiny carried out by departmental Committees. Similarly, an additional element of scrutiny is needed to tackle the cost of government, such as Departments' central costs, buried administrative costs and overheads and what Departments spend on themselves.

That new Committee could work well — as the PAC does — on the basis of the intelligence and insights of the Audit Office, and it could seriously and permanently challenge the cost of government. The Assembly must take such steps if it wants to make a difference and be permanently vigilant on those issues.

The debate is not only about the number of Departments. We must consider the question of the assumed overheads that are built into the establishment of each Department. Our various Departments — whether at the current number or a reduced number — should not have separate establishments for policy, financial management and personnel reasons. We need to consider shared services and shared support across government, or between groups of Departments, in order to rationalise the system and reduce costs.

Furthermore, we must examine the savings that the review of public administration is supposed to achieve. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have not yet provided, on behalf of the Executive, an updated review or report on the position of those projected and presumed savings. Many members of many parties believe that some of the review's changes might not

only increase costs for a period of years but lead to permanently increased costs. Therefore, we must consider how we expect savings to create part of the context in which the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, the Executive and the Assembly will consider wider issues.

Mr Hamilton believes that the number of Departments causes confusion, because different groups in the economic sector and the community and voluntary sector say that they have to deal with too many Departments. A reduction in the number of Departments will not automatically guarantee a solution. Moreover, when we had fewer Departments, many of those groups dealt with several Departments or even different divisions in the same Department. They complained that there was no coherence or consistency between different divisions and that contradiction and confusion existed. Therefore, although a reduction in the number of Departments might achieve other gains, it will not necessarily remove that problem completely. We must revise and address that issue.

We must ensure that people have a one-stop-shop experience when applying for Government funding on cross-cutting issues. Rather than melodeon government into one Department, there is a case for revisiting the concept of cross-cutting funds, such as the Executive programme fund, through which people could apply to a central fund rather than busk around several different Departments. However, the DUP and Sinn Féin abolished that fund and created the difficulty whereby people have to approach more than one Department.

The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr Spratt): The proposer of the motion and the Member who tabled the amendment both acknowledge that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has a locus on this subject. I will explain the Committee's role. The Committee was established by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, section 11 of which is entitled:

"Committee to review functioning of Assembly and Executive Committee".

Therefore, the clue is in the title.

The Committee has a work programme that lasts until 2015, by which time it is required to report on the operation of the provisions of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The St Andrews Agreement Act states explicitly that the Committee should make its report to the Secretary of State, the Assembly and the Executive. Part III of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 deals with "Executive Authorities". Sections 16 to 30 are relevant, and, in particular, section 21 deals with "Northern Ireland departments". Therefore, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee

undoubtedly has the power and authority to determine the correct number of Northern Ireland Departments.

Moreover, the Committee has been active on the issue. In May 2007, my predecessor, the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson MP, and Raymond McCartney, who continues to serve as Deputy Chairperson, met the then First Minister, and the deputy First Minister, to discuss their intention to establish an efficiency review panel.

The Ministers gave a commitment to consult with the Committee on that matter.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for the helpful explanation. On a point of clarification, is the Committee in receipt of a letter from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister seeking to delegate authority to the Committee on this matter? I thought that that authority rested, in legislation, with OFMDFM, but I understand that perhaps that office is attempting to delegate the authority to the Committee of which the Member is Chairperson. Has the Committee received correspondence?

The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee: Any correspondence received has been placed before the Committee. I was about to say that there have been subsequent exchanges of correspondence, and the Committee looks forward to receiving formal proposals, including details of the terms of reference. Should those proposals emerge, it is only right and proper that the Committee is given its place, and is fully involved in, and consulted on, the development and implementation of those proposals.

I assure the House that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee takes its responsibilities very seriously indeed, and I — and, I imagine, the other members of the Committee — will be paying close attention throughout this debate, and will have due regard to what Members, from all sides of the Assembly, have to say on the matter.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to make it clear from the outset that Sinn Féin Members will abstain from the vote on both the motion and the amendment. The reason for that is that a review that seeks to reduce the number of Departments predetermines the outcome. My party is not opposed to a review, or, indeed, the result of any such review, be it a call to reduce, or to maintain, the current number of Departments. However, that process must be gone through. Jimmy Spratt has outlined the authority with which the Assembly and Executive Review Committee will consider the matter at some stage soon.

The issue at hand does not just concern the way the Government look and operate. That is relevant, but it is also concerned with fairness — as Members have mentioned — with making sure that we get things right, and with value for money. I am sure that most

people will argue that we need to protect front line services, but that should not be done at the cost of everything else. Bringing forward a proposal to reduce the number of Departments, which considers only front line services, is premature.

There is a need to take account of a number of issues in relation to the economy, some of which were raised by Mitchel McLaughlin last week on the BBC's 'Hearts and Minds' programme. This is a very small country — one island. We need to consider matters from an all-island perspective. Peter Weir is laughing — I am sure that he is not surprised that I mentioned that. We must consider an all-island approach to health, energy, the economy, and so on, as a way of achieving good government.

As a former party spokesperson on health, I was sad to hear of families, both North and South of the border, who could not find a hospital bed for a child — the child had to be put on a plane and sent to England. It does not make sense for a country of this size to operate two massive health budgets. Despite that, there is still a big gap in need.

Equally, we must consider the provision of energy on an all-island basis.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member provide some clarification on that point? Surely the level of public service is much higher in Northern Ireland in comparison with the Republic of Ireland. Will the Member not join with others in the House in seeking to reduce the number of junior Ministers, of ministerial aides, and, if necessary, the number of civil servants that are not utilised properly? Surely we must find ways of using resources that are more in line with other parts of this island.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for providing me with an extra minute. I take it that a part of his argument is that there would also be a reduction in the number of MLAs — sometimes that does seem a tempting prospect.

1.30 pm

A review is needed to consider how we do business better, but a review with a predetermined outcome is certainly not needed. Members will expect me to talk about an all-island approach to health, the economy, energy and much more besides.

It was mentioned that the Good Friday Agreement and St Andrews Agreement contain an agreement to review and examine efficiencies and value for money. Mention is made of the ability to scrutinise the functions of Departments. My understanding is that that meant that the review would consider the ability to scrutinise structures. However, if a review is to take place, everything must be considered.

We also need to consider that the review of public administration (RPA) is an ongoing programme of work, as is the work that will come through the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. I accept the points that Mark Durkan made in relation to the ability of Committee members to scrutinise. As a Committee member trying to scrutinise a budget, I have found it very difficult. Anything that will enhance my ability to scrutinise a Minister and a Department is to be welcomed.

I want to talk about the way that we do business. I think that Simon Hamilton raised the issue of communities having access to different Departments, which is very true. We debated a White Paper about the relationship between Government and the community and voluntary sector. That also needs to be factored in.

I am aware that my time is up. At this stage, it is premature to agree to reduce the number of Departments and their functions without having a review first. We will, therefore, abstain from voting on the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I preface my remarks by saying that I and my party are strong supporters of more efficient and cost-effective government. However, today's motion makes two propositions that are not necessarily linked. One calls for public spending on front line services to be maximised, and the other calls for a reduction in the number of Government Departments.

It would be perfectly possible to have fewer, and bigger, Departments and still employ the same number of civil servants to deliver services. The only real reduction in numbers would be among the comparatively few senior staff at the top of each Department. The actual monetary savings that would be achieved by reducing the number of Departments might be quite small when considered as part of the overall expenditure of Government.

The majority of civil servants who provide the services of the Departments would still have to continue to provide those services — unless, of course, the services were cut. I presume that the proposers of the motion do not advocate that services should be cut and large numbers of civil servants sacked, because the motion states that the maximum amount of spending should be directed at front line services.

Mr Hamilton: The number of permanent secretaries is commensurate with the number of Departments. At present, the salaries of those individuals amount to something like £1.3 million. Reducing the number of Departments to six or seven could save £500,000 in that respect. That is not a massive amount of money, but it is not insubstantial either. I am sure that plenty of Ministers in the Executive would happily take that.

Does the Member recall that, when his party was in the predominant position in the Assembly, questions were asked about the cost of the Departments? At that time, it cost approximately £19 million to run a Department. Reducing the number of Departments by three, four or five would realise substantial savings for the Northern Ireland block grant.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. In financial terms, the case is not yet proved on the amount of real savings that would be made. Would we simply be reducing the number of Departments, or would we ultimately be reducing the number of jobs and the number of people who hold those posts? That debate is needed.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member accept that there are already targets for increased efficiency in Departments — a 3% real-terms reduction, and a 5% reduction in administration costs — and that many of the savings that Members have mentioned are already planned?

Mr Kennedy: I accept the Member's point, which was well made. That must be taken into consideration as we examine these matters.

There is an apparent contradiction that demonstrates the woolly thinking behind the motion. Some people might consider the motion as simply a headline grabber, or an example of grandstanding by the party that proposed it, because tomorrow the Assembly will debate the early stage of creating a policing and justice Department. It seems a bit rich for Members to talk of saving money today, when tomorrow we will begin a process that will create more costs.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No. I am sorry, but I have given way at least twice. The motion is superficial in respect of how it treats a complex subject that directly impacts on many thousands of civil servants' jobs. The matter deserves mature and intelligent discussion.

In itself, reducing the number of Departments would not downsize government bureaucracy by an appreciable degree. There would be several fewer permanent secretaries, but that is where the savings would end. The problem with the size of government bureaucracy is more complex and, therefore, it requires a more thoughtful analysis than simply cutting the number of Departments.

Unfortunately, Northern Ireland, in common with most political units, suffers from a lack of economies of scale, and a great deal of Departments' work is concerned with supplying services to the public in areas such as health, social services, education, or roads; in providing support for farmers; or in managing the skilling of the working population. Those are all public services, and, in a modern country, the public

expect them to be provided. In our case, they must be provided for a population of 1·7 million people.

Although the Scottish Parliament has only seven Departments, and the Welsh Assembly, which, like Northern Ireland's, is run on a small scale, has 10, the key question that must be answered is: how effective have the departmental structures been in delivering services?

For those reasons, and having clearly outlined its reservations, the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion.

Dr Farry: I support the motion. As Members know, the Alliance Party has a wide agenda for reforming the institutions and the system of government in Northern Ireland, whether that be the system of designations in the voting system, moving from a mandatory to a voluntary coalition, or making better use of North/South institutions in order to deliver tangible benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. The size and the nature of government in Northern Ireland is included in those considerations, and it goes without saying that the matter of the number of Departments must be considered as a critical part of that agenda for change.

The DUP motion sends a clear message of intent in that regard, and there is merit in the Assembly signing up to it. The SDLP amendment is worthy; however, the suggestions in it could be met within the Assembly's existing structures. Indeed, elements of the amendment may be counterproductive, because they might trample upon existing authorities and cut across the roles of Committees, so we must be wary.

Without doubt, reducing the number of Departments would produce a degree of financial saving, and no one could argue with that. However, at times, the scale of that saving is overstated, and the savings that the DUP envisages would not, as many people wish, release enough money to rebalance public services and modernise the economy. Nevertheless, it is worth making a start.

The Alliance Party believes that the real prize from reviewing the number of Departments lies in being able to deliver more effective joined-up government.

The lines that divide our Departments are arbitrary. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), for instance, is responsible for the needs of the unemployed, but the Department for Social Development (DSD) looks after a large part of the benefit system. Likewise, both the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have responsibilities for functions within education.

A number of Departments have roles relating to the economy. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) plays quite a small role in that area:

it has responsibility for tourism, and, in that regard, interfaces with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL).

The most acute example of the failure to deliver joined-up government relates to planning. At the macro level, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is responsible for strategic planning and the Department of the Environment (DOE) for the implementation of planning. DOE has the lead in the consideration of individual planning applications, and, alongside that Department, Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water, under the remit of DRD, play a consultative role. Those overlaps create obstacles. The Department for Social Development comes into the picture for matters relating to urban regeneration. Therefore, three Departments have a role to play in planning. That is baffling for individuals in Northern Ireland — and even more so for businesses that are trying to deliver results.

The Assembly has set out a strong, rhetorical message of the need to reform the public sector and to make it more user-friendly. We are seeing some progress in that regard, but more is required. A review of the nature and number of our Departments is key to that, and it is important that the Government are able to provide a robust response to that message — particularly in view of the economic downturn. In that global context, the role of the Northern Ireland Administration is limited, but the speed and responsiveness of the Government to those in society who are trying to create wealth and provide jobs can make a difference. That is why we need to look at our Government.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee plays an important role. The Alliance Party is not represented on that Committee, but we recognise and respect its function. The past year has seen the establishment of the performance and efficiency delivery unit, which is within the remit of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). It has an important role in cutting across government to try to find and drive efficiencies. The Department of Finance and Personnel plays an important central role with regard to departmental budgets. Its Committee, on which I sit, could play an expanded role in looking at such issues as shared services and the delivery of more efficient outcomes across Departments.

The Assembly has a broad agenda, but it is important that it sends out a strong message: let us get working on the number and nature of our Departments.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The debating of the motion is akin to putting the cart before the horse in some respects. As Carál Ní Chuilín said, a number of questions have to be answered before we can support the motion or the

amendment. For instance, Members must ask themselves whether all the Departments are fit for purpose and whether they are delivering value for money. Are they delivering what they set out to deliver? Have the citizens of the North got confidence in the number of Departments and the services that they are providing for the people? Those questions need to be answered.

The number of Departments and the structure of our Government were established under the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement provided ways and mechanisms of ensuring an efficient Government, and that included the number of Government Departments, among other things. It is important, therefore, to state that the Good Friday Agreement caters for a review of the arrangements in relation to efficiency and to equality, which are at the core of what we have done.

The number of Departments was set out and endorsed by all parties in the first Assembly.

1.45 pm

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Member is keen to defend the Good Friday Agreement where possible. However, does he accept that the agreement referred to, and permitted, a maximum number of Departments but did not specify that there should be 10?

Mr P Maskey: That is exactly right, and other parties were in the ascendancy at the time of the Good Friday Agreement. All parties in the Chamber agreed that there should be 10 Departments. That number was so high because many people, particularly in the community that I represent, did not think that any Government could work for them. However, Sinn Féin never says never when it comes to considering the number of Departments, particularly from the perspective of making efficiencies.

As Carál pointed out, however, front line services should not be diminished. That is already happening, and every citizen of the North wants those services to be maintained. Even considering cutting front line services has a knock-on effect on every individual, and that is wrong.

I listened to Mark Durkan talk about the role of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) as he moved the amendment to the motion. The PAC and the Audit Office will continue to produce good reports. The PAC determines how much money has been misspent or what mistakes Departments have made. The Committee has done much good work and will continue to do so. It brings the Departments to book and ensures that they deliver effective services for everyone.

Mark has left the Chamber, but I must make a point about his amendment, which calls on the Assembly:

“to establish a new Assembly standing committee to focus on controlling the cost of government”.

I asked Mr Durkan for a point of information because the role of the existing Standing Committees is to scrutinise the Departments. Is Mark Durkan telling the House that the role of the Committees has diminished and that they cannot do their job, or is he saying that he has failed in his job as Chairperson of one of the Committees? We, as MLAs who were elected to represent every citizen, must ensure that we continue scrutinising the Departments to make certain that they deliver front line services, provide value for money and are fit for purpose.

The remit panels will examine that issue, and, therefore, Sinn Féin supports neither the motion nor the amendment. We cannot do so until we study the outworkings of the RPA, because it provides accountability. The review is still being implemented, and local councils are still working through how it will affect them and their systems. It is important to ensure that all levels of government, including local government, deliver for all of us. Go raibh míle maith agat

Mr Weir: It is no great surprise that I support the motion. It is important for the Assembly to get back to basics. The Assembly's role is not simply to provide additional structures for the convenience of MLAs, but to ensure the front line delivery of services to the public. As such, we should root out unnecessary layers and levels of bureaucracy.

I share Simon Hamilton's disappointment at some of the remarks made by leading members of the Ulster Unionist Party at the weekend, although I was heartened by the words of Basil McCrea. The almost schizophrenic attitude of the Ulster Unionist Party is interesting; indeed it ranges from a denial that it was in any way —

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. His reference to schizophrenia is particularly relevant.

I ask the Minister — sorry, I ask the overlooked Member who may yet become a Minister — whether he, as one of the proposers of the motion, is not surprised that no response is forthcoming from OFMDFM because of the lack of agreement therein? Would it not have been better to seek such agreement before tabling the motion?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for the promotion that he tried to thrust on me. With respect to the Member, it is clear that the motion is directed to the Assembly as a whole. Some of the criticism that has been made of OFMDFM was simply unilateral action being taken by OFMDFM. I suspect that the Member — and the SDLP — will be howling with outrage at the prospect of that being imposed on them.

The attitude of the Ulster Unionist Party is schizophrenic; that party has gone from a denial that it was in any way opposed to this to the enthusiastic support of Mr McCrea, which I welcome. It is in sharp contrast to his party leader's headline of:

“DUP under fire for proposal to cut departments”.

Mr Kennedy has managed to find a middle way between those two positions: a degree of reluctant support. A fourth position on the number of Departments was revealed at the weekend, when one of the Ulster Unionist Party's Back Bench Members said that there should be a minister for tourism. That would involve the creation of an additional Department.

Given the attitudes of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP — and I pay tribute to Mr McCrea, whose fingerprints are clean on the issue — it is not surprising that they are ambivalent on the issue, as they are the Frankenstein that has created the monster. Prior to the Assembly's existence —

Mr Kennedy: Frankenstein was the monster.

Mr Weir: No, actually — [*Laughter.*]

I am sorry if that is beyond the Member's literary knowledge. He will find that Frankenstein was the creator of the monster. The monster was something separate. Indeed, if the Member checks with Mary Shelley and the original ‘Prometheus Unbound’, he will find that Frankenstein was, indeed, the monster.

I have no doubt that the move from six Ministries pre-devolution to the current 11 was the result of a late-night political carve-up at the end of 1998. To be fair, if there is some degree of retreat from that position to an acceptance that there should be a reduction in the number of Departments, then that —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No; my time is short, and I have already taken one intervention.

The issue of policing and justice — which we will return to tomorrow — is not to do with the creation of a new function; it is about the transfer of what is effectively a Department within the Northern Ireland Office. We will not be adding to the bureaucracy — and it will be an initial position anyway, as the legislation restricts the number of Departments. On that basis, therefore, there would have to be a reduction of at least one in the number of Departments.

Much has been made about the economic advantages of delivering front line services. I want to pick up on Mr Farry's eloquent point about the effectiveness of Government. I cannot think of any other jurisdiction on these islands where higher education is hived off from the rest of education; where employment and training issues seem to be divorced from enterprise and industry; where tourism

seems to fall into different categories; and where the strategy for planning across Northern Ireland lies with the Department for Regional Development, yet area plans lie with the Department of the Environment.

As another example, planning policy statement (PPS) 14 was inflicted on us under direct rule, and it dealt with rural planning. Planning is largely dealt with by the DOE and rural policy is largely dealt with by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), yet, until the court ruling, PPS 14 was being dealt with by the Department for Regional Development. A mess has been created, and if we can at least take a step back and ensure that we get the matter sorted out by moving towards a reduction in the number of Departments — as has happened in Scotland — we will ensure that the burden is shifted away from administration and bureaucracy to front line services, which is something that all Members should unite behind. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Any reference to Frankenstein's monster and the next Member to speak is purely coincidental. I call Mr Basil McCrea. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that I am entitled to an extra minute for the mirth and merriment that you have brought to the Chamber. *[Interruption.]*

I hear from stage left an intervention from Ian Paisley Jnr. One of the earliest and most entertaining parts of my political career was hearing the SDLP mug Ian Paisley Jnr with a statement about how useless junior Ministers were. The SDLP then revealed that that statement had been made by Ian Paisley Jnr about a previous junior Minister, and not himself. It is interesting. *[Interruption.]* Yes, it was rather entertaining.

It all returns to the issue that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey, raised: just because Departments are amalgamated does not mean that they are any more efficient or that savings are made. He eloquently referred to the old DOE — the Department of everything. If every function is put in one place, the result is a lack of focus, inefficiency and a failure to deliver. Therefore, it is important that we get the matter right.

If we are looking for ways in which to remove duplication, I can think of one obvious place that could benefit from some cost-cutting — the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Why do we need two First Ministers and two junior Ministers? Why do we need a plethora of “minreps”? We did not need them before. Those people have the authority to make cuts; they have the responsibility — not to mention the moral responsibility — for making cuts. I look forward to seeing immediate activity in that area.

Some discussion has taken place on why we ended up with 10 Ministers during the debate. The proposer of the motion said that he was not going to talk about that matter but then proceeded to do so. The issue at the time was about trying to ensure some form of inclusivity and a four-party mandatory coalition. However, it is now fairly obvious that there is no four-party mandatory coalition — there is a two-party voluntary coalition. If we are talking about political carve-ups, they have been between the DUP and Sinn Féin.

I am somewhat surprised by the timing of the debate, although perhaps I should not be. Could it be, as Mr Kennedy suggested, that this debate is taking place today because tomorrow we will discuss a report on the devolution of policing and justice matters, which will lead to an increase in costs and in the number of Ministers? Is today's debate a form of shadow boxing that is designed to distract us from the blame game? If Members are serious about reducing the cost of government, the Ulster Unionist Party and I are four-square behind them.

Dr Farry: Can the Member explain how having an additional Department to administer on policing and justice matters will cost more money? The Northern Ireland Office currently exercises justice functions, and the people of Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK pay their taxes to support those functions, as they do every other function. The money for justice will simply be transferred to the Assembly. *[Interruption.]* Where is the additional expense in our having a Department of justice? Responsibility will merely switch from the Northern Ireland Office to the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Mr B McCrea: That is one of the best nomination speeches that I have heard in a long time. Dr Farry will run the justice Ministry without any money. If he were on the Policing Board, he would understand that certain challenges are involved and that no reorganisation ever comes cheap.

However, the real issue is one of respect. If the real purpose behind having 10 ministerial colleagues around the one table is to enable them to have shared discussions for the benefit of Northern Ireland — something that should be done in these particularly trying circumstances — those people should be treated with respect and be included. If that is not the case, and it appears that no respect or manners are being shown and no consultation is being undertaken, there is no point in carrying on with a sham. We should just reduce the number of ministerial posts and let those two parties fight it out among themselves. We can then have a proper election and get people into this Chamber who actually want to run the country.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I declare at the outset that my party and I are all in favour of cost-effective service delivery by Government. It is essential that there be such delivery. However, I am not convinced that it will save us much money if we chop a Department or two, get rid of a Minister or two and bolt the remains, with all the associated expenses, on to another Department.

2.00 pm

A Member stated earlier that more money might be saved, through various means, in the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. Certainly, the number of special advisers there is scandalous. However, before the motion is taken seriously, we need to know how much would be saved. To my mind, that amount would be relatively small and insignificant compared with the amount of waste that exists in various Departments.

Many people regard the motion as little more than a DUP manoeuvre towards effective DUP-majority rule and towards what the previous Member to speak referred to as the removal of respect.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: I will give way in a moment.

This system of governance was set up in order to accord respect to the mandate of every Member in the Chamber, and it has a little bit to run to achieve that. My party and I were keen that, in a previous disposition, at a time when the DUP and Sinn Féin may not have been in their current positions of strength, the mandates of their Members were accorded full and total respect.

Mr Ross: Will the Member concede that even when the Democratic Unionist Party was not the largest party, it had a policy to reduce the number of Departments? Therefore, to make the accusation that the motion is about a DUP carve-up ignores the fact that the party has held that position for the past 10 years.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Member for his comment. I am not so much reflecting the past 10 years as some elements of the review of public administration. That involves a definite and clear-cut carve-up, sometimes driven by the DUP on its own, and sometimes driven by the DUP in co-operation with Sinn Féin. Despite those parties' differences, they can collude when necessary to serve each other.

Parties in this and in previous mandates set out some years ago to be inclusive and to create honest and honourable involvement for all those who are prepared bring their mandate here and to put it to work. That is essential, and to undermine that without adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach renders the motion gimmicky and a bit of a fig leaf. The motion avoids the real issues of making cost savings.

Other Members mentioned tomorrow's debate on policing and justice. I ask myself what the implications will be for justice if the motion is passed and implemented. Will the justice Ministry be just another junior job bolted on to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister? That is one of the implications that can be extrapolated from the motion. What are the implications for the scrutiny role of Committees? Will it mean that the Assembly will want to get rid of some of its Committees in order to reduce scrutiny?

I repeat: I believe that changes are desirable. Cost-effectiveness is desirable. Members must continually consider how business is done. The necessity for change and cost-effectiveness is always with us, but I do not believe that the motion is the way to achieve that. The way to do it is to, as far as possible, create a consensus by working up through the Committees in a manner to which everyone can adhere.

For me, the main effort is still in creating access. Devolution is a relatively tender infant here, and we have a little way more to go with it. The great thing about devolution is that it created access for the public that never existed under direct rule. That inclusion and that access remain important in the short term.

The motion is riddled with contradictions. I am concerned seriously about how the review of public administration is proceeding. We were told that it would cut bureaucracy and ensure that savings were directed to the front line — language similar to that was used. Direct rule Ministers said that savings of up to £200 million a year could be achieved through the review of public administration.

It would be timely for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on the projected savings from the review of public administration, because it is very easy to stand here and pull a rabbit out of a hat by suggesting that a bag of money could be saved.

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

Dr McDonnell: The savings that will be made by reducing the number of Departments must be costed, and there are all sorts of wider implications.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for not making any references to Frankenstein, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for being absent from the Chamber for part of the debate.

A Government must be run efficiently and money must be directed to front line services — no one can argue against that. However, as with every operation, front line services must be managed efficiently and properly. We expect that from all our Government Departments and Government Ministers. The difficulty

that I have with the motion is that it reaches a conclusion, instead of seeking the establishment of a review or following through on commitments that were made in the Good Friday Agreement, the Programme for Government or the St Andrews Agreement, in which political parties were tasked with examining the issue.

We must examine the issue from a fresh point of view, instead of starting a review and saying that it will reduce the number of Departments, which will make our government more efficient. I listened to the debate, and everyone has different views on how much money will be saved by reducing the number of Departments. The wages of a Minister, a permanent secretary and a few other staff will be saved, but how much will be saved after that, and, after that money has filtered back through government, would it be worthwhile?

The important issue is the reason that we have our current system. Our society was emerging from conflict, and we had to restore confidence in the political system. That is why there are 10 Departments and why the major political parties were each given a role in Government. Everyone was given a stake in the Executive and given the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process so that no one could feel excluded. No review of the mechanisms that were established by the Good Friday Agreement can be conducted without examining that. A review cannot just be concerned with efficiency — it must be about respecting the rights of everyone involved in this project. The Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP expressed concern that the motion is part of a hidden agenda to exclude them from government. Therefore, any review process must ensure that the views of those parties, and those of the other major parties, are listened to and acted upon.

Although most of the content in the SDLP amendment is fair enough, it also pre-empts the outcome of a review before it has even started. The amendment refers to:

“reconfiguring Departments and reducing their number.”

That is why we cannot support the amendment and will abstain when it is put to the House.

The other line in the amendment that concerns me is:

“establish a new Assembly standing committee to focus on controlling the cost of government.”

It is the role of the statutory Committees to monitor and examine the budgets and roles of their respective Departments to ensure that they are being run efficiently. Why establish another Committee to examine the roles of Departments when there are already Committees to do that job? That proposal is not worthwhile. Establishing a Committee every time there is a problem will not resolve anything.

My party has no difficulty in entering a review that examines the number of Departments in the Executive, and we have no difficulty in examining efficiency

savings, either in Departments or across the Executive. However, we want to ensure that the core elements in any review are, as Members mentioned, respect and a better exercise of power. Any review must also recognise that our Executive were established at a time when our society was emerging from conflict. We must ensure that the stakeholders in the Assembly and our society have a place in the future of government here.

Based on those principles, we will enter into any review, and we will not state its outcome beforehand. We will enter into it, and we will let it bring back evidence that the Assembly and the Executive will take heed of and vote on.

Mr Ross: Today's debate is important. As I mentioned during Dr McDonnell's speech, the reduction in Departments has been a long-term policy of the Democratic Unionist Party, and, for many years, our party's was the lone voice calling for it. It has been one of our party's manifesto pledges, so it is encouraging that, in recent years, other parties have come on board with our line of thinking.

I welcome the support for the motion, albeit tentative in some quarters. However, it is disappointing that Sinn Féin is taking a neutral stance on the issue. Perhaps it would have been more beneficial had that party tabled an amendment to the motion, rather than abstaining from the vote.

Mr Kennedy said that there cannot be any agreement on the matter, but the Programme for Government contains a commitment that the Executive will review the number of Departments by 2011. My colleague Mr Spratt also mentioned the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's role in the matter.

In addressing the motion, it is important that we remember where we came from. There were six Departments during the direct rule years, but, as many Members said, in December 1998, the pro-Agreement parties agreed to the establishment of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and to the increase in the number of Departments to 10, as well as agreeing to the staff who come with them.

Notably, the reason for almost doubling the number of Departments was not to ensure efficient delivery for the people of Northern Ireland, but rather, as Paul Maskey and Mr O'Dowd conceded, to ensure that all the pro-Agreement parties would be rewarded by gaining ministerial office and to ensure that from the outset of devolution, Sinn Féin had a position at the Executive table. Those political considerations also explain the reason for the inflated number of Assembly Members, which was to ensure that the small pro-Agreement parties, such as the Women's Coalition, the PUP and the Alliance Party, would all be represented in the Chamber.

Although the House cannot introduce legislation to streamline the number of Assembly Members, it has the ability to reduce the number of Departments. Indeed, it has been mentioned that the Scottish Government — as it is now known — did likewise.

As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I have been involved in the review of public administration, which a Member for North Belfast mentioned, through which the number of local councils is being reduced from 26 to 11. The main focus and thrust behind that move is to increase efficiency and delivery and to reduce the amount of waste in local councils. Given that we have decided that local government needs to be slimmed down, it would naturally follow that we would get our house in order by following the same logic. Some powers are being transferred from Departments here to local government, and although there will not be a new Department, we aspire to the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Assembly at some time in the future. Perhaps there is never a better time for us to begin the process of reorganising Departments, given that there is a maximum number of Departments that we can legally have.

As we heard earlier, representatives in the business sector made a similar call for a reduction in the number of Departments. At this difficult economic time, they are calling for a single Department to deal with the economy — a Department for economic development, perhaps — that would take in parts of DETI, DEL and other areas. It is important that we listen to the experts and decide what would make it easier for them to assist economic growth, particularly during this difficult economic time.

The call for the creation of such a Department is not being made just for financial reasons. One of the first motions that I tabled in the Assembly related to numeracy and literacy, and although it was a motion that concerned the Department of Education, it was equally important to young people over the age of 18. When I was a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, we were continually being told about the huge numbers of school-leavers who lacked the basic reading and writing skills that are required to get on in life. We were also being told about the challenges that faced further education colleges and employers.

Minister Empey spoke about school-leavers having those skills, and Minister Ruane talked about lifelong learning opportunities. That is perhaps one of the clearest examples of where we do not need two separate Departments. Again, if we look at examples in Scotland, particularly in education, it has a Department for Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr Shannon: I concur with the Member's comments about education. Who would the Member like to see in that role? Would it be Reg Empey, in

which case we could perhaps get a response to issues that are important to us all?

2.15 pm

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention; most of us would not care who the Minister was, as long as it was not the one we have now. Education is a clear example of where it would be desirable to have one single Department. Earlier on, we heard how planning is split across DRD, DOE and even DSD, when it comes to urban renewal; we should look at those examples.

It is not just about making sense of which Department does what; it is about making economic sense. We have heard before that the money that we could save on bureaucracy and staff costs could be put into direct services. The people whom I represent want resources to be put into hospitals, schools and roads rather than additional and unnecessary Departments.

The motion is very good. It is very positive, and I support it.

Mrs D Kelly: Some common themes arose across all the contributions to the debate. No one had any argument with more efficient and effective government. My colleague Mark Durkan made it very clear that powers existed in OFMDFM. He questioned whether the motion was a criticism of that Department, given that it had those powers and that although it had signalled its intent to establish an efficiency panel, it had yet to do so. In the same way, many decisions went unmade for several months, well before the logjam that was created by the impasse between Sinn Féin and the DUP.

The public, and others, should be in no doubt as to the SDLP's intent. Front line services should be protected and enhanced, and our amendment sets down proposals for the way in which services could be shared across all Departments, resulting in much better performance. Given that some Ministers and Departments are already experiencing difficulty in the performance of their current responsibilities and duties, one wonders how they would cope with further responsibilities.

Much has been said about the fact that there were six Departments under direct rule. Is anyone here going to say that direct rule was good for the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that under direct rule, local councils had more powers than they do under the current Administration? It will not help councils to be told that they will be asked to take responsibility for cutting grass and emptying drains away from DRD.

Mrs D Kelly: I accept Mr Elliott's point entirely. He is quite right; there has been a power grab to the

centre, and particularly to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Other Members remarked that in a previous life, there were those who objected most forcefully to the creation of junior Minister posts. However, once they were in position, they then created their own special adviser posts. We only have to look at the debacle that occurred this time last year, when the victims' commissioners were appointed. Mr Hamilton's contention that £500,000 could be saved by reducing the number of permanent secretaries rings hollow when it was his party, along with Sinn Féin, that appointed four victims' commissioners, which cost an extra £250,000.

The motion ignores, as have certain newspaper editorials and other interests, such as the Business Alliance, the fact that the reason that the Good Friday Agreement set out a plan for an inclusive government was because our society was coming out of 40 years of conflict after having suffered many years of discriminatory practices and abuses of power by Stormont.

Mr Hamilton: I am at a loss to understand the point that the Member has made. Despite the criticisms that have been levelled at business groups, it is their experience, day in, day out, that the number of Departments that we have cannot effectively deliver what they want, or what they believe is best for Northern Ireland. Are the Member and her party now taking a potshot at business and the community and voluntary sector? Is she saying that they do not know what they are talking about?

Mrs D Kelly: I do not accept that at all; that was not my point. My point is that we already have Ministers who are not performing correctly.

Mr Durkan: Does the Member accept that those business organisations — representatives of which some Members have met — have confirmed that they are concerned about savings being made from the proposed reduction in the number of Departments and about savings being made from the sorts of measures proposed in our amendment? Therefore, it is not simply about one issue.

Mrs D Kelly: I accept Mr Durkan's point. Is it not also the case that this is a Sinn Féin and DUP smokescreen to hide their failure to meet and to lead during the economic crisis of the past four or five months? The logjam caused by their failure to meet was the impetus for the urgent Executive meetings that were held weekly thereafter. Those meetings have now stopped. This debate is really no more than smoke and mirrors.

The First Minister, in his new year message, said:

"After St Andrews the North South Ministerial Council may be politically benign, but is it really the most effective use of our time and resources?"

The SDLP reiterates today that the North/South Ministerial Council is non-negotiable. Unlike some other parties, the SDLP will not stand idly by and watch the Council's remit be reduced, while the British-Irish Council's remit is extended. The Council deals with a number of issues meaningful for the delivery, on an all-Ireland basis, for all the people, not only of Northern Ireland, or the North of Ireland, but of the island of Ireland.

The SDLP is clear about the DUP's political motivation and its manifesto pledge to reduce Departments. What we are seeing is a back-door approach into majority rule by stealth. Other parties have fallen fast asleep and cannot see what the DUP's real agenda is. I ask the Ulster Unionists to accept our amendment, which goes much further than the original motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close, please.

Mrs D Kelly: Our amendment calls for pragmatic changes that will improve government.

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

Mr Paisley Jnr: This is a very important debate. The public will be perplexed when they hear some of the comments that Members uttered here today. Those Members are saying that they want more largesse, more government, more expenditure, more permanent secretaries and more civil servants. They want more, more, more.

During this credit crunch, all the parties have claimed that they want to see less government and less public expenditure on wasteful elements of government. They also say that they want a Government that is efficient, lean, agile and able. However, some parties want to burden the Government with more.

Day and daily, the public say that our system of government is too complex and too bureaucratic, which makes it far too difficult to get planning decisions — *[Interruption.]*

They say that the complexity of government makes it far too difficult to get all manner of decisions taken, including decisions on housing. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The public say that it is far too difficult to get all manner of decisions through government because of bureaucracy. However, for what does the SDLP ask? It asks for more government and for government to be slowed down. The SDLP wants the DUP to accept an amendment to its motion that will add at least two years to the Assembly's process of reform.

I am glad that, in the Assembly today, there is a voice of reason. *[Laughter.]* A voice of reason that says let us make the Assembly work in a more

efficient, more able, and more cost-effective manner than is currently the case.

Most people will be amazed by the SDLP's decision to show two faces in this debate. Margaret Ritchie told the Executive that she was prepared to support the Programme for Government that called for this review, that called for change and that supported a lean government. Her party's leader and his sidekicks, however, have stood up and demanded that there be more government and, with that, more expenditure. That is amazing. The public will be absolutely amazed at the exhibition that the SDLP has made of itself today. Mr Durkan had his chance to change things when he was in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but he failed, and he failed miserably. He failed to deliver those changes.

We then hear the cries from the SDLP that this is a power grab by the Democratic Unionist Party. I do not want to read a lecture to the SDLP about how the d'Hondt process works, but I fail to see how it is a power grab when our party will have fewer Ministers at the end of it. The public will be amazed that yet again —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Sit down, Mark. You are not getting in, son. You had your chance and you were wick then, so you will not get another chance on my time. *[Laughter.]*

I am glad that the Ulster Unionist Party has supported our motion. Danny Kennedy said that only a small amount of money would be saved. The case has to be made and proved, but it takes little to see that some benefit would result from reducing the cost of salaries of permanent secretaries by not renewing those salaries. That would save at least £1.3 million, and the cost of establishing and running a Department —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has consistently advised that he will not give way, so please stop interrupting.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I cut at least 10 minutes from my speech so that you can have the benefit of getting home early today, Dolores, so at least allow me to make my speech.

It would cost around £20 million to establish a new Department in Northern Ireland. If that money were saved, it could be spent on front line services. Our calculations show that amalgamating three of the current Departments with other Departments would save up to £80 million. That money should be spent on front line services. We have heard much about the need for public housing, and I sympathise and agree with that. Let us get the money out of wasteful bureaucracy and into front line services.

The business community has made a clear demand for those changes. The Business Alliance made it clear that, in the Programme for Government:

“service delivery could be enhanced through bold redesign”

of government. The DUP supports that. The Institute of Directors (IOD) said that the challenge for 2009 is:

“the review of central government departments cannot be immune from rationalisation and reform, and must be pursued vigorously.”

The DUP is prepared to pursue that vigorously. It has tabled the motion, and it has demanded action on the issue. It is incumbent on the parties that talk the talk of bold, effective and efficient government to walk the walk through the aisles with us today. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Question will be put on the amendment.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: I again remind Members of a change in the arrangements for Question Time. Members wishing to ask a supplementary question should rise in their places as the Minister finishes responding to a lead or supplementary question.

EDUCATION

Post-Primary Transfer

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education when she expects to announce her final proposals on post-primary transfer. (AQO 1677/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I mí Bealtaine, tharraing mé moltaí comhthoiliúla anuas a bhain le socruithe nua don aistriú iarbhunscoile; bhí na moltaí seo bunaithe ar dhíospóireachtaí forleathana leis na páirtithe leasmhara ar fad san earnáil oideachais.

I brought forward consensual proposals in May 2008 for new post-primary transfer arrangements, which were based on extensive discussions with the full range of education stakeholders. My proposals are designed to address inequalities associated with the existing arrangements. The case for change is compelling.

At present, one in four children in the non-grammar sector is entitled to free school meals. In the grammar sector, that ratio is one in 17. In addition, due to the size and nature of the grammar sector persisting amidst a major decline in pupil numbers, the pressures and burdens of sustainability are suffered exclusively by non-grammar schools. The maintenance of the number of grammar places against a backdrop of demographic decline has meant that pupil numbers have fallen in only the non-grammar sector. That means that children from disadvantaged socio-economic groups face not only an admissions process that gives them disproportionately low prospects of obtaining a grammar school place, but means that they are significantly over-represented in non-grammar post-primary schools.

The case for change is also underlined by the extent of educational underachievement and how that relates to educational disadvantage. For example, 70% of children — 14,391 children — not entitled to free school meals left school with at least five GCSEs at grades A* to C, yet only 38% of school-leavers entitled to free school meals had the same level of achievement. Some 92% of Travellers have no GCSEs, compared with 4% of all school-leavers.

We must move away from a system in which children's prospects are so heavily influenced by the relative affluence of the area in which they live. For example, 73% of the children who transferred from primary schools in Holywood did so to a grammar school. In Hillsborough, that figure was 72%; on the Malone Road it was 95%; and in Stranmillis it was 85%. However, in Twinbrook and Poleglass, that figure was 34%. It was 22% in Rathcoole, 26% in the Shankill area and 20% in the New Lodge.

I have sought Executive engagement with my proposals, and I made a formal bid to have them included in legislation. In the absence of substantive consideration by the Executive of my proposals, I have sought individual discussions with each Executive Minister. In many cases, however, I have not had a response. I remain ready and willing to bring a policy memorandum to the Executive when they are in a position to discuss it.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her answer. She has now been Minister of the Crown for education in Northern Ireland for some 18 months.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Moutray: Is it her intention to bring forward proposals that incorporate the current legal reality regarding academic selection?

The Minister of Education: Yes, I have been Minister of Education for many months now, and I have to say that it has been a very important job. This is a key time in education. It is wonderful to be at the helm of education when so much change for the better is happening.

We have an outdated education system that needs to be changed and I am determined that we continue with the change that has already begun. Thankfully, we have had the last 11-plus. There will be no more 11-plus here in the North of Ireland, and that is good news for all our children, none of whom should be sitting an exam at the tender age of 10 or 11, with future pathways decided on the basis of two one-hour tests.

Where are the Members in representing the children whom the system is failing? Where are they in representing the 12,000 young people whom our system is failing? Are they content to allow to continue a system that fails a huge number of our young people? Well, I am not.

There will be change, and I look forward to working with all Members in effecting that change.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Minister of Education aware that, because of her failure to introduce any constructive proposals, she is the most unpopular politician in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, is she aware that the people of Northern Ireland long for a return to the good old days of Martin McGuinness? Has there been some misunderstanding? Will the Minister explain to

the people of Northern Ireland why she has failed not only her people but all our people?

The Minister of Education: I do not know where the Member has been, because I have introduced proposals. I have introduced compromise proposals for the phased ending of academic selection, and I look forward to Members supporting those proposals. In the absence of those proposals being supported, I will issue guidance on admissions criteria, but I would prefer us to reach agreement.

I look forward to Members representing their constituents and working with me to deal with educational underachievement. I am not prepared to preside over educational apartheid or academic rejection.

Popularity was not my rationale for entering politics. My rationale in being the Minister of Education for the North of Ireland is to bring about the change that is so badly needed. I urge Members to talk to the people on the ground and the young people who have been failed by the current system. I have talked to them, and it is not acceptable for us to fail the number of children whom we are currently failing.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an bhfuil plean eile aici seachas an ceann a nocht sí cheana féin don idirthréimhse, b'fhéidir ceann a bheadh bunaithe ar an pháipéar a chuir na ceannasaithe Eaglaise i gceionn a chéile, a mbeadh, b'fhéidir, tacaíocht níos forleithne aige. Chuideodh sin le córas neamhrialta a sheachaint.

Does the Minister have an alternative transitional proposal beyond the one that has already been revealed, perhaps a proposal based on the paper that was published by the Church leaders? Such a proposal would gain more widespread support and would help to avoid the development of an unregulated system of academic selection. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh míle maith agat. As I have done in the past, I pay tribute to the Church leaders for the work that they have done. As Members will know, I met representatives from all the Churches in the North of Ireland. I also met representatives from all the different education sectors, and the vast majority of those people want change.

I have introduced compromise proposals, on which I look forward to reaching agreement. I have always said that I am willing to listen to suggestions, and if those suggestions improve my proposals, I will certainly take them on board.

Change is needed for all our children, and we must progress our education system into the twenty-first century. I look forward to the support of the SDLP when I present those proposals.

Education for Children from the Travelling Community

2. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that children from the Travelling community receive a fair and equal education. (AQO 1816/09)

The Minister of Education: Le fada an lá anois, tá leitheal á dhéanamh ar an Lucht Siúil sna réimsí oideachais, sláinte, titíochta agus fostaíochta. Tá siad ar cheann de na grúpaí is mó atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste sa Tuaisceart.

For too long, the Traveller community has suffered discrimination in education, health, housing and employment, and it is one of the most disadvantaged groups throughout the island of Ireland. The vast majority of Travellers in the North have no formal educational qualifications, and 92% have no GCSEs or equivalent qualifications. Indeed, in 2006, it was reported that nine out of 10 Traveller children had not achieved the required literacy levels.

I am driving a number of key actions to ensure better educational access and outcomes for Irish Traveller children and Roma children. At the centre of my vision for the future is the work of the task force on Traveller education, which I established in September 2008. That task force is jointly chaired by an Irish Traveller, Catherine Joyce, and Dr Robbie McVeigh. The task force is bringing together representatives from statutory and non-statutory bodies from all of Ireland to make recommendations on Traveller education, which will be underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In March 2009, we will be holding a joint North/South conference on Traveller education, during which we will share good practice in Ireland and further afield. That will further inform the task force in developing its recommendations. We are also working to progress data collection for Irish Traveller children and Roma children, particularly in the areas of attainment and attendance. That will enable us to set benchmarks, measure progress, and identify areas that require more work.

I am also taking action to ensure that Roma children — who, as members of a historically nomadic group, face the double barriers of language and discrimination — receive a fair and equal education. Additional funding is being provided to schools based on the current reported number of Roma children. We cannot have a situation in which children go hungry in our schools.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her reply. In areas where a high number of Traveller children are attending school, will she consider providing extra classroom assistance or support for teachers to ensure that those children get the opportunity of education?

The Minister of Education: Tríd an bhfoirmle comhaontaithe fuair scoileanna £983 de mhaoiniú breise do gach páiste den Lucht Siúil sa bhliain 2008-09.

Through the common funding formula, schools received £980 of additional funding per Traveller child for the year 2008-09. Those funds are provided to schools because of the Traveller children who are attending them; therefore, it is very important that schools use the funds to work for the needs of those children. Each school decides how best to use that money.

The Department is holding a series of working groups to consider the money that schools receive through the common funding formula for each Traveller child. We want to provide more guidance on what schools should spend their Traveller factor funds on. The working group consists of departmental staff, representatives from the education and library boards and principals from two primary and two post-primary schools.

A total of £364,000 earmarked funding was provided to the boards for the education of Traveller children in the year 2008-09. Therefore, a total of over £1 million is provided as additional funding for the education of Traveller children. A total of 822 Traveller children were in schools as of October 2007, and Members will know that we have put classroom assistants into every P1 and P2 class right across the North of Ireland.

Mr Storey: I note that the Minister of the Crown for education on this occasion is not wearing her educational balaclava, so I am delighted that she is in the House to answer the question.

On the matter of fair and equal education, were the Minister successful with her current transfer proposals, would it not be the case that she would turn every child into a Traveller child? We would have a situation in which our children would be denied choice and opportunity, and the problem that she is trying to address in the Travelling community would be exacerbated. We would have more problems in our educational system, but the Minister fails to recognise or deal with that.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I ask the Minister to respond, I must inform the Member that — as I made absolutely clear this morning — he should not use that language in the Chamber.

The Minister of Education: I am going to ignore the first part of the question.

In relation to the second part of the question, the Member — and all Members — will know that I put children first in all areas of my work and that children are at the centre of my concerns. I find it insulting when people talk about “our children”, meaning one set of children. I am the Minister of Education for all children. I take my duties very seriously, which includes my responsibility for the 14,000 young people who are failing, whether they are from the Protestant community,

the Catholic community, or are ethnic minority children. Therefore, I do not discriminate against any children. What I do is put a system in place that ensures that children with special needs get the money and resources that they deserve, whether they are from the Falls or the Shankill, the Waterside or the Bogside, from Newry, Down, Tyrone or another part of the North of Ireland.

I ask Members to join with me. The Member asks whether we will input the same amount that we have given to Traveller children — work with me, give me more money and I will be happy to put it into our education system. I would love to see the Education Department getting more money.

2.45 pm

Members will be aware that I have targeted funding on the basis of need. I am reviewing the common funding formula so that we can put more money into working-class areas where there are Protestant children, Catholic children and children from all ethnic minorities.

Mr McCallister: It is good to share a constituency with the most unpopular politician in Northern Ireland. The Minister obviously feels that the Travelling community has been disadvantaged. Who does she think has caused that disadvantage, and will she identify those responsible for it?

The Minister of Education: I am sorry, could you repeat the question?

Mr B McCrea: She is not even listening to us.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister identify those whom she feels are responsible —

Mr B McCrea: Start again.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister identify those responsible for the disadvantage that she feels exists against the Travelling community: will she identify the people whom she thinks have caused that disadvantage?

The Minister of Education: First, we will let the electorate of South Down decide who is popular. Given the votes that my party gets, we will let the electorate decide that matter.

Regarding the discrimination against our Traveller population, what we have is systemic discrimination that is multi-layered. We have discrimination because they are —

Mr McCrea: What does that mean?

The Minister of Education: Basil may not know what that means, but it means that we have an education system that disadvantages huge sections of our population; not just Travellers, but because Travellers face extra barriers, they, along with other sectors in our society — our ethnic minority children,

children facing violence in the home or outside the home, whether it be sexual or physical violence — have extra barriers to overcome. We are trying to put support in place for the different sections of our population that face barriers.

It has been documented — and I urge the Member to read the Equality Commission's report — that the Travelling community has the highest number of children leaving school without formal qualifications: 92%. That means that only 8% are leaving school with formal qualifications. I hope that the Member joins with me in working to bring about improved outcomes.

Academic Selection

3. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education to detail the legal restrictions she would face in unilaterally seeking to remove academic selection. (AQO 1676/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní féidir le duine ar bith roghnú acadúil a chealú ná a fhorchur ar bhonn aontaobhach, agus dá bhrí sin níl aon cheist ann.

No one can unilaterally impose or remove academic selection, and, therefore, the question does not arise. I have brought proposals to the Executive for the phased abolition of academic selection. Those proposals include a transitional period of three years during which schools can admit a proportion of their intake on the basis of academic selection.

My proposals address a number of inequalities that are evident in the existing arrangements, particularly the role that disadvantage plays in constraining the life chances of children as they make the transition from primary education to post-primary education. As I have said, it is a damning statistic that while one in four children in our non-grammar schools is entitled to free school meals, the ratio in grammar schools is one in 17.

We need to bring about change that is badly needed, and I am determined to do so. I want to reach agreement, but in the absence of agreement, I will issue guidance.

Mr Simpson: The Minister of the Crown for education in Northern Ireland has already conceded in an answer to a question for written answer that it is legally permissible for schools that wish to do so to utilise academic selection in the event of there being no agreement. She has also stated that she was aware of the current legal reality regarding academic selection from day one of her tenure. Does the Minister intend to bang her head against a brick wall in an attempt to get round the legislation or will she get on with her job?

The Minister of Education: I am getting on with my job. The 11-plus is gone.

Mr Elliott: In light of what the Minister has said, does she expect to see an end to academic selection within the lifetime of the current Assembly, and is

there — or does she perceive there to be — any legal impediment to the continuation of academic selection by whatever means?

The Minister of Education: I am not going to repeat the proposals that I have introduced — the Member knows what they are. I hope that we can reach agreement on those proposals — if we do, it will be in the interests of all children; if we do not, I will issue guidance.

Mr Lunn: What are the legal restrictions on schools that seek to select their own intake, by means of an examination or otherwise?

The Minister of Education: I have made it very clear that I want us to reach agreement. If we reach agreement, those schools that want to carry out independent tests — breakaway schools — will not be able to do so, unless they become private schools. If we do not reach agreement, I will issue guidance. I have outlined on many occasions that there is a danger in breakaway schools operating independent tests; the Department works to equality and disability legislation, and it will not fund independent tests or any appeals to those tests. I urge everyone — political parties and all the education sectors — to move forward and to put children at the centre.

Mr Dallat: Although not wishing to advocate the retention of the present system, will the Minister agree that an unregulated system is probably worse than the current system? I ask that question on behalf of my constituents, and not on behalf of the Crown, Mrs Windsor or anyone else.

The Minister of Education: I welcome the fact that the SDLP is opposed to academic selection, and I look forward to its support for my proposals. The worst-case scenario is the current system; I have no plans to bring back the 11-plus, and I hope that the SDLP does not — perhaps, at some point, one of its Members will clarify that. As I have said, I want, and look forward to, agreement. If we do not reach agreement, I will issue guidance, and that guidance will be very carefully managed.

Education (Pupil Records and Reporting) Regulations (NI) 2009

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education what are the policy objectives of the Education (Pupil Records and Reporting) Regulations (NI) 2009. (AQO 1820/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé tábhachtach againn mar thuismitheoirí fios a bheith againn conas atá ag éirí lenár gcuid páistí ar scoil. Is é is cuspóir leis na dréachtrialacháin, mar sin de, a chinntiú go

bhfaisgheann tuismitheoirí eolas fiúntach ábhartha faoina bpáistí ag na pointí cuí ina saol oideachais.

It is important that parents know how their children are doing at school. The objective of the draft regulations is to ensure that parents receive meaningful and relevant information about their child at the appropriate points during their education. We must make sure that parents have the information that they need in order to know not just how their child is doing at school, but how they can help support learning at home. If children are to do well and reach their full potential, they need the help of their teachers and parental support.

I have listened to the feedback from parents, teachers and principals on last year's pupil profile pilot, which was useful in helping me to decide which elements to retain and which to improve. As much of that report was positively received, I will be making very few changes to the detail of what should be covered in the annual school report. I am, however, proposing to go back to calling it an annual report to parents — tuairisc bhliantúil do thuismitheoirí — and to making sure that there is the flexibility for schools to add any extra information that they think that parents will find useful.

Parents, teachers and young people are being consulted on the proposals. In view of the feedback from the pilot programme, my proposals do not require schools to use a standard format for reporting; however, the format that was trialled last summer will continue to be made available for the many schools that have found it beneficial.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for her answer. Under the draft regulations, how will the annual reports to parents differ from those that they currently receive?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith as an cheist sin. Beidh nasc idir an tuairisc agus an curaclam don chéad uair riamh.

For the first time, the draft regulations will bring reporting requirements fully in line with the revised curriculum. All Members of the House have been concerned about raising literacy and numeracy standards. The regulations will allow reporting to reflect the clear focus that I expect teachers to place on standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as providing parents with information about how their daughters and sons are doing in other areas of the revised curriculum.

If a school has traditionally reported class assessment outcomes to parents, it will continue to do so. The draft regulations propose common coverage of reporting, so that no matter what schools children attend, all parents will get the same breadth of information about how their children are doing. Good practice must be built on.

Mr Gallagher: In the Minister's response to an earlier supplementary question, she referred to a money shortage in the Department. Recently, she announced the end of the pupil-profile initiative. Surely when she took that decision, she calculated how much money her Department had spent on the initiative. Will she tell the Assembly how much money the pupil-profile initiative has cost her Department?

The Minister of Education: There is a presumption in the question that the Department has wasted money. No money has been wasted. The approach to annual reporting to parents has not changed significantly.

In 2007-08, 2008-09 and the current financial year to date, the cost of training and support of teachers on reporting to parents via a standardised pupil-profile format has been £180,000. I am sure that all Members understand the importance of reporting to parents, which was emphasised during all the pilots and consultations that were carried out. Are Members suggesting that teachers should not report to parents? The Department has listened to educationalists and parents. It has decided that instead of "pupil profiles", they will now be called "annual reports to parents".

Mr McCausland: A 2008 document on the revised curriculum, which was published with a foreword by the Minister, states that the future lies with pupil profiles. Will the Minister, therefore, acknowledge that she got it wrong? Will she acknowledge that she changed her mind? Will she also tell the House the actual full cost of developing the pupil-profile system and of the work that was done to support and train teachers — which has been mentioned already — in the now-redundant system?

The Minister of Education: It seems that the DUP has moved from its position of being anti-pupil profiles to being pro-pupil profiles. I adhere to my statutory duties, one of which is to conduct consultation. The leaflet to which the Member refers was published before the policy's launch.

Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the review of special educational needs and inclusion, which commenced in April 2006.

(AQO 1824/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá riachtanas speisialta oideachasúil de chineál éigin ar chóir a bheith 18% de na páistí inár scoileanna.

Almost 18% of schoolchildren have some form of special educational need (SEN). Much has been achieved under the current SEN framework. However, the review was undertaken in order to consider the

bureaucracy of current arrangements; the inconsistencies and delays in assessment and provision; the year-on-year increase in the number of statements; the growing number of children with special needs in mainstream schools; and the clear need for strategic use of resources.

Change is not needed for change's sake; it is needed for children's sake. The review aims to ensure that every child and young person who faces a barrier to learning is given a fair and equal chance. It must be ensured that all children are provided with appropriate support as early as possible in order to help them to achieve their full potential.

In developing policy proposals, there has been much early engagement with a wide range of groups and individuals in order to obtain stakeholders' views. Publication of those policy proposals is, therefore, much anticipated by everyone who has been involved. Draft policy proposals were first referred to my Executive colleagues on 1 July 2008. A formal request for agreement to proceed to public consultation was issued to the Executive on 28 November 2008. When agreement on the policy proposals has been given, the Department will be in a position to move quickly to issue the proposals for public consultation.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Loans

1. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the recent reductions in the Bank of England interest rate are being reflected in the rate of interest charged by the Student Loans Company. (AQO 1700/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Interest applied to income contingent repayment (ICR) student loans is based on either the annual March retail price index or the highest base rate of a group of specified banks, including the Bank of England, plus 1%. The lower of those options is selected. As a result of the reduction in the base rate to 2% in December 2008, the base rate plus 1% was lower than the March 2008 retail price index, which was 3.8%. The Student Loans Company, therefore, reduced the interest rate payable from 3.8% to 3%. Following the further reduction in the base rate to 1.5% earlier this month, the interest rate payable on ICR student loans has now been reduced from 3% to 2.5%.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he agrees that a lower interest rate on student loans is a good news story. Can he tell the

House how he proposes to get that message across to potential students?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I thank the Member for his very helpful suggestion, because there is a lack of information and knowledge. The Student Loans Company is the body that services, provides and administers student loans throughout the UK. I will consult the Department and write to the Member when the issue has been examined.

The rate applied to student loans does not immediately affect the amount that a person might repay at any point in time, because HM Revenue and Customs takes 9% of people's income above the threshold level. The reduction in the interest rate means that there is less to repay, but it does not have an immediate impact on the level of payment.

Mr Shannon: Can the Minister confirm that some people have been put off from applying for a student loan because of the interest rate? Is the Minister aware that many parents are left to assist in the repayment of student loans? Indeed, that may be especially the case this year, due to the economic downturn. Is any consideration being given to students who are trying to repay loans through their parents?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Not every person who is eligible for a loan takes one. Indeed, the last statistics that I saw indicated that about 20% of people eligible for a loan did not take one out. It is not an interest rate that is applied to student loans, so much as a charge that is applied to the account. Since its inception, it has traditionally been lower than the level that would be offered by a bank.

There are many people around the Chamber who have sympathy with parents becoming involved in the repayment of student loans. Parental involvement continues to happen. However, as the Member knows, we are looking at the whole question of student finance this year, and we will take all of these things into account. Early indications are that the number of students taking up positions in our universities continues to rise.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware that the graduate salary threshold of £15,000 for the repayment of student loans is too low? There is quite a bit of evidence to suggest that graduate salaries are more likely to be between £18,000 and £23,000. Given that students have to repay 9% of their salary when it reaches £15,000, can the Minister give an undertaking that he will look at the issue and introduce a higher threshold that better reflects graduate salaries?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: This scheme is administered by HM Revenue and Customs throughout the UK. HM Revenue and Customs is not prepared to regionalise the scheme; it is

not prepared to treat Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England separately. There would have to be an agreement between the four Administrations before the threshold could be changed.

I am prepared to write to my colleagues in the other Administrations to point out the difficulties that the Member has highlighted, and I will inform the House when I receive a response.

Mr Gallagher: The threshold for qualification for maintenance grants, which is based on parental income, is linked to the salary threshold and to the huge problem of student debt. Does the Minister agree that the Assembly could, perhaps, examine that matter? Will he consider raising the eligibility threshold for maintenance grants?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that Northern Ireland has retained a differential on maintenance grants, and we pay £500 per annum more than anywhere else in the UK. Indeed, in the comprehensive spending review that was announced in 2008, we decided to protect that differential because Northern Ireland has achieved greater participation among students from disadvantaged backgrounds than any other region. We must review the matter continually and include it in the student finance review. At this stage, my policy is to maintain the differential between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Funding

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide details of additional funding for new PhDs and research and development, as a response to the economic situation; if his Department is seeking funds to create a new Innovation Fund and if there is any North/South element to the recent announcement of a new Innovation Fund in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 1808/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In 2008, my Department announced several new university-based research initiatives, which represent an investment of more than £63 million over the next three years in local academic research bases. That includes funding for an additional 100 PhDs in each of the next three years in areas of economic relevance.

Those initiatives are partly supported by £31.3 million from the new funding for innovation stream, which is co-funded by the Irish Government. The new Innovation Fund - Ireland, to which the Member referred, is part of a framework for sustainable economic renewal that was launched in November 2008. Although the details in the framework have still to be developed, 'Building Ireland's Smart Economy: a Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal' states:

"to the extent that it is appropriate, and by agreement with the Northern Ireland Executive, all of the policies, programmes and initiatives in this Action Plan will take full account of the mutual benefits available through North-South co-operation."

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Does he agree that, as soon as we escape the recession — God knows when that will be — we will require as many graduates and PhD students and as much investment in higher learning as possible in order to outperform other parts of Europe? Does he agree that we should invest even more money in that area?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is talking to the converted. He will be aware that the Department made several announcements under the funding for innovation scheme, and he will remember that an initial series of schemes was announced in autumn 2008. Furthermore, he will be aware that we have added further packages to the package that the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced on 15 December 2008. Therefore, we have radically increased spending, and I have reprioritised the Department's plans in order to allocate money to that area.

The Member referred to the new Innovation Fund - Ireland. We do not yet know the full scope or details of that scheme, but I assure the Member that the Department will consider extremely closely and favourably any opportunities to strengthen the research base here or in co-operation with the Republic. I agree with the Member's assertion that, on the rebound from the economic crisis, we will need as many highly qualified people as possible to lead us out of the recession.

Mr B McCrea: What consideration has the ever-popular Minister for Employment and Learning given to increasing levels of R&D spending in universities as a means of fighting this dreadful recession?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that Gordon Brown announced a couple of years ago — before devolution was established — that he was considering an innovation fund. He will also know that when the comprehensive spending review process began after devolution was re-established, one of my main targets was to try to attract as much as possible of the money from that fund into the Department. We succeeded in attracting in excess of £40 million — roughly half of the total amount. That was one of my main targets for the simple reason that an innovation fund is one of the ways in which we can improve our research and skills base. The Member will be aware that, through the comprehensive spending review, the Department got money for another 100 places per annum over the next three years. All of those places have been taken up in the universities, which is very positive.

My Department will keep the pressure on to increase the money available for providing those places, and, in

answer to a previous Member, I said that the Department has already re-prioritised some of its spending lines in order to make money available for research and development. People must understand that the research and development spend in Northern Ireland is still well below not only national levels, but international levels, which is more important. Therefore, there is work still to be done.

Belfast Metropolitan College: Senior Concessions

3. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to review the policy on senior concessions for further education courses in Belfast Metropolitan College, to include those over the age of 60. (AQO 1814/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: At present, all college directors are collectively examining their fee structures, taking account of the current economic climate, and in light of the current part-time enrolment pattern throughout the further education sector. In establishing their fees policies, colleges have to take account of relevant legislation. They have to comply with Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, which came into operation in October 2006. Unfortunately, those regulations mean that colleges are no longer able to offer concessionary fees to learners solely on the basis of their age.

In advance of the start of the 2008/09 academic year, my Department worked closely with colleges to identify additional means-tested criteria that they could apply. As a result, all colleges can now offer fee concessions to learners who are in receipt of rates relief, in addition to concessions that are available to those in receipt of a range of benefits, including pension credits.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. I have received correspondence from a number of constituents in south Belfast aged between 60 and 65 who have been engaged in a range of community-based programmes. They are now being asked to pay the full fees, and are being discouraged from the opportunities of further education, and from attempting to address social isolation. Can there be flexibility for those who have been engaged in a range of programmes to continue with those without having to pay the full fees?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will have heard of the law of unintended consequences, and if ever there was an unintended consequence, this is it. I do not think that there is a Member in the Chamber who has not written to me at some time in the past 18 months regarding this issue, and it is not a place in which we want to be. However, the legal advice that the Department has received — outlining a view that is shared by the Equality

Commission — puts us in a position in which, if colleges give concessionary fees purely on the basis of age, they are contravening the directive. The Department is examining that, and trying to broaden the applicable criteria.

I wish we were not in this position, because it seems bizarre that a piece of legislation that was designed to help primarily older people has ended up hindering them. I take very seriously the point that the Member has made about the non-academic aspects of the issue.

There is a social aspect, and I have received letter after letter about that. Another European directive is coming on this issue — although one could probably say that at any time, because there is always another European directive coming — which may provide an opportunity if we can find to fix this problem.

I have written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the past few days asking if this issue can be taken up nationally and at European level, because I am quite sure that those who designed the directive and the subsequent legislation never intended this to happen. I do not want that to happen. It was a mistake and it is a shame. In the short term, we are trying to mitigate the circumstances as best we can.

3.15 pm

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he have any information as to the impact that that situation has had on the enrolment figures at the Belfast Metropolitan College and at other colleges?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A number of Members have asked that question. The material for the last academic year has been analysed by the Department. The final figures have not yet been produced for me, but that will not take long. As soon as those are available, I will write to the Member with the details. I hear anecdotal reports, but I do not yet have the finalised, analysed figures to hand.

Mr McCallister: The Minister will be aware that I have contacted him about how important this issue is and the effect that it is having on constituents in South Down. Given the Minister's earlier response about the amount of European directives, does he agree that we need a better system in which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister could scrutinise the directives, so that we do not end up with anomalies that cause problems and hardship in our constituencies?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I share the Member's frustration. However, I suspect that it goes further than that, because Governments are signing up to those directives in Brussels. The Council of Ministers takes the final decisions, or else takes joint decisions with the European Parliament. The recent vote on the nitrates directives was taken in that way.

After people decide on those directives, they are left for quite a long time. It can take years before those decisions filter through. By the time they would reach the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, it would be too late. They need to be dealt with at governmental level at Westminster, because, unfortunately, our representatives in Brussels are approving those directives. Under the previous arrangements, that could not happen unless the Council of Ministers approved them. The British Ministers agreed to that.

The frustration that the Member expressed clearly applies right across the board. I will ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to investigate whether there is any way that the effects can be mitigated while it is possible that another directive will come. However, that will require positive input from the UK representatives on the Council of Ministers.

Review of Student Fees

4. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he expects to publish his report on the review of student fees. (AQO 1679/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The review of variable fees and student-support arrangements is under way. Northern Ireland is the first area of the United Kingdom to undertake such a review. I will ensure that the Committee for Employment and Learning is updated on a quarterly basis and at key milestones during the progress of the review. I anticipate issuing a document for public consultation in the autumn of this year.

Mr Newton: That was not the question that I asked. The question that I asked was when the Minister expected to publish his report on the review of student fees. My understanding is that that will not be until March 2010.

Mr McNarry: Why did the Member ask the question if he knew the answer?

Mr Newton: That will all become clear. In December 2007, the Minister pleaded with the Assembly to give him 12 months to complete his report. According to the Hansard report, his actual words were:

“for the sake of a year.” — [*Official Report, Vol 26, No 2, p88, col 1*].

If I am correct that the report will not be published until March 2010 at the earliest, was that not an irresponsible approach that misled this House?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: If the Member cares to read the Hansard report, he will know that I repeatedly said that we would conduct a review in academic year 2008-09. That is precisely what we are doing — in fact, we announced that review before Christmas.

A lot of work has been going on: a team has been established; a chairperson has been appointed; people have been appointed to sit on the group; and an Economic and Social Research Council fellow is in position to consider the data.

The Member knows that we must have enough robust statistical evidence to make a case, because if the review were to conclude that we should replace or do away with student fees, we would be talking about huge sums of money — approximately £100 million. Therefore, if one is to approach the Department of Finance and Personnel, or anybody else, with such a bill, robust statistics — and not a lot of waffle — are required, and such statistics can be obtained only by means of a sufficiently significant data sample.

In answer to questions, letters and debates in the House, I repeatedly said that the review would commence in the 2008-09 academic year, and that is exactly what happened.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. Further to the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning’s question, bearing in mind the figures highlighted by the Minister for years 1 and 2, the fact that he must await figures for year 3 in order to bring a case to the Department of Finance and Personnel, and given that Basil McCrea said that Sir Reg Empey is one of the most popular Ministers, will he make a popular decision? Is he minded to go to his Executive colleagues with proposals to do away with student fees?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: If I were minded to do that, why would I go to the bother of instigating a review process in the first place? Perhaps the Member will indicate in advance which of her party’s Ministers would give me the money, because, if the money must come from the total pot, it must come from their pockets, as well as those of other Ministers. We have appointed an independent review in good faith, and the Committee will be updated on its progress at least quarterly, or when any other milestones are reached. There is no point in appointing a review committee if one has already made up one’s mind about what to do.

Mr Elliott: Perhaps the Minister should have said “in a political lifetime”, which seems to be an acceptable timescale. Will the Minister confirm that student fees are means-tested and that, consequently, the majority of Northern Ireland students do not pay them?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is correct. My Department’s policy of maintaining a differential to the maintenance grant was introduced by my predecessor Seán Farren — or perhaps it was Mrs Hanna. We have consistently done that, and currently pay the highest grant.

In conjunction with other university programmes funded by the Department, the policy has been successful

in assisting more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to become students. It has been successful because we have worked at it. In fact, in Northern Ireland, the British Government's targets for encouraging people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get involved in higher education have long been exceeded, and that is something to be proud of.

Most, if not all, parties represented in the Chamber were hostile to the idea of introducing fees, and, in the present circumstances, any debt or bill that people must face represents a huge challenge. Nevertheless, now that the review is under way and people are in place to examine the situation, we must take all circumstances into account before reaching a decision, and I hope that, when I receive the report, assuming that the Executive is still meeting, there will be something for them to discuss.

Mr Dallat: I can assure the Minister that I do not know the answer to my question. *[Laughter.]*

I agree with Mr Elliott's comments that the Minister has been proactive on further and higher education. I am sure that the Minister will agree that many good plans that are made today will be history by the time the report is published. Is the Minister of a mind to monitor any potential drop-off in the number of students from lower economic backgrounds? Will he advocate access funds for those students to the colleges should the recession bite even harder than it is currently biting?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes.

Education and Training for People with Tourette's Syndrome

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the education and training provision available for people with Tourette's syndrome, and any future plans for such provision. (AQO 1810/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department encourages and supports access to education and training for people with disabilities. Under current disability legislation, colleges and training providers are required to make reasonable adjustments to allow people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to access mainstream provision. The support available is comprehensive and applicable to a wide range of impairments, including Tourette's syndrome. Support arrangements in the Department's areas of responsibility are kept under review and will be enhanced as necessary.

To enhance the effectiveness of the Department's Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes, a group was established comprising individuals who have expertise in dealing with young people with disabilities. The Department is considering the group's report and will respond in the next few weeks.

Mr McCarthy: What action has the Minister or his Department taken to raise awareness among teachers and lecturers about Tourette's syndrome during their training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We have not distinguished between a wide range of difficulties and learning challenges that people face, because we try and deal with those on a case-by-case basis. We are fortunate in that a number of freelance professional and non-professional support workers are recruited and trained to assist students with disabilities. Access to the register is available to all disabled students in the universities and university colleges, and on identifying that a student has a particular need, we try to match him or her with someone who has the appropriate expertise.

The Member will be aware that we try to cover a broad spectrum — and rightly so. However, following the publication of the report on autism, attention deficit /hyperactivity disorder and other issues, it is fair to say that people asked whether those conditions should be included in the continuous professional development — as well as the initial professional development — of teachers and, perhaps, lecturers. I will consider that, but through working with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and other parts of the public sector, we try to match a student who has such a condition with someone who has the relevant expertise. I am prepared to look at individual cases of which the Member may be aware.

Construction Industry Job Losses

6. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his Department's strategy for assisting anyone who loses their job in the construction industry. (AQO 1789/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A comprehensive range of services is available through my Department's jobs and benefits offices, jobcentres and contracted providers, to help the unemployed — including those formerly employed in the construction industry — find work. The services include mandatory work-focused interviews, action planning for certain clients and measures designed to improve the job prospects of those who have become unemployed.

Immediate assistance is also available, where appropriate, through the Steps to Work initiative. Participants who have been out of the labour market for 13 weeks or more may avail of the step 2 provision of that initiative. They may, for instance, undertake a new qualification provision or retrain in a new occupational area. The participant may enter at an early stage, at the adviser's discretion, if, for example, there is the prospect of a job.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Has he considered the role of the community and voluntary sector, because, in many cases, it is that sector that will have to provide support for those who become unemployed as a result of the economic downturn?

3.30 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that the construction industry has been particularly badly hit. He asked specifically about the role of the voluntary sector. My Department has several provisions in place and is asking the voluntary and community sector to help with the implementation of its policies.

In recent weeks, I have visited several jobcentres, and the current difficulty is that there are virtually no construction jobs on offer. Therefore, we are telling the advisers there that even if an individual has recently received training in construction and would not normally be eligible for retraining for some time, they may have to exercise their discretion. If there is a genuine prospect of a job, they may need to offer earlier training in another discipline. If that involves other training providers who are contractually obliged to help the Department, so be it, and the Department will strongly support going down that track.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what work is being done to identify the specific export industry segments that will be targeted for future growth; how those segments are determined; and what links have been set up between the local economic agencies and the Republic of Ireland's Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. (AQO 1724/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): The first part of the question deals with the export potential of industry sectors. The sectors targeted for future growth are outlined in Invest NI's corporate plan for 2008-2011. Invest Northern Ireland's key objective is to help its clients to increase their growth and profitability. It has a wide range of sector strategies to boost the export potential of existing businesses. They include strategies for the development of professional and business services, the food sector, digital media, biobusiness and niche manufacturing.

The sector focus of Invest NI's inward investment marketing and sales strategy is to attract higher-value-added activities in financial services and information

and communication technology. As has been clearly demonstrated in the past six months, the business environment is ever-changing, and the strategies are, therefore, subject to ongoing review and development.

The second part of the question was a request for information on the links that have been set up between the local economic agencies and the Republic of Ireland's Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, but that is a matter for the Department for Employment and Learning.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer, and, given the circumstances that currently pertain to the financial institutions, I particularly welcome the review. Does the Minister agree that the capability and strategic positioning of the Northern Ireland Skills Expert Group should be enhanced? That group should work in partnership with the Republic's Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. A mechanism is required to ensure greater co-ordination between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the further and higher education sectors here.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I agree with the Member. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) keeps us informed about its work and its co-operation with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. My understanding is that a successful all-island skills conference, Building Better Skills Together, was held on 9 October 2008 in Londonderry, and DEL hopes to build on that.

The Member mentioned financial services. Although everyone in the House acknowledges the particular difficulties in that sector, there are also opportunities for Northern Ireland there. We must be alive to those opportunities, and my Department is aware of what it needs to do to attract new businesses in that sector to Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I too thank the Minister for her response. As exports are vital to Northern Ireland, will the Minister tell the House what further initiatives are being undertaken by Invest Northern Ireland to strengthen the export potential of clients in its target sectors in the Province?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest Northern Ireland's concentration on the sectors that it identified in its corporate plan is ever-increasing. In response to the current economic downturn, Invest Northern Ireland is working with its clients and stakeholders to strengthen the export potential of the target sectors. It is providing support for the development of a wide range of key activities, including the development of centres of R&D competence.

During questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning, Members heard that Northern Ireland has fallen behind in its R&D spend. My Department is trying to correct that through its work with Invest NI. In December 2008, we announced a new campaign to

encourage more companies to develop their research and development capabilities, and it was widely welcomed by industry.

We are trying to strengthen the supply chain. As all Members know, the failure of a company at the top of the chain creates difficulties for companies further down. Unfortunately, that has been happening, particularly in the manufacturing industry, and has had the greatest impact in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and in the constituency of Mid Ulster.

We are also working with industry associations for which relevant university and non-university co-operation in research and development is vital. We are also examining the alignment of future skills provision with business needs, and in doing so, we work with the Department for Employment and Learning.

Mr Savage: Will the Minister explain how growing companies that are not client companies of DETI can be identified as having export potential and therefore be encouraged to export?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department has been working in that area for the past six months. When it launched its credit-crunch seminars for Invest NI clients, it recognised that there was also a need to help other companies — particularly small companies that were not Invest NI clients. Before Christmas, I attended, in Omagh, the first of the credit-crunch seminars. The Department is now working with Enterprise Northern Ireland, local government and chambers of commerce in particular areas to develop and help those small businesses that may find themselves in difficulty, especially with cash-flow problems. That is a new and innovative move for Invest NI — it has not been done before. I welcome the partnership approach that we have developed with those companies. I hope that the take-up will be as good as that for Invest NI companies, which was very successful.

Varney II

2. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's consideration of the Varney II recommendations.

(AQO 1826/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department submitted a detailed response to the Department of Finance and Personnel on the recommendations that are in Sir David Varney's second report. In that response, I explained that my Department was taking action already to address the issues that were the subject of the majority of Varney's recommendations.

One recommendation suggested that a review be conducted into the role, structure and governance of Invest NI. That was one of the factors that led me to

establish the independent review of economic policy relating to my Department and Invest NI. The overall aim of the review, which I launched in the House on 1 December 2008, is to ensure that DETI and Invest NI's policies, programmes and resources are targeted to help improve private-sector productivity in Northern Ireland.

I have asked the review panel to report by summer 2009 on how existing policies and programmes might be better tailored, and what, if any, new policies are necessary.

Dr Farry: Given DFP's downgrading of the regional economic strategy, does the Minister share my concern that the Varney II recommendations may be sidelined? Does she agree that it is important for us to accelerate consideration of any reform agenda in order that we can free up businesses to create jobs and wealth and get the economy going again in the context of the downturn?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I do not share the Member's concerns. Many of the recommendations in Varney II have been taken on board already, particularly by my Department. I mentioned already the ongoing review, which will report to me by early summer. If the Member were to look at other suggestions in Varney II, such as the take-up of R&D tax credits, he would know that the Department is running a very successful innovation voucher scheme. The Department has already tried to improve the take-up of R&D tax credits with that scheme, which has been praised for its good work.

It is important to take on board the MATRIX report recommendations, which the Member will be aware of and which are key to the future development of the economy of Northern Ireland. We should not underestimate the recommendations in that report. I hope to have a discussion with Executive colleagues on how we roll forward the MATRIX report in the near future.

Mr K Robinson: I agree with the Minister about the importance of R&D to our industry and about any recovery that may come along.

Does the Minister agree that a reduction in corporation tax is even more important, given the economic downturn and the credit crunch that we are all experiencing?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yes; obviously the prospect of that would be very welcome to Northern Ireland — if we had it. The Member will be aware that in response to the Varney II report, the Prime Minister confirmed that fiscal dispensations, including a reduction in corporation tax, would not be granted to Northern Ireland. If we keep on looking myopically at that the issue of corporation tax without looking wider, we will miss a trick.

We need to consider other issues. Obviously, we will still pursue a reduction in corporation tax, but we must also look at the other tools in our box and get on with the job of promoting Northern Ireland and its economy.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister will recall that the Programme for Government set a great number of economically focused targets. Will she confirm whether the review will consider those economic targets in the light of the changing economic circumstances in which we find ourselves?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The short answer is yes. I have specifically asked the review team that is examining the development of policy in DETI and Invest NI to consider the Programme for Government targets in the light of the economic downturn. It is only reasonable and rational to do so.

The Member knows that the purpose of the review into Invest NI and DETI policy is to deal with the medium to long term. It is not a knee-jerk reaction to the current situation; rather it is about planning for the future. As with everything that we in DETI do, we want to take short-term measures to deal with the pressures that we are under on a daily basis — of which there are many — and also to look to the future. In that way, we can have a strong economy to deal with the challenges that arise when there is an upturn.

Inward Investment Jobs

3. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many inward investment jobs have been created during the last quarter and whether her Department is on target to meet the inward investment goals set out in the Programme for Government. (AQO 1845/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The provisional data for those inward investment projects that were approved between 1 April 2008 and 31 December 2008 indicate that 2,053 new inward investment jobs have been promoted to date, with 759 of them being in the last quarter of the period. That would suggest that the 2008-09 foreign direct investment (FDI) jobs target is on track for achievement, albeit that some projects have not yet been announced and might well now be delayed until more favourable economic conditions arise.

However, if we look at the longer term, moving into 2009-2010 and 2010-11, the pipeline for new projects is not favourable. It shows a significant reduction in project numbers compared to the same point in 2007-08. That correlates to feedback received from the national business survey, which shows a general deterioration in business confidence. As those projects would have been due to be delivered over two to three years, that

forecast downturn is likely to have a negative impact on my Department's ability to deliver some of its public service agreement targets within the timescales envisaged. We are, of course, keeping progress under review.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. Everyone recognises that, in the current economic circumstances, it is difficult to attract inward investment.

Given that tourism is a significant component of economic growth, will the Minister identify any specific help that her Department is giving to projects in my North Antrim constituency that impact on tourism? In particular, will she reveal anything to the House about investments to the Bushmills Inn, Bay View farm cottages or Hilden Barn in Ballymoney? What other tourism projects in my constituency can the Minister assist?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for giving me notice that he wanted responses on those particular establishments. If he, or any other Member, has any questions on any particular tourism development, he should write to me about it. He is absolutely right; tourism is one of our key drivers of the economy, nowhere more so than in his constituency. Therefore, it is essential that we look to the medium to long term to get the correct product for people who want to visit here and to ensure that they have a good experience and want to return.

Invest Northern Ireland has approved an offer of support of £480,000 for the expansion of the Bushmills Inn, and that project will lead to the company being able to offer an additional 19 rooms. The company has also recently completed the Invest NI tourism visa marketing programme. I had the opportunity to visit the Bushmills Inn last year, and I commend the owners on the tremendous work that they are doing.

Invest Northern Ireland has offered Bay View farm cottages support totalling £57,000 for the development of three five-star self-catering cottages within walking distance of the Giant's Causeway, and that project will help to alleviate the requirement for high-quality tourism accommodation along the Antrim coast.

Finally, in November 2008, Invest Northern Ireland approved an offer of £95,000 for the establishment of a self-catering facility at Hilden Barn near Ballymoney. That is a £600,000 project that will result in four five-star units, creating 20 bed spaces.

3.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: I draw the Minister's attention to recent statements by the US president-elect, who will be inaugurated tomorrow, that he intends to make renewable energy technology a key component of future US economic and job creation policies. I also

draw the Minister's attention to the recent statement from the Irish Republic that €500 million will be spent on renewable energy technologies. The Scottish Executive also intend for Scotland to become world leader in renewable energy technologies.

Some Members: Speech.

Dr McDonnell: Well, I suggest that there is an obvious implication for us, Mr Speaker. I ask the Minister, simply, if she intends to make any similar announcements, or is there some way in which Northern Ireland can get a role, or partnership, in some of those significant developments?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. He knows that one of the areas discussed in great detail in the MATRIX report is the green economy. It is certainly an area in which I believe that Northern Ireland can expand; not only through innovation at universities, but also through manufacturing. There is quite a lot of capacity in manufacturing to help deal with those issues.

The Department takes all the renewable energy issues very seriously. A strategic environmental assessment was recently commissioned on tidal energy off the north coast. I believe that that will lead to competition for those people who want to invest in tidal energy. Northern Ireland has some of the best tidal energy in the world; therefore, it is wrong to say that the Department is not taking the issue of renewable energy seriously. The Member need only consider the current scoping process as part of the strategic energy framework, which contains a lot in relation to renewable energy. I know that the Member will contribute to the debate surrounding that.

Mr McElduff: Has the Minister's Department got a particular focus on creating and sharing inward investment jobs between regions to the west and to the east of the Bann in order to bring about more balanced economic development? I am asking whether the Minister and her Department are being proactive enough in explaining the merits to inward investors of towns such as Omagh, Strabane and Enniskillen.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I must say that I am surprised that the Member asks that question, given that he knows where I come from. The Member also knows that the terms of reference in relation to the review into DETI policies and Invest NI specifically mention regional points that must be taken into account, questions whether those points are being taken into account effectively enough, and what must be done in respect of that.

I believe — and I hope that he agrees — that the Department is trying to reach out to all regions of Northern Ireland. My officials went to Omagh, and I mentioned recently about working with Invest NI, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Member's own council.

The Department wanted to roll out a discussion about the credit-crunch events, not just in the area east of the Bann; that process started west of the Bann. The Member knows that that was a very successful seminar, and that it was not just about FDI. He knows — and I have already stated in answer to the substantive question — that the FDI pipeline is not as good as it was. Therefore, Northern Ireland must look to its indigenous companies and small businesses, because small businesses are the backbone; they represent 98% of what happens here. There must be a balanced approach. There must be planning for the future, as well as consideration of what can be done in the short term.

Mr McFarland: The Minister mentioned the likely substantial reduction in FDI. Will she share with the House her detailed plan for growing local industries to take account of that drawback?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have already indicated that the Department is working very hard with Invest NI and its indigenous clients. I sometimes think that Members believe that the only clients that Invest NI has are those that come from a different country. That is not correct. More than half of Invest NI's budget is spent with indigenous companies. Therefore, the Department will continue to work with indigenous companies. I have already said that the Department wants to exploit more research and development capability. More of what the MATRIX report identified in relation to innovation must be exploited, and then taken through to manufacturing.

There is much that we can do to help the Northern Ireland economy. It depresses me that Members see the glass as half empty rather than half full. We should be positive about the Northern Ireland economy. We have not lost 1,900 jobs, as the Republic of Ireland recently did with Dell — we may be in a bad situation, but others are in a much worse one.

Job Losses in 2009

4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what analysis her Department has carried out of the potential scale of job losses during 2009 as a result of the current economic downturn. (AQO 1843/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Although Northern Ireland's unemployment rate between August and October 2008 of 4.3% was among the lowest of the UK regions, I am well aware that the global economic slowdown continues to impact on the local labour market.

Many sectors are reporting job losses, particularly in construction, real estate, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade. My Department commissioned an economic forecast in November 2008, which indicated

that overall employment in Northern Ireland could fall by 12,000 in 2009. That forecast is being updated to reflect the ongoing economic downturn. However, we must recognise that economic forecasting is a complex business at the best of times — the more so in the exceptionally dynamic conditions that we now face.

Mr Storey: Jobs in my constituency have been secured at Stevenson and Company in Cullybackey. The Minister is to be commended for her work on that and, on behalf of the companies involved, I thank her for her help. That is a good news story. However, the future has a degree of uncertainty.

We have a four-party mandatory coalition, and sometimes there is a blame game in the House about who is responsible for certain issues. What are the Executive doing to help the economy as we face the days of challenge and the forecast downturn that the Minister mentioned?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I join the Member in congratulating Dunbia on its takeover of the Stevenson and Company plant, which is tremendously good news, particularly for the pork processing industry.

Sometimes it is forgotten that, at a time when the economic downturn was not foreseen as being so dramatic, the Executive put business at the centre of their Programme for Government. We did that because we believed that Northern Ireland required a strong business community at its heart to prosper. From the beginning, the Executive recognised that that was the way to go. My friend and colleague the First Minister put a cap on industrial rates when he was Minister of Finance and Personnel; the current Minister of Finance and Personnel announced a small-business rates-relief scheme; the streamlined planning process has worked effectively in the north-west and is being rolled out throughout Northern Ireland by the Minister of the Environment; and the new planning policy statement (PPS) 21 has replaced PPS 14, which helps the construction industry.

My local divisional planning officer told me that 35% of the applications that were being held under PPS 14 have been approved, which is something that SDLP Members may want to take cognisance of when talking about the new PPS 21. The Minister of the Environment is also taking planning reform measures to the Executive, which we look forward to endorsing.

My Department has been examining practical measures to help: we funded face-to-face advice with the citizens advice bureaux for people who find themselves with multiple debts; we have worked with Invest NI through the credit-crunch seminars and the £5 million that was invested in the accelerated support fund; and we recently announced the Kelvin transatlantic telecommunications link, which is very good news that

should not be underestimated. Therefore, we are doing a lot to help businesses. I recognise that businesses are struggling, but we are doing our best to help and will continue to do so.

Ms J McCann: Will the Minister consider recommending to the Executive that they consider a similar scheme to that recently announced by Gordon Brown, in which businesses are given a financial incentive to employ people who have been unemployed for six months or more?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That is a matter for the Minister for Employment and Learning. He briefed the Executive on Thursday and said that measures are already in place. In fact, the Prime Minister had been following some of the things that were going on in that Minister's Department. Therefore, if the Member addresses that issue directly to the Minister, he will be able to provide her with more details about what is happening.

Mr McClarty: The Minister will be well aware of the number of job losses that have been announced recently, none more so than in my constituency in recent weeks. There is a real fear in the community that the situation will turn into a job-loss tsunami. No one but a fool would hold the Minister responsible for those job losses, because they are well outside her control. However, will the Minister give us her best guess as to the number of job losses there could be before we begin to experience an economic upturn?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I said in my substantive reply, the economic forecast in November 2008 indicated that there would be 12,000 job losses this year. However, I also said that economic forecasting is difficult in these dynamic conditions — one has only to listen to the differences of opinion from the economic commentators. For example, officials from the Ulster Bank are saying very negative things about our economy, but officials from the Northern Bank, Mike Smyth from the University of Ulster, and Alan Bridle just today, have been saying more positive things about it. Therefore, opinions differ, depending on the commentator. However, as Minister, it is difficult for me to try to take the evidence base and make a best guess about where we are going, as, I am sorry to say, the situation changes from week to week. That is why we are looking to the medium-to-longer term and trying to deal with the short term in the most effective way possible.

Business Assistance

5. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what she is doing to assist the business community during the current economic downturn. (AQO 1683/09)

Small Business Assistance

6. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to help small businesses in the current global economic downturn. (AQO 1831/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 6 together. In my capacity as chairperson of the Economic Development Forum (EDF), I have established a subgroup to consider what additional measures could be implemented to help businesses through the economic downturn. The subgroup will present its findings to the EDF meeting on 12 February.

Invest Northern Ireland has also developed a programme of initiatives designed to enable its clients to tackle the impact of a sustained economic downturn. At the end of September 2008, I launched Invest Northern Ireland's £5 million accelerated-support fund, which can make fast-track advice and assistance available to client companies to help them to respond to the effects of the downturn.

Since the end of September 2008, we have held seven seminars on the theme of navigating through challenging times, and they have attracted more than 500 attendees and 440 client companies. Feedback to date has been extremely positive, and a further event is scheduled for the end of this month. As a follow-up to that, Invest NI is offering up to five days of free consultancy support on a range of key business areas, and, to date, 88% of clients have expressed an interest in that.

For businesses that are not Invest NI clients, a "Beat the credit crunch" section has been added to the website nibusinessinfo.co.uk. That provides practical tools and guides on key business activities such as managing finances and securing extra sales. In partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland, district councils and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, we have also developed a further programme of business information seminars, specifically focused on non-Invest NI clients.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for her reply. Further to that question, will the Minister outline what work is being done with key enterprise partners to assist the wider business community?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: First, I commend the Member and his colleagues on Craigavon Borough Council for taking the initiative in relation to the credit crunch. That is very much to be welcomed, and it shows that local government has a strong role to play in trying to help the community through these difficult times. As I have indicated, Invest NI has brought together other economic development partners to launch a series of seminars on the theme of navigating through challenging times. As I said, the

first seminar was held in Omagh and they are now being rolled out throughout the country.

Invest NI believes that working in partnership will bring us the most benefit. Working with organisations such as the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry will allow us to access those companies that, otherwise, we would not have been able to reach. I welcome the partnership-working that is occurring, and I hope that it is a template for the future.

4.00 pm

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I am pleased to learn about the different initiatives to help our business community. What representations has she made to the banks about loans to small businesses in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member may not be aware that I recently attended a meeting of the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and representatives from the four main banks, at which issues concerning, in my particular case, those businesses that were finding it difficult to gain access to credit were raised.

One of the difficulties for small businesses in Northern Ireland is that they cannot obtain the credit that they need, and they have cash-flow difficulties. I raised those issues with the banks' representatives directly.

The Member will know that the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform has announced various measures, one of which is the enterprise finance-guarantee scheme, which will be available in Northern Ireland, as well as in the rest of the UK. That scheme represents a widening of the small-firms loan-guarantee scheme, which was already in place in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, however, take-up of that scheme was not as wide as it was on the mainland. We were concerned about that, but it is to be hoped that the widening of the criteria, by way of the enterprise finance-guarantee scheme, will allow others to take the scheme up in a way in which they were unable to in the past.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Reducing the Number of Government Departments

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of ensuring that the maximum amount of public spending is directed at front line services; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals to reduce the number of Government Departments. — [Mr Hamilton.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “services;” and insert

“notes that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) has unanimously agreed that issues around efficiency and the number of Government Departments would be part of its programme of work and asks that the AERC addresses such issues; agrees to establish a new Assembly standing committee to focus on controlling the cost of government; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to review and report on the administrative savings to be achieved from the various measures and proposals associated with the review of public administration; and to bring forward proposals to the Executive and the AERC to streamline management and reduce overheads of Government Departments including options for more shared services and policy support, reducing tiers of bureaucracy, reconfiguring Departments and reducing their number.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 13; Noes 43.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr P J Bradley, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr A Maginness.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Ross and Mr Storey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of ensuring that the maximum amount of public spending is directed at front line services; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals to reduce the number of Government Departments.

Adjourned at 4.15 pm.

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