
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 27 January 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform the House that a fault in the Lobby voting-system software on Tuesday 20 January led to the Aye Tellers' votes being recorded twice during the vote in the debate on the 'First Report on the Arrangements for the Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters'. The fault did not affect the outcome of the vote, and the Official Report and the Minute of Proceedings now both reflect the correct result. I assure Members that the problem has been identified and procedures have been put in place to ensure that that will not happen again. The fault did not affect any of the other votes.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments tabled to the Bill. No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Financial Assistance Bill

Final Stage

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move
That the Financial Assistance Bill [NIA 4/08] do now pass.

I am delighted that the Financial Assistance Bill has reached its Final Stage today. When I announced in the House on 15 December last year that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) intended to introduce a Bill to take new permissive powers to respond to any circumstances that the Executive agreed warranted rapid and effective action, I said that we hoped to have the legislation in place before the end of January.

We are now in the last week of January and, should Members pass the Bill today, we will have achieved that target.

During the debate at the Bill's Second Stage, I said that it was the most important piece of legislation to be brought before the Assembly since the return of devolved Government. Certain Members took me to task for making that statement and claimed that the deputy First Minister and I had plans for how the Bill would be used. However, I make no apologies for repeating that statement — the Bill is important, first and foremost because of what it aims to do, but also because it is a creation of the new Administration, which means that its provisions are unique to this jurisdiction. The Bill has already attracted positive interest from other jurisdictions.

Our experience since the restoration of devolved Government has shown that the Executive must be in a position to react quickly to unforeseen events or to target resources that address inadequacies in current arrangements for tackling poverty and social exclusion. The Bill provides us with the legislative basis to do that, and it will ensure that the Executive have the necessary

flexibility to address unforeseen circumstances and gaps in the arrangements for tackling poverty.

As politicians, we cannot always foretell what will happen tomorrow, next week, next month or next year. Therefore, it is vital that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as the heads of the Executive, take the necessary statutory powers to enable the Executive to respond to future circumstances or situations as required.

Before I go any further, I want to thank those Members who made constructive contributions to the debates on the Bill, particularly those who spoke in support of the Bill and the Executive amendments that were agreed at the Bill's Consideration Stage. I also thank the few Members who, despite opposing elements of the Bill, genuinely sought to probe, challenge and amend the Bill's provisions. That is part and parcel of the legislative process and is one of the main purposes of a legislative Assembly, it is right that we have a local Assembly that considers local issues to arrive at local solutions that are designed to improve local conditions for local people. I also place on record my appreciation, and that of the deputy First Minister, to the OFMDFM Committee for the clear interest that it demonstrated in the Bill and for supporting the accelerated passage.

However, there are other Members who deserve no gratitude for the role that they played. The Executive will not be waylaid by Members who put party politics above the interests of those in our community with the greatest need. Neither will we let the purpose of the Bill be distorted by those who, in the pursuit of petty point scoring, care nothing for facts and accuracy. There have been lofty pleas about the worth of democratic debate and the need to take into account the views of small parties. That might have had some value if those who hid behind the verbiage had accompanied their rhetoric with a willingness to cease making claims that they, and everyone in the House, knew were bereft of a sliver of accuracy.

Although the Financial Assistance Bill is very short, it has generated considerable heat in the Chamber. Over the course of the four Assembly debates on the Bill — accelerated passage, Second Stage, Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage — we have spent 14 hours discussing two clauses in the Bill. Despite the use of the accelerated passage procedure, it is fair to say that we have discussed and examined those two clauses thoroughly, if not exhaustively.

In addition, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister met on three separate occasions in recent weeks to consider the Bill. First, it met to consider our request for using the accelerated passage procedure; secondly, it met to seek further information from us on the Executive's proposed amendments to the ministerial code; and thirdly, it met

to consider the Executive's proposed amendments to the Bill. I trust that Members will accept that we have tried to keep the OFMDFM Committee fully briefed ahead of each of the Assembly debates.

Much of the discussion on the Bill has, I am afraid to say, centred on idle and inaccurate speculation by Members at the other end of the Chamber about the intentions of those bringing forward the legislation, as opposed to the real intentions of the Bill. Those Members were prepared to undermine their credibility by describing the Bill as a "Trojan Horse", a "politburo Bill", a "personal power grab" Bill, and even a "thoroughly un-British Bill". They referred to the Bill as "loathsome", "obnoxious", "dangerous", "undemocratic" and even "unparliamentary". For good measure, they also — somewhat bizarrely — sought to liken the sponsors of the Bill to a sixteenth-century monarch and a twentieth-century dictator. The proverbial man from Mars looking in at our proceedings might well ask what great evil is being foisted upon the community. He may also wonder about the wicked reason for the Bill's enactment and about the devilish intention that the Executive are seeking to inflict on the people of Northern Ireland. There might be no small amount of incredulity on the part of that proverbial man from Mars when he discovers that the purpose of the Bill is to give financial assistance to people who are in dire need as a result of an emergency or crisis. The confusion might rise even further when he discovers that the Bill has a secondary purpose, which is to tackle poverty and hardship.

During the Bill's accelerated passage through the Assembly, in response to concerns that were raised in Committee and in the earlier stages of our discussions, we proposed a number of amendments to improve the effectiveness of the Bill. At Consideration Stage, we amended clauses 1 and 2 to require that any regulations that are made under those clauses be made within three and six months respectively of a determination made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We also amended clause 2 in order to increase the degree of Assembly control on regulations that are made under that clause. Assembly approval is required, rather than the scheme being subject to a negative resolution. We also amended clause 3 to enable the relevant Department to put a time limit on the duration of a scheme in the regulations that establish it.

I trust that Members will recognise and appreciate that we have attempted to listen to genuine views that have substance and that were offered in order to improve the Bill. Where appropriate, we tabled amendments that were designed to build in additional safeguards to the way in which the legislation will operate.

Without wishing to go over old ground, much mischief was made by some Members on four key issues: first,

was the involvement of the Executive in the decision-making process arising from the Bill; secondly, was whether the Bill's introduction had been delayed; thirdly, was the claim that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were attempting a power grab; and the fourth related to a number of amendments that I put together that went to the heart of whether to duplicate existing legal provisions and whether to insert standard Assembly practice and procedures on the face of the Bill.

I will take those issues in turn. First, with regard to the involvement of the Executive in the decision-making process, the argument ran that because we did not have the word "Executive" on the face of the Bill, it somehow meant that the Executive were not to have a role in the process.

10.45 am

At a very early stage, it was made clear that we had one statute book, that the role of the Executive was already secured by statute and that there was not, in the view of legislative counsel, any need — nor was it desirable — to duplicate legislative enactments. I dealt with that point conclusively on several occasions during the Bill's Second Stage and Consideration Stage.

We all recognise now, though not all are prepared to admit, that the less frequent repetition of that point indicates that everyone is now aware of the nature of the process, which is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would make designations and determinations, which would be brought to the Executive for their agreement. In the case of clause 1 matters, a scheme would be brought forward that would also have to be approved by the Executive. Those matters would be subject to being annulled by negative resolution by the Assembly, if it so desired.

In the case of clause 2 matters, the determination and designation would be brought to the Executive for approval. The scheme would be brought to the Executive for approval and brought to the Assembly for approval under affirmative resolution. No other Minister or Department would have their ordinary day-to-day decisions taken in that manner. That is the most democratic aspect of our Assembly's life.

On top of that, we have the normal accountability measures through which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, or any Minister who is taking forward a scheme, can be questioned during Question Time. Debates can be secured by any party that wishes to do so, and any Member can raise an issue by way of an Adjournment debate. This legislation is subject to the normal panoply of accountability measures. Departments will inform their respective Statutory Committees, as is the normal practice, and those Committees can discuss those matters and bring Ministers to account if they so wish.

Members will know that the Executive have agreed to table amendments to the ministerial code that will require any proposal by the First Minister or the deputy First Minister to make a determination, designation or scheme under the Financial Assistance Bill to be brought to the Executive for consideration and approval. Once the Bill becomes law, we will bring the proposed amendment to the ministerial code to the Assembly for formal approval by cross-community support. I trust that Members will support that amendment to the code in due course.

I will now deal with the second issue, which was whether the introduction of the Bill was delayed. On 13 occasions during the debate on accelerated passage, on three further occasions during the Bill's Second Stage, and at least once or twice thereafter, comments were made to the effect that the legislation was being brought forward by accelerated passage because the Executive had not met for 154 days. The House knows my views on that delay, and the measures that I sought to take in order to have the Executive meet. Contrary to the suggestion that was made yesterday — that I was, somehow, having to defend the deputy First Minister — I can assure Members that that was not my purpose. My purpose is to defend the truth, and the truth of the matter is that no delay was caused by the Executive's not meeting.

The facts are simple. First, the public announcement of an intention to bring forward measures that would allow payments to be made was first made by the Minister for Social Development. The proposed amounts of money were suggested publicly, and there was no hint of any legislative requirement until 2 October 2008, which, as the leader of the SDLP pointed out, was some four months after the first public announcement that the scheme was being pursued.

Several meetings on the matter had taken place between Ministers, and the Executive were informed by the Minister for Social Development — even after the paper of 2 October 2008 — that, although the Department for Social Development (DSD) did not have the legislative authority to take the necessary steps, legislative counsel, the Departmental Solicitor's Office and DSD officials were trying to find out whether any other Department had such powers. For example, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has responsibilities for energy, and it was possible that cover could be found under article 60 or article 61 of the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. The letter from DSD to legislative counsel in early December 2008 brought that process to an end.

The Executive had already been reactivated and had had two meetings by that time. A raft of communications from Departments supports those facts, as do official notes of meetings and agreed minutes of an Executive meeting. Let us put to rest the suggestion that, somehow,

a delay had been caused that necessitated accelerated passage.

Every Member of the House should recognise the need to make a provision to allow the payments to be made. Those payments could never have been made last year. They would have required funds to be put in place, which became available through the December monitoring round process — a process that the Executive accelerated. Normally, the results of the December monitoring round are not announced until this time of the year, but the December monitoring round was brought forward so that the funds would be available in order to give us the flexibility to make the payments. Even then, there will be administrative requirements to be met, and after the passage of the Bill, the Social Development Minister will require time to put those in place.

The third issue that Members referred to was a “power grab”. The answer to that is simple: we do not need any new legislation if we want to grab more power for OFMDFM. The enabling legislation for that lies in section 17 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in a later Order, which allows us to vary the functions of Departments. We needed no further legislation if we wanted to grab power. The powers that are being sought under clause 2 relate to issues that are already the responsibility of OFMDFM. Those two facts put to death the suggestion of a power grab, the prospect of which was raised publicly for purely party-political purposes.

The fourth issue concerns an area with which I have more sympathy, and it generated proposals for several amendments. Members sought to specify, in the Bill, normal processes that would, in practice, have occurred anyway. I understand that Members — the male Members in the Assembly, at least — like to have a belt and braces approach. However, it is unnecessary to burden legislation with references to things that happen anyway. That is the case both with respect to duplication, such as putting the requirement for Executive decisions on the face of the Bill, and to some of the procedures suggested in the amendments at Further Consideration Stage. Neither the deputy First Minister nor I have any desire to dodge Committees or to go behind their backs with regard to issues that may emerge from the Bill.

This legislation is being put in place in order to have a better system of government: a Government that are better able to react to unforeseen circumstances. That indicates a desire by the Executive to be able to face any challenge. It is not an indication —

Mr Ford: I appreciate the First Minister giving away. I feared that he was about to move away from the point that I wish to raise.

I take entirely the point that he made about Ministers reporting on schemes to their departmental Committees. However, if I may put to the First Minister a point that

I put to the deputy First Minister yesterday about amendment No 13, which was defeated — the idea that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should provide a general report annually to the Assembly on the overall operation of such schemes. Perhaps the First Minister can give me a better answer than the deputy First Minister did yesterday as to why that amendment was rejected.

The First Minister: I will give the Member three answers. My first is that it may well be that for any purpose after its first purpose there will be no further need for the Bill. Do we put in legislation a requirement for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to give annual reports if the Bill is not used during the course of a year? Do we include in the Bill a requirement to come before the Assembly when the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister already performs a particular role by scrutinising what the First Minister and the deputy First Minister do? Should we do that when existing procedures allow any party to table a motion that would have to be answered by the deputy First Minister or myself on these matters?

If Members wish to have a review of those issues from time to time, they do not have to wait for a year. If Members consider a matter to be serious, they can table a motion, and existing procedures ensure that such a motion would not be blocked from being debated in the Assembly. The deputy First Minister and I would be happy to answer that debate. The Member has my assurance on that matter, as long as he does not do it at an inappropriate time, and I am sure that the Business Committee can ensure that that does not happen.

Therefore, we have no intention of dodging scrutiny of the operation of the Bill. I can think of no Bill that will have its implementation more scrutinised. It will be scrutinised by the Executive and by the Assembly when the schemes are being set up, and by any Committee whose Department is responsible for taking a scheme forward. The normal mechanisms exist at any time for Members to seek clarification or further information through questions, Adjournment debates or, indeed, by a party tabling a full debate.

As I said, I do not believe that there is a need, on the face of a Bill, to duplicate legislation that is already in place, nor to insert processes and procedures that are already catered for by the normal practices of the Assembly.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am delighted that the Bill has reached its Final Stage today. However, getting the Bill to this point and, subject to the will of the House, onto the statue book, is not the end of the matter. In many ways, we are at only the beginning of the beginning for this piece of enabling legislation. It might seem strange for me to take the opportunity at the Final Stage of a Bill to say

that I hope that, after its initial use, the Bill never has to be used. If it never has to be used, we will not have had to face an emergency or crisis. If it has never had to be used, that will mean that all the procedures in Departments have operated satisfactorily.

The truth is — and all of us know it — that it will probably not be too long before some crisis will come upon us, and it will probably not be too long before we need to ensure that we have a more joined-up approach to tackling poverty and hardship. In the real world, we have to face those eventualities. However, the difference now is that the Executive will have the ability to respond swiftly and decisively.

I, therefore, commend the Bill to the House.

11.00 am

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Bill and commend it to Members. There has been much debate on the matter, and somewhere in the region of 30 amendments have been tabled. Clearly, everyone has had the opportunity to express their views.

Decisions have been taken, and although I welcome a healthy debate — that is what the Chamber is about — I believe that some of the amendments were unhelpful. Nonetheless, Members have the right to bring them forward. I remind Members of the votes that have taken place, which were very clear, and the will of the Assembly is clear also. Votes of 2:1 and 3:1 on some of the amendments have stated clearly the opinion of the Assembly and Members.

The focus of the Financial Assistance Bill is to help those in need due to emergency situations. I believe that the legislation will be endorsed soon. We will soon have an opportunity to help those in dire need and to respond to those who need help. As the First Minister said, the legislation may never be needed, but should an emergency arise, we will be in a position to respond. I urge Members to support the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Executive and the legislation that is before the Assembly.

We will be more accountable to the people who elected us and to the electorate in general. The Bill is genuine, and we should move forward with it. I believe that it is good legislation; that it can meet the needs of the people of this Province; and that it is important to have it in place. The public can, and will, see the difference in an Assembly that is accountable to them and whose Members are working together to deliver legislation that is important to each and every person.

I urge Members to support the legislation and, in the case of some, to bury the hatchet and move forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don Bhille.

I support the Final Stage of the Financial Assistance Bill. It is an important mechanism, which further empowers the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide necessary leadership. The Bill is about leadership. Effectively, we have 11 Government Departments that are being led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Let them lead — and challenge them to lead.

I am pleased that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister actively supported the request for accelerated passage. During Further Consideration Stage yesterday, my colleague Martina Anderson detailed our party's objections to all 13 amendments, particularly amendment No 4 to amendment No 11. I concur with the Member for Foyle when she stated that the intention of the Bill is to identify the capacity gaps where this kind of strategic leadership or intervention is required. Why would one disable the powers of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their ability to get on with things and make a real difference to the quality of people's lives, especially as they are able to do so?

I call on those who oppose the Bill to turn over a new page and to move forward and engage in constructive opposition. In far too many debates, it appears to me that the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party have been engaged in negative opposition for negative opposition's sake. It seems to be negativity for negativity's sake, and it seems to me that they would rather score a political point over Sinn Féin and the DUP than contribute constructively here. Every day, one hears: "Sinn Féin and the DUP" — they would almost blame us for the bad weather.

The bottom line is that there is a requirement for everybody to engage in working together constructively and to abandon the pursuit of negativity for negativity's sake. I do not have much more to say, apart from restating my call for the SDLP, the UUP and the Alliance Party to stop engaging in negativity for negativity's sake. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: My speech will consist of a few interesting words if I am restricted to saying only nice things about the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Mrs D Kelly: What about us?

Mr B McCrea: You are quite right, Mrs Kelly.

We have been admonished, vilified, and even blamed for the weather; we have been exhorted to do better, and to try, somehow, to put the past behind us. The simple fact is that when one disagrees with something — even as a minority of one — the truth is still the truth.

The First Minister said that the Bill has been, and will be, scrutinised; however, I assure Members that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. How often

will the Bill be invoked? Will it be used appropriately? Will it produce better government? Will it produce action in areas where there is currently no action? Will it tackle the issues of poverty and social deprivation? The proponents of the Bill claim that it will do all those things. We look forward to such action, now that Sinn Féin and the DUP have got their Bill.

The First Minister seems to have two different points of view. On the one hand, he mentioned that Members seemed to criticise the Bill less frequently and that, therefore, perhaps they understood it better. On the other hand, I clearly remember him admonishing Members for repeating the same argument over and over again.

We have not been convinced that all is right with the Bill, despite the fact that — as Mr Shannon said — some of the proposed amendments were defeated 2:1 and 3:1. We proposed amendments precisely because we were unconvinced. When Members state that they will bring something to the Executive — where the two parties that support the Bill have a clear majority — or before the House — where, patently, those two parties have the votes to put anything through — that belies the claim that everything is all right with the Bill.

Mr McLaughlin: Yesterday's voting pattern was informative. The three parties that brought forward a raft of proposed amendments had difficulty in mustering the votes. If this is such an important issue, why could they muster only around 50% of their votes?

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure what the Member's point is. Given that we all know the political reality —

Mr McLaughlin: Only 23 Members voted.

Mr B McCrea: I have given the Member a chance to intervene.

Given that we all know the political reality — no combination of votes from the UUP, the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the PUP, or anybody else, can defeat the unholy alliance between the DUP and Sinn Féin — we wanted to find a way forward.

There has been some suggestion that we should bury the hatchet and move forward. I put it to the First Minister and deputy First Minister that that will depend upon the style of government that they want to engage in. Members proposed what they considered to be proper, well-considered amendments. Whether the other parties disagreed with them is a matter of opinion, although some claim it is a fact — that is fair enough. However, if amendments are brought forward in the proper manner and all points of view are debated, I fail to see the problem.

The First Minister said that he has no doubt that, in the not too distant future, we will come across another unforeseen crisis that we will have to deal with. I know of no bigger crisis facing the whole world than the

current economic crisis, and addressing it will require some form of unity.

Yet, what do we get? We get constant bickering and admonishment from people who cannot do better. That does not build unity. The two-party voluntary coalition is determined to have its own way, or no way. Fair enough; it has the votes at present, so it can do that. However, if it wants consensus, it is going the wrong way about it.

The Ulster Unionist Party has always supported the creation of a statutory mechanism to enable the Executive to provide financial support in exceptional circumstances. It is of paramount importance that any Government can pinpoint objective need and deliver relief effectively and efficiently to people who face extreme situations. In that regard, my party supported the accelerated passage of the Financial Assistance Bill, because we recognised that it will be used in the immediate future to give relief to pensioners who are suffering from fuel poverty. That action is to be welcomed. We look forward to the scheme's introduction by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister at the earliest opportunity.

The Ulster Unionist Party also supported clause 1 of the Bill for the same reasons. However, the clause was seriously flawed because it placed too much power in the hands of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. If they are serious about collective responsibility, they must promote it. Clause 1 amounts to a power grab. The First Minister asked how OFMDFM can grab a power that it has already. In that case, if OFMDFM already has that power, why was there a need for this protracted wrangle? Furthermore, why did Martina Anderson suggest that there was a sea change about the way forward?

Mr Ford: Where is she?

Mr B McCrea: That is a good question.

My party made genuine attempts to amend the Bill in order to make it more in tune with the power-sharing arrangements that are in place, which should include every party. We sought to ensure that decisions would be taken by the Executive and that individual Departments would not be overruled by OFMDFM, because they must have control of their own budgets. Those are perfectly valid reasons to question whether the Bill achieves what the Assembly wants.

We opposed clause 2 because it deviates wildly from the Bill's original objectives. It gives the First Minister and deputy First Minister cross-cutting powers to dictate policy on poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. Of course, people can say that that was in the Belfast Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement, or whatever. However, the point is that the Assembly has collective responsibility to work together on those issues. The problems of social deprivation

and poverty will be with us for the foreseeable future. Departments that have policies to tackle such issues must carry them out under the Programme for Government.

OFMDFM has set a dangerous precedent by pushing legislation through the Assembly by accelerated passage and by refusing even to countenance amendments that have been tabled by other parties. One of the most disturbing features of the debate on the Bill — and Members will know that I am not a culprit — was that when Members wanted to express their points of view through interventions when time was not limited, they were frequently met with, “Talk to the hand”, and their points of view were not heard.

That is not about consensus Government, a shared future or a way forward. That says, “We are bigger than you, so shut up and sit down”. Given the challenges that face the country and the entire world, that is not the way forward. Members who come out with trite words, who say that the Assembly should do better and that parties must bury the hatchet, are those who have votes and leadership and must, therefore, set the style. They have an onerous responsibility because of the challenges that face each and every person in Northern Ireland. It is not our responsibility; it is theirs, because they have taken power. They had better deliver.

I will not labour the point that, previously, the Assembly was warned on other serious issues, such as the proper definition of a victim, and we ran into huge problems on that issue. The point is that if the accumulative mandate of parties in the Assembly is not taken on board —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a discussion about victims. I ask the Member to stay close to the Bill.

11.15 am

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Deputy Speaker. I made the point that I was only addressing the modalities of why it is important that we take account of the views of all people in the community in these debates.

We have our future to look forward to, and many people have high hopes for the Assembly and that Members will work together. From what I have seen and heard, I have grave doubts about whether this generation of politicians has much to offer the people of Northern Ireland. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating and, one year from now, I will be interested to see whether the Bill has made any real difference to the people of Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: At the outset, I thank the Assembly Bill Office for the help that it has given to the SDLP in relation to the legislation; I am sure that that sentiment is shared by many other parties. The use of the accelerated-passage procedure led to the 14 hours of debate, which the First Minister referred to, and many

amendments being tabled. That placed pressures on all parties, but it also placed pressure on Assembly staff, not least the Bill Office, and it measured up to the task.

Although there has been a lot of hot air and heavy words spoken, the Chamber, in its own way, has measured up over the course of this legislation. This legislation has been one of the more defining experiences of the Assembly. It demonstrated that the balance of power in OFMDFM is very firmly in Peter Robinson’s hands. It also reconfigured the balance of power between the Floor of the Assembly and OFMDFM.

Due to the content of the debate, the issues engaged, and the conviction of people from all parties — and I do not demean people in the way that the First Minister demeaned people on these Benches I recognise that there are people in his party who are genuine and who believe what they are saying — the balance of power was shifted back to the Floor of the Chamber. The Chamber began to punch its weight and lay down markers in respect of the authority of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the rest of the institutions established by the Good Friday Agreement. It began to define a culture of how politics should work in the North of Ireland, which is not manifest in many aspects of this piece of legislation.

The SDLP amendments were intended to probe, improve and proof the legislation and, without exception, all were rejected. Similarly, the amendments tabled by other parties, which, in my view, were also probing, improving and proofing the legislation were also, without exception, rejected.

It is not for me to offer advice to the First Minister, but the experience of the SDLP and many others is that he and his colleagues are at their best when they are being forensic and technical. Anyone engaging with the DUP in this type of situation needs to be fit for purpose and as forensic, technical and political as they are. What surprised me about the nature of the debate was that over the past number of weeks, and again this morning, the First Minister felt that he could not live merely with the protections of being political, technical and forensic, he also had to be insulting, hostile and aggressive to other Members of the House.

Let us look at some of the language that was used this morning. Peter Robinson said that there are people in the Chamber who

“care nothing about facts and accuracy”.

This morning, the First Minister defended the legislation and said that other Members should:

“cease making claims ... bereft of a sliver of accuracy.”

Furthermore, he accused Members of “idle and inaccurate speculation” about his intentions that undermined their own credibility.

That is some of the milder language that the First Minister has used this morning and during the passage of the legislation. It surprises me that someone who has such a grip on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — to the point that he is wiping other people's eyes — feels the need to deploy such language, tone and content to Members. It suggests that the First Minister has felt the pressure, because he knows that during the course of the debate, he and the deputy First Minister have dropped the ball in several regards and have said things that have let slip the chilling truths behind this legislation.

Four points need to be reiterated and emphasised. What does it say about the parties in the Chamber and the nature of democratic debate and discussion that all other parties' amendments to the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the Chamber — a fact that the First Minister felt it necessary to repeat, without apology, this morning — can be dismissed completely?

The First Minister's language towards the Alliance Party was more protective than that used about the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. However, even the Alliance Party, which tabled reasonable and appropriate amendments, cannot say that it has left its fingerprints on the Bill that Mr Robinson described as the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the Assembly. I do not understand how he can draw that conclusion when no recognition has been given to other parties' reasonable amendments. It provides a chilling insight into how other people in the Chamber view the nature of democratic debate.

What does it say about the political culture of the Assembly when no amendments are accepted and Sinn Féin finds it necessary — as it did last night — to boast? The Sinn Féin Whip told the House to "get used to it." What does it say to the people of Northern Ireland about the culture of the Assembly, when one party says that other parties should "get used to" not prevailing, not having their views acknowledged and not having their amendments to the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the Assembly accepted?

My colleague Basil McCrea characterised it well when he said that they told us that they are bigger than us and that we should shut up and sit down. That is a chilling insight into the mindset of at least one party and offers a chilling commentary to the people of Northern Ireland.

The First Minister: Before the Member gets too chilled, will he take something else into account? First, I made it clear at Consideration Stage that I accepted the spirit of most of the 30 or so amendments, with the exception of one or two. Furthermore, I accepted the spirit of the amendments that were tabled at Further Consideration Stage. The question was not whether the

points behind the amendments were valid. The problem is not the content of amendments but the party political trivia that is being pushed elsewhere. The amendments were unnecessary because their intentions are already covered by the statute book or by existing practices and procedures. We do not need to legislate for normal procedural matters.

Mr Attwood: I thank the First Minister for his intervention. I note that he was silent about the very point that I was making about there appearing to be those in the Chamber whose message to other parties — and to the community in the North — is that we should get used to their power and to their way of doing things.

Replying specifically to the two points that the First Minister made, you say that now —

The First Minister: I said it during Consideration Stage.

Mr Attwood: I know that you did, and you say it now, but in your closing speech, when you had every opportunity to say more in order to try to bridge the divide that exists in the Chamber over the Bill, you chose to go in a different direction. I repeated earlier some of the language that the First Minister used in his opening remarks; indeed, I repeated some of his milder language. Not once did I hear in his words either any spirit of healing or reconciliation or any spirit that reflected anything other than a continued aggression and hostility to those in this part of the House who tabled those amendments. I must say to you, First Minister, that those words this morning come a bit late. When you had the opportunity for half an hour —

The First Minister: You were not listening.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to please refer all his remarks through the Deputy Speaker, and I ask the First Minister to refrain from having this little conversation and to include everybody in the debate.

Mr Attwood: I apologise for not directing my comments through the Deputy Speaker.

In any case, the First Minister may not have been in the Chamber last night during the concluding part of the debate on the third group of amendments. I took up the point that Mrs Naomi Long of the Alliance Party made when I said that I found it curious that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were rejecting an amendment that would require them to report to the Assembly once a year on any actions that may arise out of the legislation. I made the point — and I make it again — that in my view that demonstrates that the First Minister and deputy First Minister view themselves as somehow more precious than every other senior official in public bodies in this part of the world, across the island, in Britain, and elsewhere, who, as a matter of routine and course, appear before a Minister or a

Parliament at least once a year, in one way or another, to give an account of what they have or have not done.

I say to the First Minister and deputy First Minister —

The First Minister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second.

I say to them that in the spirit that the First Minister referred to earlier, it seems to me that it would have been useful for two reasons if the First Minister and deputy First Minister had agreed to amendment No 13. The first reason is that a practice that is accepted in many other places would have been established.

I suspect that the First Minister is about to say that there are many other ways in which the First Minister and deputy First Minister can be held to account, but when it comes to, for example —

The First Minister: You are answering a question that I did not ask.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I referred already to this conversation that is going on between the First Minister and you, Mr Attwood. I ask you to please take part in the debate, to refer all your remarks through the Chair, and to include everyone in the House.

Mr Attwood: The point is that, curiously, in his reply to yesterday's debate on the third group of amendments, despite the fact that the debate went on for around an hour, the deputy First Minister took no opportunity to address any of the points that were raised, except for one. That seems to me to be the minimum response that the First Minister and deputy First Minister could have given in order to narrow the gap that exists between their thinking and that of various parties — that gap is clearly a chasm.

I will now give way to the First Minister.

The First Minister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He seems to be making bricks without straw.

Can the Member tell us what is the process, from which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is exempt, that brings other Ministers to the Assembly for annual reviews?

11.30 am

Mr Attwood: This is a very specialist piece of legislation. It provides you with enormous powers and it requires that you undertake very substantial responsibilities in the event of certain circumstances arising.

The First Minister: That was not the question.

Mr Attwood: Pardon?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should refer to the First Minister in the third person, rather than as “you”, as he has been doing. He should also make all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: Consider an organisation such as the PSNI. Arising from the Patten Report, it has a whole range of accountability mechanisms for how it conducts its affairs in the North. I do not have to elaborate on what those are, because they are well known. Those accountability mechanisms include a process of occasional formal reporting. That is done at least annually, when the Chief Constable of the PSNI circulates to every house in the North what is, essentially, his annual report on how the PSNI conducts its affairs.

If an organisation such as the PSNI — not to mention many other public bodies in the North — has that level of accountability, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should have the same. In order to create certainty and to avoid doubt, in order to build a bridge with other Members, and in order to demonstrate — on that matter at least — that the First Minister is not guilty as charged by some of the parties in the House, that would have been a minimum step for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take. In doing so, they could have demonstrated their better intentions rather than realise the worst fears that have been outlined in the Chamber. However, even that amendment, like all the others, was rejected.

The debates on the legislation demonstrate that a tension lingers around politics in the North. The First Minister said that the Bill was not a grab for power, but he also said that ministerial colleagues from the DUP and Sinn Féin were under the “control” of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That tension, that slip of the tongue, that revealing comment — however it is described — remains a central concern about the Bill. Even reasonable amendments from various other parties were all rejected, in order to demonstrate where control continues to reside.

As we know, Sinn Féin said that the legislation represents a sea change. However, that should be symbolically — if not materially — demonstrated by creating protections and guarantees around the legislation that gave rise to that claim. Many of the amendments over the past week from the parties to my left outlined those desired protections and guarantees.

Finally, it is only appropriate that I have the opportunity to reply to comments that the First Minister made on another matter during this Final Stage debate; namely, that the Minister for Social Development allegedly advised the Executive that her fuel-payment proposals were covered by legislation. That issue forms part of the backdrop to the Bill and part of the politics that informs it. It is clear that clause 2 contains an attempt to take the ground of the Minister for Social Development.

The Social Development Minister has demonstrated that she is the champion of good causes for people in

hard places, including those suffering from fuel poverty, social housing problems and the loss of construction jobs. She is the champion of good cause for people in bad places, and I believe that the intention behind the legislation is, in part, to put her in her place, given that she is the one who has been asserting her independence in the Executive while remaining part of the collective responsibility.

The Minister has demonstrated that in asserting that independence, she has not conceded what is the right approach for her on issues and as a Minister. That is part of the backdrop to the legislation.

For some time, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have been going to some lengths to try to portray the Minister for Social Development in a way that would not be to her choosing and, in my view, would not be confirmed by some of the evidence. Earlier, the First Minister outlined, at some length, how he saw the role of the Minister for Social Development when it came to the issue of legislative cover for a special fuel payments provision. It is the story of a letter, a statement and draft legislation, as evidence to be measured against what the First Minister outlined this morning and heretofore in the Chamber.

I want to put some evidence on the record. First is a letter from Margaret Ritchie to the Executive. In that letter, on 2 October 2008, when the Executive were not meeting, the Minister for Social Development circulated to her Executive colleagues her proposed fuel-poverty package. Bearing in mind that it is now the end of January, the Minister was highlighting the need for legislation for fuel payments as early as the beginning of October. That letter, which was sent to all Ministers, stated:

“The Department for Social Development does not have legislative authority to make such payments, and therefore, Executive approval will be sought to take forward the necessary legislation in the Assembly through use of the accelerated passage procedure.”

Yet, on Tuesday 20 January 2009, the First Minister informed the House:

“The Minister from her party told Executive colleagues that she already had appropriate power and that legislation was not required. Therefore, the legislative draftsmen were not alerted because the Minister argued that there was no need for additional legislation because she had the power to make fuel-poverty payments.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p335, col 1]*.

The second piece of evidence is a statement by Margaret Ritchie to this Chamber on 6 October 2008, the Monday after she sent her letter to her Executive colleagues. As part of her answer to a question for oral answer from Naomi Long — and again stating the need for Executive clearance for the package and that that might include the need for legislation — the Minister for Social Development said:

“I need clearance for the package, because although the benefits of the proposals may not reach people until January 2009, the work —” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p315, col 2]*.

That proves how far-seeing she was. She continued:

“including possible legislation — needs to start immediately. Obviously, the package includes direct help for those most vulnerable to fuel poverty, but it also includes a series of other actions aimed at bringing more resources to bear on the problem. However, the issue merits a full response from the Executive as a whole” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p315, col 2]*.

My third piece of evidence is that during the course of all that, as the First Minister knows, the Minister for Social Development was attempting to prepare and draft legislation in order to provide her with the legislative cover that she said — in those two statements to the House and in her letter to the First Minister and his Executive Colleagues — would enable her to go about her business.

There are three pieces — *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given the Member some latitude on this issue, because the First Minister referred to it in his presentation. However, now is the time for the Member to return to the contents of the Bill, as printed on the Order Paper.

Mr Attwood: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is the evidence, as I see it —

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: That evidence confirms the situation that was developing in the period up to Christmas, and beyond. In my view, the consequences of the exchange — and I will finish my point here, Mr Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You should be talking about the contents of the Bill, Mr Attwood. There will be no further reference to what has gone before.

Mr Attwood: The point has been made accurately and conclusively.

Mrs Foster: It has been made partially.

Mr Attwood: I could invoke other evidence on the Floor of the House to confirm the point.

As I said earlier, there has been a clash of democratic culture in the North around this issue. Nobody is denying that there should be special legislation for fuel payments or that we need to look at legislation and, if necessary, draft it appropriately to respond to particular situations. However, the debate on the Financial Assistance Bill demonstrates that there is a clash of culture. There is a clash of culture between those who are prepared to have reasoned debate and to incorporate amendments into legislation, and those who are not; and between those who want to control us and tell us to get used to them being in charge, and those who want

to live up to the standards of democracy, accountability, oversight, co-operation and partnership that were so long denied to many of the community in the North of Ireland, and who want to move forward on a proper basis.

Mr Ford: I will take up Mr Attwood's latter comments, and — you will be pleased to hear, Mr Deputy Speaker — not his earlier comments.

It seems that we are discussing the willingness of parties in this place to implement normal democratic procedures of debate. I want to place on record the Alliance Party's position on the Bill as it has progressed through its Stages and as it stands, because representations on my party's position on the Bill from certain parts of Executive party Back Benches — DUP and Sinn Féin Members — could be best described in parliamentary language as terminological inexactitudes.

I also noted with some interest that there seems to be an almost mathematically perfect correlation between the proportion of a speech that a Member reads and his or her unwillingness to accept interventions or willingness to misrepresent other parties. I acknowledge, in his presence, that Jim Shannon takes interventions. He does not answer them or address the point that is made, but he is willing to engage in open debate, unlike Members who stand with their heads down and their speeches pre-typed; who make allegations about other parties before those parties have even contributed; and who are unwilling to take interventions in which they will be corrected. That behaviour will have to be looked at by the Committee on Procedures, or as Stephen Farry said a couple of days ago, we might as well resort to a position where researchers email the speeches to the Office of the Official Report. That would save a lot of time and effort in the House.

The position of the Alliance Party is simple: we accepted accelerated passage because there was urgency in respect of the matters provided for in clause 1 of the Bill. It is not a state secret that the Alliance Party is not an enthusiast of accelerated passage. We have supported it for parity Bills for social security and for Budget Bills, but, otherwise, we have taken the view that the need for accelerated passage must be scrutinised carefully.

When one considers the Bills that have progressed through the House with accelerated passage, one will see the evidence as to why a Committee Stage is required on a range of matters. It is hoped that those Ministers who continue to promise that they will not use accelerated passage will deliver on those promises.

My party supported clause 1, because there is the need for urgent business to be dealt with in exceptional circumstances by the procedures that are provided for in that clause.

The Alliance Party also sought to make amendments that we considered would improve the working of clause 1, but they were rejected.

11.45 am

We opposed clause 2 standing part of the Bill, not because we oppose the principle or because we believe it represents a power grab — as other Members pointed out, OFMDFM already has those powers — but because we consider the powers to be potentially so wide-ranging that proper scrutiny is required.

However many hours the two Stages in the House last, they do not amount to the same level of scrutiny that would be carried out during a proper Committee Stage. That Stage involves a proper examination of the issues with witnesses, the taking of written evidence, the opportunity to question, and the opportunity for negotiation between Departments and the Committee. That is why something as exciting as the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 was, eventually, a good Act; it was discussed at inordinate length at umpteen meetings to ensure that the work was done properly.

However, on some Bills that are more important to the overall operation of Northern Ireland, we are not getting any discussion. Legislation is simply rammed through with a limited debate and without a meeting of minds, nor any attempt from the other end of the Chamber to achieve one. That is why I cannot accept this morning's statement from the First Minister that the two Stages debated in the House represented proper scrutiny; they simply did not.

Although the Alliance Party supports the First Minister's general contention that there is a need for joined-up government — indeed, some of us have been accused of banging on about it to the exclusion of almost everything else — there is no doubt that the imposition of the will of the First Minister and deputy First Minister through clause 2 is not joined-up government in the sense that it would be understood elsewhere.

I took some notice of the comments at the beginning of the First Minister's statement. He thanked Members who had contributed to the debate, particularly those who had supported his position. As he also thanked those whose contributions had been "constructive", he seemed to be looking at this corner of the Chamber. I am not sure whether he was seeking to embarrass me. Yesterday, Mrs Kelly suggested that the Alliance Party was being softened up for some other reason by kind words from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That was a tad naive. Anyone who thinks that the Alliance Party's price for playing a constructive role is having people be nice to it has much to learn.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I am sorry, but I will not give way to Mr McCrea on this occasion, because he will probably make the same pointless intervention that he made during Dr Farry's contribution last week.

Dr Farry: Go on; give him a chance.

Mr Ford: Oh, all right then.

Mr B McCrea: My point is not the one that the Member thought that I was going to make; I am sure that that issue will come up another time. I simply want the Member to appreciate how rarely the First Minister utters soft words. Perhaps the Member is being unduly dismissive. It is not very many people who get kind words. Perhaps the Member should appreciate them a bit more.

Mrs Foster: That is not true.

Mr Ford: I will have to wait to see what the future brings; I am sure that I can accept the assurances of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that Mr McCrea's statement is incorrect. However, I am not sure whether that applies to private Executive or DUP party meetings.

I may be inclined to accept the compliment contained in the nice things that the First Minister said this morning and the nice things that the deputy First Minister has said about the constructive nature of engagement. I recognise and welcome that, as recently as last week, the First Minister used the term "official opposition" in reference to the Alliance Party. However, if the First Minister and deputy First Minister were to go beyond saying that amendments are sensible by accepting a few of them, or by engaging in discussion with those who make constructive suggestions, that would be a much greater compliment. *[Interruption.]*

Indeed, as I hear a Member behind me say, and as Mr Attwood said earlier, the acceptance of even one amendment would show a willingness to accept that the Chamber is a place for debates and ideas, and that the possession of insight and perfect wisdom is not entirely reserved to those who sit at your end of the Chamber, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Sometimes, the small, or even obscure, points that can be heard from all parts of the Chamber may contribute to the greater overall good. If the First Minister and deputy First Minister wish to impress me, my party and, possibly, Members who sit on either side of me, they should take on board the simple notion that an occasional engagement, rather than regarding OFMDFM as the all-seeing, all-wise Department that can solve everything, might possibly help.

One lesson that Members have learnt during the various debates on the Bill relates to interventions. We have, in part, improved the standard of debate and embraced the concept of taking interventions.

I noted the willingness of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take interventions, sadly, they were not prepared to take any notice of those interventions. However, at least there is a little movement forward, and we should accept that.

Even today, regarding the merits of amendment No 13, which was proposed yesterday, the First Minister said that the first reason against it was that it might mean that they would have to produce a report when they had not done anything. Given that amendment No 13 simply called for a report:

"on the operation of any schemes made under this Act.",

it is clear that if no schemes were made under the Act, there would be no report. The Alliance Party was not imposing anything at all. Nevertheless, that was the first argument made against the point that we were making.

It seems that while some people —

The First Minister: I gave three reasons; were the other two all right?

Mr Ford: Give me time; I was merely pointing out that the first argument that the First Minister can think of showed that he did not have yesterday's amendments in front of him and that he was not really with it.

The suggestion that an issue such as a formal report being tabled before the Assembly could be met by an offer to an opposition party to table a debate during private Member's time, as opposed to a regular standing proposal for something, does not meet our concerns. Therefore, although a little listening has been done, there has been no willingness to look at the matter.

Although DUP and Sinn Féin Members on the Front Benches — and, indeed, their more intelligent Back-Benchers — have learned that open debate is a good thing, there is an unwillingness to listen; there is merely an opportunity to take an intervention and to ignore it, and set the steamroller on its way.

Those issues apply to both those parties, which regard themselves as taking the lead. They will continue to win the votes because they have the numbers to do so. They may lose the arguments some of the time but they will continue to win the votes all of the time, and to use Ms Ní Chuilín's eloquent phrase — we will "get used to it".

If Ministers wish to see improvements to legislation, and if they wish to see things done properly, it would be nice if they would consider whether matters such as clause 2 really need to be included under accelerated passage and whether there would be opportunities to improve legislation by listening to those of us — indeed, all of us at this end of the Chamber — who have sought to be constructive.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This stage of the debate is very important.

Although there has been a lot of banter about the reasons for the Bill, it is important that we recognise the need for the legislation and for accelerated passage. The documentation required has been responded to by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in a way that tries to move forward the passage of the Bill.

Several Members mentioned the compassion that they wanted to see, but we also need to look at the real reasons for the amendments — were they realistic and necessary, or were Members simply trying to put their fingerprints on the Bill? If the amendments were realistic and required, I am certain that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the legal advisers, would have recommended that they be accepted. However, the fact that the amendments were not required meant that they could not be accepted, and the logical reason for refusing the amendments was ignored by those who proposed them.

Mr Basil McCrea said that the Assembly has a collective responsibility, and that all parties must be involved. That works both ways. If there is a reason why amendments should be accepted, it must also be understood that they will not necessarily be accepted every time they are proposed.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he understand that it is difficult for people to agree that his argument is substantiated when it is frequently the case that proposed amendments are praised, but none is ever accepted?

Mr Molloy: I can understand that —

Mr B McCrea: I was going to let the Member finish his point before I intervened, but Mr Ford jumped in ahead of me. I listened most intently to what the Member said. However, the First Minister said that he understood the intentions or sense behind all the amendments — perhaps bar one — and that he had some considerable sympathy with them. Surely it would have been better to have found some consensus or form of words that the House could unite behind. If that had been done, and some cognisance had been taken of the good points that had been made, I can assure the Member that the time that it took for the Bill to pass through the Assembly would have been considerably reduced.

We want to work together, but we have to know that some cognisance has been taken of the significant points that we made. As Mr Ford said, there is no point in being given a pat on the back and being told that a point is good, but, by the way, it is going to be ignored. We must have some form of genuine interaction if we are to make progress.

Mr Molloy: To respond to Mr Ford's point, amendments may be accepted at times, and people may give way and discuss the issues, but that does not necessarily mean that an amendment is right.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member very much for giving way. The Member said that some of us perhaps did not listen properly to the logic that was being used to reject some of the amendments. Among yesterday's amendments was one to make provision for a report to be made to the relevant Committee after a scheme was in operation for a year. The argument that the deputy First Minister used against that amendment was that he would have more sympathy with the idea of a report being delivered to the Assembly as a whole, rather than to the Committee. Yet, when a later amendment made provision for a report to be provided to the Assembly, the deputy First Minister rejected it, as did those on his Benches. Where is the logic in that?

Mr Molloy: First, I thank Members for the interventions. It is useful to hear them; everybody has different ideas. When agreement to accelerated passage was being sought in the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, two parties did not agree to it — they did not object to it, but they did not go along with it and state that it was required. The Bill's passage began against a backdrop of paranoid thinking from the opposition that the Bill represented a seizure of power, but let me ask this question: a seizure of power for what purpose? Where is the power?

The Assembly must meet again to discuss all the issues, and the Executive must agree on them. Mrs Kelly took great exception to my comment that a majority would decide. However, all the Committees and the Executive are made up of a proportion of members from different parties, and they will all vote, and if there is a majority, well, that is the way it is. Unless, we are saying that within every Committee —

Mr O'Loan: Bring back Stormont.

Mr Molloy: A majority now, Mr O'Loan, is different to the situation in Government here some time ago.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member knows well, and perhaps better than anyone else in the Chamber, that he must refer all his remarks through the Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Molloy: I stand corrected, a LeasCheann Comhairle, my apologies to you. As Mr O'Loan knows, majority rule within Stormont was an entirely different situation to the situation now whereby the two largest parties have a majority. Over the past few days, we heard lectures on various situations, and it was Mr Durkan who proposed some time ago that we return to majority rule.

Mr Durkan: I made no such proposal. Rather, I rightly accused Sinn Féin and the DUP of operating the new majority rule, with decisions that are made in Stormont Castle being railroaded through the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is time to get back to discussing the Financial Assistance Bill, so I ask the Member to address his remarks accordingly.

12.00 noon

Mr Molloy: The point has been made.

The concerns that were expressed by those who proposed the amendments centred on an alleged seizure of power. The amendments reflected that and, instead of improving the Bill, were about preventing an alleged seizure of power. The situation might have been different if the amendments, rather than being protectionist, had tried to make the Bill better. The amendments have come across as trying to protect a particular Minister. We should all have confidence that the Executive will accept arguments made by any Minister, regardless of party, because they want to do the right thing.

Mrs D Kelly: I totally reject the Member's assertion that the amendments were proposed to deal with a seizure of power — they were about improving accountability and scrutiny. To support the Bill, this side of the House must have confidence that the needs of those who live in poverty, deprivation and exclusion will be met. However, in the last Budget allocation, the Sinn Féin Agriculture Minister took £20 million for slurry tanks from the Social Development Minister's budget for housing. Given that action and the fact that there are so many people who are homeless and living in dire conditions across the North, the Member must understand why we have no confidence that the provisions in the Bill will be used for the right ends.

Mr Molloy: I do not accept that argument. The Bill has a new format and will provide assistance for an extra 36,000 pensioners. That shows that the Executive were concerned about the less well off, wanted to improve their position and wanted to expand the allocation of payments. Therefore, one benefit of the delay is that we have a better Bill.

With regard to the reallocation of money in the Executive, one Minister was not able to spend all her money, which was put back into the pot and used by another Minister who had an urgent demand. If Mrs Kelly is saying that the farmers who had to fulfil targets that they were set by all political parties were not entitled to that money, she is making a different argument from those made by her party colleagues on the Agriculture Committee. There are issues that must be dealt with, and it is important that we deliver for those who are in most need.

The paranoia of those opposed to the Bill has centred on the protection of the interests of Ministers. It is important, and assurances have been given —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member accept that all the amendments related to all Ministers, not just one?

Mr Molloy: The other Ministers did not feel concerned, did not feel intimidated and did not feel that they were losing power — they were confident that they could exert power in the Executive. I do not believe that the Minister for Social Development felt concerned, intimidated or that she was losing power — it was a political argument to get at the Executive. I accept that the former —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Molloy: I will give way when I finish my point. At the weekend, the former deputy leader of the SDLP, who is also a former deputy First Minister, advised parties to engage in more effective debating in the Chamber. The SDLP should take some guidance from its former deputy leader on that issue, get into the cut and thrust of debate, and be confident that it can make arguments in the Executive and have them accepted.

Mr Ford: I do not want to get involved in an intra-nationalist squabble. However, the Member said that all the amendments were designed to protect one Minister. How was amendment No 13, which I proposed yesterday, designed to protect one Minister, as opposed to ensuring accountability?

Mr Molloy: I said that some Members and some parties have particular issues and that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have responded to the amendments and did not see the need for them. That argument was made and was responded to.

The debate has been useful in that sense. However, it does not mean that because Members think that their amendments are important and would be very effective, the proposers of the legislation will think the same. That is the argument that Members have to win or lose. However, it was not, as it has been interpreted, simply a matter of a block voting against it. We all wanted to move forward in a clear way to get the legislation in place in order to deliver on it as quickly as possible.

There have been some delays, but we need to have the legislation in place so that we can deliver on it. We will not have to go through the entire procedure again, as the legislation will be in place, and if there are any future crises, the Executive will be able to respond quickly to the needs of the people at that particular time. Go raibh maith agat.

The First Minister: I thank Members for their contributions during today's debate and in previous debates. I also thank the Committee in particular for supporting the accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly.

I will now take the opportunity to touch on some points that were made during the Bill's passage through the Assembly. I will start with the comments made by the now absent Member for Lagan Valley Mr McCrea, who said that, at the end of the day, the truth

was still the truth, and the proof of the pudding would be in the eating. Of course, he is absolutely right. Indeed, that is what the deputy First Minister and I are relying on. When the truth is seen, and the spurious and bogus intentions that he and others have attempted to place upon — and to hang around the neck of — the deputy First Minister and me have been proven to be inaccurate, will there be an admission on the part of the Member for Lagan Valley and others that their fears have been assuaged and that the Bill has not been used for the purposes and intent that they indicated?

I will now come to the issue that flows from that, which is amendment No 13 in the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill. The Assembly is master of its own House, and it can bring not just the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but any Minister, before it and seek an explanation for whatever the subject matter may be, including the issue of the working of this piece of legislation.

For the very reason outlined by the Member for Lagan Valley, the deputy First Minister and I will be very glad, if the Assembly so wishes, to have OFMDFM representation in the House to give account for any issues that flow from the implementation of the legislation. However, I say to the Member for South Antrim, who is the leader of the Alliance Party, that he should not forget that at each stage of implementation, the Assembly has the opportunity to deal with any scheme under clause 1 or clause 2. If a new scheme under clause 2 is being brought before the House, it will be completely in order — subject, of course, to your will and to that of the Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers — for a Member to consider that particular scheme in the wider context of the overall schemes that have been brought under this legislation. There, again, is a further opportunity for Members to consider the provisions of the Bill and how they operate.

The other argument being advanced by the still absent Member for Lagan Valley was a gripe about the fact that he cannot win votes in the Assembly, just as, no doubt, he gripes about being unable to win votes in Lagan Valley. The problem appears to be that he does not seem to like democracy. The Member for Strangford Mr Shannon pointed out that the votes were 2:1 and, on occasions, 3:1, but the Member for Lagan Valley wants a system whereby, even if the vast majority of Members believe that there is no need for a change in the legislation, the minority should have its way even if it is deemed by the majority to be unnecessary.

That is just not the way that things work. The leader of the Alliance Party and some SDLP Members complained that, overall, they tabled 30 amendments that were not accepted. Should the deputy First Minister and I accept amendments to the legislation that we believe do not merit inclusion? The argument seems to be that certain amendments should be accepted because

the parties that tabled them considered them to have merit, irrespective of the advice that we received, which was that we should not accept them, and that we take those decisions ourselves.

Mr Ford: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: Let me finish the point; I will give way to the Member.

I have already said that, overwhelmingly, we had much sympathy with the spirit of those amendments. However, the fact is that in some cases, they would have resulted in a duplication of what is already in legislation, and, therefore, were totally unnecessary; in other cases, they would have reflected the general and normal standard practice of the Assembly and its Committees and the way in which we operate, and again, therefore, were not necessary. The only amendment to which I would have objected on principle was the amendment to drop clause 2 in its entirety, and I explained why we did not wish to do that, because it is important that, as soon as we can, we put on the statute book legislation that will provide the mechanisms to allow us to take a joined-up approach to tackling poverty and hardship.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the First Minister for giving way eventually.

Were he advancing the case that he is currently advancing on the Consideration Stage of the first Bill to come from OFMDFM, it would be entirely understandable. However, he seems to have missed the point that I made to Mr Molloy, which was that when one is told, Bill after Bill, that amendments are constructive and the spirit is understood, but every single one is nonetheless rejected on every single Bill that is introduced, one can possibly understand why paranoia is, perhaps, fed.

The First Minister: It should not be, because the facts are not as the Member states them. The facts are that we tabled four amendments to this piece of legislation in response to concerns that were expressed to us. We listened to all those concerns, considered those that had merit, framed amendments on the basis of what we heard, and tabled them. It is not the case that the parties that are in opposition — or those that are in the Executive but want to portray themselves as an opposition — tabled amendments that were then ignored. In our opinion, there were four specific amendments that had value and merit, and we, therefore, changed the Bill in order to incorporate them.

Although we agreed in many cases with the general tenor of some of the proposed amendments to the Bill, we did not take them into account because they were unnecessary. Many of the effects of those amendments would have happened anyway, and they would not have changed the outcome or purpose of the legislation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the First Minister for giving way.

Some of the amendments that the First Minister has mentioned were tabled as a result of representations that were made to the junior Ministers at meetings of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is a clear indication that OFMDFM responds to Members' concerns.

The First Minister: My honourable friend is right. We were responding not only to members of Committees, but to Ministers from some of the parties who spoke during the course of this debate and who made submissions to OFMDFM on the legislation.

I shall deal with another point that was made by the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea, who is still not present in the Chamber. He asked why, if OFMDFM already had powers in the areas of concern, it was introducing this legislation — why was it necessary, if OFMDFM already had the relevant powers?

12.15 pm

Again, he seems to have missed the purpose of the legislation. The legislation is not intended to bring new powers to OFMDFM — and I assume that the Member is referring to clause 2 in particular. Rather, it is intended to put in place a mechanism so that OFMDFM can properly implement the powers that it has already in relation to poverty and hardship. Therefore, it is not a power grab or an attempt to claim new powers for OFMDFM. Rather, it is to provide a way to implement better the responsibilities that OFMDFM has in place already.

The Member for Lagan Valley, Basil McCrea — who has still not come into the Chamber — made another factual inaccuracy. He seemed to think that by putting forward this kind of measure, we were setting off on some new course or direction contrary to the Programme for Government. The purpose of the Bill is to assist us to deliver the Programme for Government, not to provide a course of action contrary to it. I made that point at an earlier stage in the Bill's progress. Therefore, it is consistent with the Programme for Government that we want to deliver the commitments that are in the Programme for Government.

Indeed, I pointed out, specifically, that we had the responsibility, with regard to cross-cutting issues, to deliver on a number of the targets that were set down in the Programme for Government. However, because it was cross-cutting, and other Ministers would have to drive them forward, we did not have the mechanism to get Ministers to do what was required in a joined-up way under the Programme for Government. The Bill provides us with a mechanism to ensure that we can deliver the targets that the Assembly endorsed in the Programme for Government. So, although he did not intend to do so, the Member strongly made one of the points in favour of passing the legislation.

I turn to points raised by the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood. I leave aside his view that there was a shift in the balance between OFMDFM and the Assembly. The provisions of the Bill reflect the strong preferences of the deputy First Minister and myself. There were no differences between us with regard to bringing forward the Bill. The Bill, in its first use, is to help those most in need. It might be worth pointing out to the Member for West Belfast that had the purpose and intention of the communication of 2 October 2008 been carried through by the Executive, tens of thousands of senior citizens would not have benefited from fuel-poverty payments. He said that the Minister for Social Development was the only person in the Executive who is the champion of good causes for people in bad places. Rather, the Executive were the champions of more people in bad places than was the intention of the paper put forward by the Social Development Minister.

The other issue raised by Mr Attwood was that I had somehow been insulting to those who opposed some of the provisions of the Bill. During the course of thanking Members, I defined categories: those who supported the Bill and its amendments; those who were genuinely constructive in opposition to it; and I gave no thanks to those who deliberately went out of their way to distort the terms and intentions of the Bill. There is a saying: if the hat fits, wear it. The Member clearly recognised the category into which he fell, and felt that the finger was pointing at him. By his own admission, therefore, he recognises that he belongs in the latter category. Ultimately, people will judge his contribution on the outcome of the legislation.

The Member also spoke of the 30 amendments, and seemed aghast that Members could bring forward amendments and them not be accepted. I touched on that issue in relation to comments made by the leader of the Alliance Party.

It is not usual for the Opposition in the House of Commons, and, I suspect, in other legislative Chambers, to propose amendments. Mr Attwood said that the purpose of the SDLP proposing its amendments was to probe the Government. On many occasions, opposition parties do not propose amendments with the intention of getting them accepted — because they know that their amendments do not have the merit to be accepted — rather, they do it to create a debate on the issue and to allow a Minister to give undertakings.

If one examines the various debates that have taken place at each Stage of this Bill, one will see that the deputy First Minister and I have given a series of assurances and have lain out very clearly how we intend this legislation to operate. I hope that Members will examine all the responses that we have provided. If they do so, they will see that we have responded in a positive way to the points that were raised during the course of the discussions.

The deputy First Minister: I thank the First Minister for giving way. During the course of an undoubtedly important series of debates on this issue, words such as “power grab” were used. Yesterday, Declan O’Loan, although he had toned down his comments, described this Bill as a dangerous Bill. Today, the Member for West Belfast Alex Attwood used the word “chilling” several times in his contributions. The First Minister and I have been accused of not supporting any of the amendments that the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party or the Alliance Party proposed.

Like me, does the First Minister find it strange that when it came to voting on those amendments — which were of such grave importance to those parties — the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and the SDLP, as well as, I presume, the PUP, could not muster the support of up to half their members? I find that quite incredible.

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister made two points, the first being that this is a pot-and-kettle issue. The Member for West Belfast Alex Attwood objected to some of the terms that I used during earlier debates on the Bill, while he completely ignored the types of comments that the Member for North Antrim Declan O’Loan made. Mr O’Loan, who must have searched the dictionary for insulting terms that he could use during the debate, came up with “obnoxious”, “loathsome”, “dangerous”, and some others, and yet, Mr Attwood made no reference to those during his strictures.

I agree entirely with the deputy First Minister’s second point. I think that every Member in this Chamber recognises that Mr Attwood has not quite got himself out of party conference mode and into the real world again.

We, in the Assembly, must recognise that there are occasions when we must take off our party-political hats and act in the interests of the wider community. The public, quite frankly, are not following some of the nonsense — the hair-splitting and the intricacies of the unnecessary amendments — that has taken place in this Chamber. All that the public want is for a mechanism to be put in place that can give some help to those who face real hardship as a result of the economic downturn.

In that context, some Members should have shown a greater degree of charity in trying to encourage this piece of legislation. As I indicated earlier, anyone who listens to this debate will find it hard to understand why the Member for North Antrim used the kinds of terms that he has done, and how some of the arguments that particularly the SDLP and Ulster Unionists have put forward could possibly be about a piece of legislation that is designed to overcome poverty and hardship and to make payments to those who are faced with emergencies or crises.

Although Members feel that they have a role to play in probing and opposing legislation, they also have a responsibility not to go over the top.

I will be very careful in this matter because I know that the Deputy Speaker does not want any protracted debate about the issue of delay. Members of the SDLP have spoken again about the paper of 2 October 2008: if life had ended on 2 October, they would have a fine argument to present. Life, however, did not end on 2 October. Further papers were generated after that time. The Minister for Social Development indicated — after 2 October — that she was looking at other ways of finding the powers that would not require new legislation.

The argument was made twice — and I have not referred to this at all as yet — once by Mrs Kelly, and once by the deputy leader of the Alliance Party, that the Minister for Social Development had produced legislation. The Minister for Social Development has at no time produced legislation in order to take this Bill forward. I have the letter with me. The first letter, which —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. First Minister, you were quite right to say that I do not want you to go down that route. I gave you latitude in your original contribution to the debate, and I gave Mr Attwood leeway in responding to that; however, I do not think that we need go any further. Please stick to the matter of the Financial Assistance Bill.

The First Minister: I accept your ruling, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, there are Members present who have criticised other Members for not listening to them, and for not replying to points that they had made. I simply wanted to reply to a point that I had listened to and could have provided information on, which might have put the Member in a better position to deal with the issue.

Mrs Foster: Will the First Minister agree that when one is presenting written evidence to support a case, one should give all that written evidence and, indeed, all the oral evidence?

The First Minister: Yes, of course one should. However, the Member who first raised the point did so on the basis of a selective leak from an irresponsible person and was clearly not given all the evidence to bring forward. I accept the Deputy Speaker’s ruling, and will not —

Mr I McCrea: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I will, providing it is not about that particular issue. *[Laughter.]*

Mr I McCrea: Unfortunately, I cannot promise that I will not stray —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I can promise you that you will not speak on that particular issue. If it is not

about that particular issue, you can intervene; if it is, we will go back to the First Minister.

The First Minister: As Members are aware, the catalyst for this Bill comes from the need to have a legislative basis for making a one-off payment of £150 to help those households suffering from fuel poverty. That plan was announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel as part of the Executive's response to the economic downturn.

I accept entirely the point made by the deputy leader of the Alliance Party that this is the first use of the Bill. It is an enabling Bill and does not, in itself, make that provision, but it was felt to be right — and I think that the Alliance Party agreed with the decision that the Executive took — that rather than coming forward each time with a piece of legislation to deal with a particular Department's emergency, there should be one piece of legislation that can be used in all cases. I think that that was the right decision to take, but, again, I hope that it will not be used too often.

The Bill provides us with the basis on which to do that, and it is, therefore, important that the Bill is passed by the House and receives Royal Assent as soon as possible.

12.30 pm

Subject to the Bill's becoming law, and to Executive agreement, the deputy First Minister and I will immediately make a determination on designation so as to enable a scheme to be developed for making the fuel payments. Officials are considering the available options, and their advice will help to guide Ministers in agreeing the most effective means of getting payments to those households that need it most. The deputy First Minister and I are agreed on the fact that we want those payments to be made as quickly as possible, as they address an immediate need. The Executive will be fully involved in that process. The relevant Committee will undertake its normal scrutiny of the resulting regulations that outline the fuel-payment scheme. The Assembly will have ultimate control of the continued operation of the eventual scheme.

We look forward to working with Members on the first outworking of the powers in this enabling piece of legislation. I urge the Assembly to support the measure.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Financial Assistance Bill [NIA 4/08] do now pass.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

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

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move

That the draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

This statutory rule has been made under powers that are contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the Order must be laid in draft for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly. It amends existing provisions in the Energy Order 2003 that relate to the operation of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO), which is the main support mechanism to encourage the development of renewables in Northern Ireland.

The debate could not be timelier as we look east to the recent problems with the flow of gas from Russia and consider the unpredictability of oil price fluctuations during the past year. It is vital that we, in Northern Ireland, do all that we can to increase the levels of our indigenous renewable energy. That is important to secure the energy supply; to cushion the volatility and impact of longer-term energy prices; and to tackle the challenges of climate change.

Before I outline the amendment's key focus, I will explain briefly the background of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation. NIRO is the main support mechanism for our renewables policy. I am pleased to note that it has successfully stimulated large-scale renewables investment in Northern Ireland.

Indeed, the amount of electricity that is being generated from renewable sources is double what it was when NIRO was introduced in 2005. Almost 7% of electricity now comes from indigenous renewable sources, primarily onshore wind, which continues to be the most commercially viable renewable technology. I am confident that the current renewable electricity target of 12% by 2012 will be met.

NIRO provides the financial incentive that is needed by eligible generators and renewables developers through a system of certificates known as NIROCs (Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificates), which are awarded for each megawatt hour of output that is consumed in Northern Ireland. Those certificates are, in turn, needed by electricity suppliers to demonstrate

that the proportion of their sales that is specified in NIRO legislation for any particular year can be accounted for by renewables generation.

Otherwise, suppliers must pay a buyout fee in order to meet their obligation under NIRO. The buyout alternative means, therefore, that renewables obligation certificates have a tradable value, which is typically in the region of £40 to £50 and which provides the additional revenue stream that is needed by generators of green electricity.

NIRO operates in tandem with similar obligations in Great Britain. There is a single UK-wide market for renewables obligation certificates, regardless of the obligation under which they are issued.

The primary purpose of the statutory rule is to amend existing primary legislation to allow for the principle of banding in NIRO — that is, to allow different renewable energy technologies to receive differing degrees of support in order to take into account their relative costs. That means that less well developed and more expensive technologies will receive higher levels of support through getting more than one renewable obligation certificate for each unit of output, while others will receive lower levels of support by getting only a fraction of a renewable obligation certificate for each unit of output.

Those banding proposals received broad support in the public consultation exercise that was undertaken by the Department during summer 2008. By increasing support for some technologies, the revised NIRO will help to advance the development of other sources of renewable electricity, such as offshore wind, wave, tidal, and some forms of bioenergy, while continuing to provide a useful incentive for Northern Ireland's valuable onshore wind resource.

The Order does not set out the level of banding that each technology or energy source will receive. Recently, that detail has been the subject of further public consultation. Based on the outcome of that consultation, I will bring forward shortly the second stage of legislative changes that are needed to introduce the detailed banding proposals. That will be the new Northern Ireland renewables obligation Order, which the Department plans to implement by 1 April 2009.

For the sake of clarity, I reiterate that today's draft Order provides simply for the principle of banding to be introduced, not the detail. However, it does provide for associated and consequential changes that are needed to introduce the principle of banding. Specifically, the draft Order provides for the principle of grandfathering to be introduced, which will allow existing projects, or those near to coming on stream, to keep the levels of support on which they relied in making investment decisions. That is especially critical for technologies that will receive a lower level of support under the new

banded arrangements and had made their investments on the basis of receiving one ROC for each unit of output.

The draft Order also provides for the continued operation of the NIRO in tandem with the Great Britain obligation. That is particularly valuable for us, as it not only provides the market size needed to make the NIRO viable, but because it allows us, though being able to operate on a relatively low obligation level, to reduce the impact on consumer costs.

The draft Order introduces a provision for the NIRO administration costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator and the GB regulator, Ofgem, which administers NIRO on behalf of the regulator, to be met from the buyout fund. All those changes reflect the recent amendments that the Energy Act 2008 made to the equivalent primary legislation in Great Britain.

Before finishing, I will comment on the need to make late minor drafting amendments to the draft Order as originally laid in November. Those require laying a revised draft Order at short notice, which, although unusual, is necessary in this case because of the time frames to which we are working with the Department of Energy and Climate Change in London in order to have the banded obligations in place by April.

The drafting amendments did not involve any change to the policy intent of the draft Order. They were needed because Department of Energy and Climate Change lawyers were of the view that the interaction between our draft Order and the equivalent GB legislation would preclude the GB legislation from issuing ROCs in respect of generation in Northern Ireland territorial waters. That is a feature of the current obligations, and one that we propose to continue.

We may wish to secure that power for Northern Ireland in due course, and I will consider that in the context of the outcome of the strategic environmental assessment of our offshore renewable energy. In the short term, however, the main imperative is to ensure that all eligible projects that are located in Northern Ireland territorial waters can benefit from the increased level of ROCs for offshore generation. The late amendment to the draft Order secures that position.

I know that many Members will agree with me that increasing Northern Ireland's renewable electricity generation is critical, not just to meet targets but to reduce our overly high dependence on imported fossil fuels, to help to make our energy supply more secure, and to help to shield us from the price volatility of world energy markets. I hope that Members will support the amendment to the primary legislation to allow variations in the levels of support that different renewable technologies will get. I look forward to putting the detailed banding proposals before the Assembly in March.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler.

Mr Butler: Is the Chairperson or the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee not called first?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement on the draft Order. There were particular concerns about the expense of investing in the marine power section of the banding system. What are the incentives for people to invest in wave and tidal projects in order to meet that part of the NIRO?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Wells.

Mr Wells: We are all somewhat taken aback by the fact that Mr Mark Durkan, Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is not present, and I understand that he had a statement prepared. Perhaps I should give way to the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, because I believe that they take priority in such circumstances.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. About half an hour ago, I was asked to deputise for Mr Durkan. The Office of the Speaker should have been informed that I, as Deputy Chairperson, am standing in for Mark because he is unable to attend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We were not told. Your name is not on the list, and I must call Members whose names are on the list. I can now call Jennifer McCann.

Mr McNarry: That is two Shinners in a row.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I called Mr Wells, but was then asked to withdraw that decision on the basis that the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee should be called first. She has a statement to make on the Committee's behalf. That is what I am doing, and that is why I am doing it.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has considered proposals to amend and replace the primary provisions of the Energy Order (NI) 2003 in relation to the NI renewables obligation. The Committee was made aware that local legislation is dependent on primary legislation being enacted in GB. Therefore, we must make those changes together in order to avoid distorting the market.

The NIRO works in tandem with the renewables obligation in England and Wales and the renewables obligation in Scotland. There is effectively a single market for renewable obligation certificates. That has led to concern within the Committee that the Scottish Executive propose to award more ROCs for tidal-stream and wave generation than the Department does

here. That could mean that wave and tidal device operators here would receive only two ROCs per megawatt hour for the electricity that they generate, while their Scottish counterparts, under current proposals, would receive three and five ROCs per megawatt hour for tidal-stream and wave generation respectively. That discrepancy has the potential to lead to underinvestment in marine renewables here compared with Scotland. The Committee will explore that matter further when it considers the SL1 for the proposed 2009 NIRO.

The Committee is also concerned that the renewable obligation certificates here and the renewable electricity feed-in tariffs regime in the South are not compatible. It is somewhat tenuous to claim that a single electricity market exists when the two schemes to provide incentives for generating renewable electricity result in operators on one side of the border being unable to avail themselves of incentives to provide electricity to suppliers on the other side of the border. The Committee will watch that issue closely.

After consideration of the proposals at SL1 stage on 3 July 2008, the Committee subsequently considered the Energy (Amendment) Order (NI) 2009 on 20 November and 16 December 2008. Despite the issues that I have raised, the Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the Order.

Mr Wells: Members might wonder why I was so taken aback when I was called previously; I was relying on our Chairman, Mr Mark Durkan, to speak, and I had set aside 40 minutes for his contribution. Our Chairman is extremely diligent, and I am certain that had he been in the Chamber, he would have read up and given an excellent presentation on the important Order.

I support the Minister's Order, which will benefit Northern Ireland. As I have told the Committee previously, I often think that people in Northern Ireland are like the man who buys a new Range Rover in order to take bottles to the recycling plant. We are prepared to take the easy options on renewables and the protection of the environment. However, we balk at the difficult decisions. Sadly, there was a good example in the UK recently in relation to the third runway at Heathrow Airport. Our own Government have set a challenging target of an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. Having put the rubber stamp on that decision, the Government then balked at the first major policy decision that affected them and decided to go ahead with the third runway. It is clear that we will have to take some difficult actions in the next few years if we are to meet that target.

Remember, the target of 80% reduction by 2050 is based on the consumption rates of energy in 1990. Therefore, in order to reach that target by 2050, we must, in effect, reduce our current energy use by 90%.

That will only be possible if there is a massive increase in the use of renewables, not only in Northern Ireland, but throughout western Europe. Therefore, any amendment to the legislation that will facilitate that must be very welcome. The whole House should support the motion.

I do not see the issue as being entirely negative. Renewables offer a massive opportunity for the economy of Northern Ireland, because we have plenty of sea, plenty of tide and plenty of wind. We are, therefore, in a privileged position in comparison with other countries, as we have the basic forces of nature, which can be harnessed to create renewable energy. We have wind farms, and the tidal turbine at the Narrows on Strangford Lough. Although my colleague Mr Hamilton maintains that that is in Strangford, I maintain that it is actually in South Down. I am absolutely certain of that. A pioneering effort in renewables is being made at Strangford Lough, and the tests of the turbine have proven to be exceptionally successful in generating a large amount of totally renewable power.

There are many other sources of renewables that we in the Province can utilise, but there must also be an opportunity for our beleaguered industry to manufacture many of the items that are required to harness that energy supply — turbines in particular. I believe that we are pushing an open door.

I am also delighted that, yesterday, the President of the United States, Mr Obama, very clearly nailed his colours to the renewables mast as well. Almost every Government Minister in every part of the world has signed up to the need for an increase in renewables. I have no doubt that President Obama is following our own Minister's lead in that respect.

I have no problems whatsoever in wishing the Order a fair wind, and I urge the entire House to vote for it.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the Minister's statement and Mr Wells's comments. The use of finite resources was mentioned in President Obama's inaugural speech last Tuesday as well, so it is an issue that is important far beyond here.

The Minister made the point, which was supported by Mr Wells, that it is not just a matter of meeting our targets in relation to renewable energy. We can do more than that; we should be aiming to exceed those targets. I referred to the issue in a question to the Minister of the Environment at Question Time yesterday, and — as children sometimes say about a reaction from parents or teachers — I got the head ate off me. I received a lecture about how it was enough simply to meet our targets here in Northern Ireland. I am glad to hear another voice in the DUP speaking more passionately about the issue.

I would like some clarification from the Minister in relation to the ROCs and the single energy market. I

take the point that she made about the UK implications. However, when the producers of renewable energy have surplus electricity, the certificates are not tradable on the island of Ireland. Therefore, some of that surplus electricity cannot be put into a single energy market for the island. That is a problem here in the North of Ireland and, equally, in the South of Ireland, because the system does not work the other way around either. I raise the issue in case it has implications for amendments. We should keep those options open, and work towards creating a situation in which producers of renewable energy anywhere on the island can feed their surpluses into the supply, North or South of the border, regardless of where they are located.

That will improve the system and provide greater security for the generation of electricity across the island.

Mr Neeson: The draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 has been considered by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we are in support of it. Like other speakers, I remind the Minister and the Department of the very powerful speech that was made by President Obama last week. It is important that a man of his stature provides a lead on such an important issue as the development of renewables.

The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee clearly needs to address the issue because all of us now realise the difficulties that have been created by the global recession and the instability of energy prices throughout the world. I urge the Minister to speak to her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to encourage the greater development of renewable sources throughout the island of Ireland. The single electricity market provides an opportunity to create such co-operation. The island of Ireland has a huge amount of natural resources to develop renewable energy through wind and tidal power. The Ards Peninsula experiment is leading the way in the development of tidal power.

During lunchtime, we received a very powerful statement from Douglas McIlldoon, the former regulator. From what he told us, it is clear that consumers in Northern Ireland are paying too much for their electricity. Hopefully, we will address that issue in future. In conclusion, as a member of the Committee, I fully support the draft Order.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Members who took part in the debate for their thoughtful contributions. I am pleased that the legislation is supported, and I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the ETI Committee for outlining the concerns and, ultimately, the support of the Committee for this legislation.

I will deal with a couple of issues that were raised during the debate. The Committee will know that Faber Maunsell was appointed by the Department to

undertake a strategic environmental assessment of offshore wind and marine renewables in Northern Ireland waters. Mr Butler made that point at the start of the debate.

On completion of that strategic environmental assessment in spring 2010, we will work with the Crown Estate — the owners of the seabed — to develop the programme, which will involve a competitive application process for commercial renewable energy projects in 2010. Several national and international companies have already expressed an interest in generating electricity in Northern Ireland waters, which we very much welcome.

Mention was also made of the Scottish proposals for a higher level of support for wave and tidal technologies. I stress to Members that those are only proposals at the moment — they have not been endorsed by Europe. I will evaluate whether that is the most appropriate means of encouraging such investment for Northern Ireland. In discussions with my officials and in responses to statutory consultations on the band of NIRO, developers have indicated that ROC rates are not the only factor in their investment decisions for offshore renewable projects.

Other areas, such as access to the grid and the ability of projects to have their electricity taken when they are ready in the next few years, are considered critical as well. Therefore, although I understand the points that have been made, more work must be done on those matters.

The single electricity market is another subject that often comes up, and it was mentioned by Mr Gallagher, Mr Neeson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. There has been much discussion because the Republic of Ireland's system is different to the one in the UK — the Republic uses a feed-in tariff, whereas, the UK deals in ROCs. That is a fundamental difficulty. If we intend to change the system that we use, we must ensure that we do not penalise people who have based investment decisions in Northern Ireland on the renewable obligation certificate system.

Moreover, we must be mindful that chopping and changing systems might point Northern Ireland out as a risky place in which to invest. We must project stability and say that this is our system, and we are sticking to it. That does not mean that we are not examining the Republic's feed-in tariff and attempting to work with our colleagues there on the matter. We are doing so, and we will continue to do so.

My colleague Jim Wells indicated his support for the motion, and he said that there is plenty of wind in Northern Ireland. He is right, although most of it is in the west —

Mr Weir: It is mostly in the Chamber.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That is also right. Nevertheless, we must look beyond onshore-wind power generation, and consider other technologies, such as marine, wave and offshore wind. In addition, Mr Wells spoke about the third runway at Heathrow; however, that subject is completely ultra vires with regard to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, so I will make no comment about it.

Mr Wells maintained that the SeaGen project on Strangford Lough is actually in his constituency of South Down, but I think that the clue is in the name of the lough. The success of SeaGen should not be underestimated; it is a hugely successful pilot project, and it lends itself to Northern Ireland leading the way in marine technology. Although the Scottish Executive have made a lot of noise about leading the way in marine technology, Northern Ireland is the first place to have the type of technology that is being piloted in Strangford Lough. We should be — and I am — particularly proud of that fact, and I was able to point that out last week in Brussels, where I attended an energy conference.

We should also take advantage of the green economy. Much has been said about Mr Obama, the President of the United States — where this Chamber leads, he follows. The potential exists for this Administration to bring many green jobs to Northern Ireland, and the SeaGen project clearly demonstrates that point. Therefore, I welcome the scope for investment in that area, which the Matrix report identified as a key sector, and my Department will be working closely with colleagues in Invest NI to identify those possibilities in the green sector.

I say to Mr Gallagher the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone that climate change is not the only driver in the Bill; there are three drivers: climate change; the need for a competitive energy market; and the need for a secure energy market. We must consider all three elements.

Although amending the support system to encourage the development of new and innovative technologies is not the only thing that we must do to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits from increased levels of renewable electricity, it is a vital measure, and the banding proposal will ensure that our renewables policy remains robust and effective. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Strategic Stocktake

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes in which to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Executive's budget position for 2009/10 and 2010/11, in the context of the strategic stocktake as conveyed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the statement on 20 January 2009.

I will begin by making remarks on behalf of the Committee, and if time permits, I will make some personal remarks. I will make that divergence clear, if it is not already so.

2.30 pm

The debate follows on from last week's statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the strategic stocktake of the Executive's Budget for 2009-2010 and 2010-11. I welcome the opportunity to debate the way ahead, especially in the context of the current financial and economic climate and the challenge that that presents for the Executive and the Assembly with regard to their delivery of the priorities in the Programme for Government (PFG) and to achieving maximum impact from our limited resources.

There has been some debate among Members in the Chamber and in the Committee on the process that should be followed in advancing budgetary matters in the upcoming period. In March 2008, the Executive decided that a strategic stocktake would be undertaken in place of a comprehensive Budget process for 2008-09. On several occasions, the Committee considered the implications of the Executive's decision in that regard. On 24 November 2008, the Committee Chairperson and I met with the Minister to discuss the Committee's concerns. Subsequently, we agreed that the Minister would make a statement to the Assembly on the Budget position in the context of the strategic stocktake — which he did last week — and that that would be followed by today's take-note debate, which will provide Members with the opportunity to deliberate more fully on the issues. At its meeting on 26 November 2008, the Committee expressed its satisfaction at that approach and decided not to pursue other measures.

Last year, the Committee published a co-ordinated report on the future Budget process. In response to that report, the Committee will be briefed soon by departmental officials on proposed arrangements for

the future Budget process. Therefore, the process is ongoing, and it is an issue in which the Committee will take a continued interest.

The Committee agreed its submission on the strategic stocktake to the Minister on 3 December 2008. That included submissions that were received from a majority of the Assembly's Statutory Committees. The terms of reference for the stocktake included a review of departmental progress against plans; the identification of reduced requirements and emerging pressures for the next two years; and proposals for addressing the pressures through adjustments to existing plans and priorities.

The Committee raised concerns in its submission that Departments had not met the stocktake's terms of reference. Members saw no evidence of proposals for addressing new pressures through adjustments to existing plans. That issue was highlighted in several of the submissions that were received from Statutory Committees. Although that may have been as a result of Departments being under increased financial pressure, it makes the job of central finance group and, consequently, the Executive more difficult, and I urge Statutory Committees to scrutinise that area in the coming months. The Committee was more concerned about the apparent absence of a critical review of progress against plans to date. The Committee was particularly concerned by DFP's assertion that more work is required to provide the necessary assurances that services are being delivered as planned and that the majority of public service agreements require improvements in governance and risk management.

The Committee believes that more management analyses of expenditure need to be undertaken in Departments and, centrally, by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and it notes the view of DFP officials that there is an information gap to be filled to enable such analyses to be performed. In the current climate of pressure on our resources, it is even more important that those are directed at the Executive's main priorities and influenced by progress in achieving PFG targets. The Department of Finance and Personnel is continuing to examine the arrangements to achieve PFG targets, and it agreed with the Committee that that should be completed as soon as possible.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel considers that a performance management and monitoring framework for Programme for Government targets will be an extremely important tool to improve analysis and should be implemented as soon as possible. The Committee believes that failure to deliver is the main reason for Departments returning reduced requirements in quarterly monitoring rounds and for year-end underspend. Once established, regular reports against that framework should be shared with Statutory Committees to allow their scrutiny role to be enhanced.

On 26 November 2008, the Committee was briefed by DFP officials on the issues emerging from departmental stocktake positions. At that time, the Committee expressed concern at the approximate £1 million difference between bids submitted and reduced requirements declared to date for 2009-2011.

The Committee accepted DFP's assertion at that time, but questions remain about the scale of some of the bids; whether they reflect pressures and whether those making the bids are aware that difficult negotiations between DFP and other Departments are ongoing. However, the numbers have not improved since November 2008, and the tables attached to the Minister's statement last week detailed a similar difference. Therefore, I again urge Statutory Committees to increase their scrutiny of the proposed pressures and to seek to prioritise them in conjunction with their respective Departments. In the current climate of an economic downturn, it is crucial that Departments do not merely submit wish lists but focus on the identified pressures.

DFP officials informed the Committee that they would have expected more capital reduced requirements to be declared, given the lower cost of taking forward capital projects as a result of the fall in property prices and more competitive market conditions for public procurement from the construction sector. The Committee believes that DFP must do more to identify such capital projects as soon as possible.

Strategically, the Committee's view is that the economic downturn and the emerging pressures on the Northern Ireland block grant over the period of the stocktake mean that it is vital that maximum impact and value for money be achieved from the available resources. The focus should be on the implementation of last year's Pannell Kerr Foster (PKF) report, which aims to improve financial management in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

DFP is working on programmes of mandatory financial training for senior civil servants and on a standard model of financial information to be made available to Department boards. More must be done to move from an incremental to an output-based approach to budgeting and expenditure, as recommended in the PKF report. To that end, the Committee received a commitment from DFP officials that they would begin a series of rolling baseline reviews, with the aim of subjecting all departmental expenditure to that zero-based analysis over three to five years. That analysis will have a key role to play in future budgetary processes, and its output must be shared with the relevant Statutory Committees.

Furthermore, the Committee was informed that the Northern Ireland Civil Service accounting systems are

not fit for purpose; DFP, therefore, expects an improvement in its financial management when financial and accounting services are provided through Account NI. That process will be fully implemented by April 2009.

DFP informed the Committee of the challenges that it faces in meeting its own efficiency targets for 2009-2010 and 2010-11, and it is aware that achieving efficiencies is posing problems for other Departments, too. Statutory Committees' scrutiny of efficiencies is not helped by their outstanding concerns at the level of detail contained in the efficiency-delivery plans of some Departments — even though they should have been published in full early last year.

Nevertheless, DFP recently conducted a review of efficiency-delivery plans and provided an analysis of its key findings to the Minister. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has requested a copy of that analysis, and I urge Statutory Committees to continue to scrutinise plans and to seek assurance from their respective Departments that savings are being achieved through carefully planned measures to improve efficiency rather than through crude cuts in front line services.

The current challenge to meet efficiency targets may be exacerbated by the Chancellor's announcement, as part of his pre-Budget report, that efficiency savings for Whitehall Departments will increase by £5 billion for 2010-11. In November 2008, the Chancellor indicated that those additional efficiencies will apply to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At an evidence session last week, DFP officials informed the Committee that that will result in more than £100 million of additional efficiency savings for Northern Ireland in 2010-11 — on top of the current target of more than £700 million.

The Minister has already said that he intends to challenge that proposal before the Chancellor's Budget speech in the spring, and he can be assured of the support of the Committee, and of the wider Assembly, in those negotiations.

The main pressures on DFP's budget over the two years that the stocktake covers were identified as relating to NICS reform programmes that it is progressing on behalf of all Departments. In the Committee's report on the Executive's draft Budget, published in late 2007, the Committee raised concerns about the funding of those programmes. We were told that the intention was to allocate the required money from the 2008-09 monitoring rounds. However, bids submitted in June and September 2008 were not met, and the Minister subsequently announced that the collection of rates arrears by Land and Property Services (LPS) would be used to meet the residual cost of Civil Service reform.

Given the Committee's continuing concerns about the performance of LPS — concerns that Members

around the House share — it will continue to scrutinise that area to ensure that the cost of essential reforms are met. Of all the NICS reform programmes, NI Direct probably has the most impact on public expectation. The Committee has been briefed on that programme's progress, and it was informed that the identified pressure of just under £9 million for 2009-2011 will be sufficient to address the total cost of the programme of some £17.9 million, as planned in the final business case, and thus ensure delivery of the Programme for Government targets for that programme.

The Committee also notes that DFP did not identify any reduced requirements as part of its stocktake submission and sees that as a positive reflection that DFP will use its resources effectively to achieve targets in that period and, therefore, minimise resources handed back due to slippage.

The Committee believes that the need to maximise impact on value for money from finite resources requires DFP to take the lead on identifying pre-emptive measures to safeguard against significant year-end underspend. The pattern of Departments declaring reduced requirements late in the financial year has resulted in unacceptable underspend and ever-accumulating stocks of end-year flexibility, to which it will become increasingly difficult to gain access. Given the current economic climate, it would be intolerable if history were to repeat itself and we were in the same position at the end of March this year.

The Committee will wish to see continuous improvement in the performance of the public sector in managing programmes, finances and other resources and in achieving business targets. Individual Statutory Committees, and the wider Assembly, have an important role to play in driving that improvement forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in the time left to me, I will make some personal remarks on the strategic stocktake. Like many Members, I view the strategic stocktake as a valuable exercise in theory, given the economic climate. It was an opportunity — as it says on the tin — to take stock in a strategic way and to assess the state of public finances in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, that has not necessarily been the case in practice in two particular areas. First, as I said earlier, the terms of reference have, at times, been ignored by Departments. There was little evidence that Departments were seeking to identify pressures and consider how they could be met from adjustments from their own plans. Secondly, Departments submitted what were, in effect, wish lists. The process may have been concluded before Christmas, but there was no excuse for some Departments submitting what were, in effect, Dear Santa letters and demanding infinite amounts of money that simply did not exist.

The figures show £52 million of reduced requirements against more than £1 billion of bids. The monitoring round in December had £70 million available and some £300 million of bids. I have heard criticism of a supposed black hole in the public finances of Northern Ireland. The more I hear of that criticism, the more I am inclined to believe that there is a black hole. However, it is not in public finances; it is in the heads of Members who raise that issue. It does them no service whatsoever to start scare stories about schools' budgets being hit and money for education and other front line services being affected. If those Members scrutinised what is going on, they would see that that is not the case. The insinuation that there is a black hole would suggest that it is somehow hidden. The Minister can confirm that he has in no way hidden any of the pressures on bids that have come on our public finances.

There is a duty on those who say that there is a black hole to look at the validity of some of the bids to see whether they are priorities, whether they are absolutely needed, whether they are urgent, and whether they are required at all in some cases.

Asking Ministers to submit bids for what they would like to see implemented over the next couple of years is akin to my going home this evening and asking Mrs Hamilton what she would like me to buy. I am sure that she would say that she would like two new cars, five foreign holidays a year and a brand new wardrobe. *[Interruption.]* She might have to take a bit of a cut in what she would like. There are massive demands on every domestic budget, but that does not mean that that expenditure is necessarily valid, correct or right.

The behaviour of some Departments in respect of this stocktake undermines the argument that some have made for a revised and new Budget process as well. It is clear from the stocktake that these are difficult economic times and that there is no new money available. A revised Budget process would require taking money from other Departments.

I have heard many demands for money, but I have not heard any constructive suggestions from Members as to where that money should come from. Those are important thoughts for Members to ponder; however, I am not optimistic that they will be taken on board. I commend the motion to the House.

2.45 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's debate. The strategic stocktake offers us the opportunity to have some input to the budgetary process, and it allows us to highlight some of the priorities that have been affected by the serious economic decline.

I am a member of the Committee for Social Development, which has supported increased

expenditure for a social housing programme to deal with the ever-increasing numbers of people waiting for a home. In fact, Sinn Féin has argued that to invest in social housing is to invest in the future of those who are most in need in our society. Having a home raises our quality of life and impacts on our educational attainment and health. We in the Chamber have a duty to ensure that citizens who find themselves without a home can feel part of this new dispensation, and that can be done only by providing a home for them to live in.

Over many monitoring rounds, the Executive have shown their commitment to the provision of a social-housing newbuild programme. The Programme for Government set out the commitment to provide more than 5,000 new homes over the next three years. Any slip in that schedule would have a devastating effect on those waiting to be housed. The Minister for Social Development must realise that everyone in the Chamber is a supporter of providing an effective social housing programme. In fact, we have congratulated Ministers on providing additional moneys for housing in most of the monitoring rounds that have taken place since the Assembly was restored.

However, rather than arguing a case with her ministerial colleagues, the Social Development Minister has chosen to attack them, even though she supported the package of proposals —

Mr O’Loan: I thank the Member for giving way. I welcome his support for the provision of the money that is necessary for social housing. Can the Member be explicit: is he encouraging the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make good next year the deficit in the housing budget this year? Furthermore, is he asking the Finance Minister to ensure that the money that was allocated for social housing for the next two years will, in fact, be handed over?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Minister argued that the December monitoring round was a smash-and-grab raid on her budget, when, in fact, not a penny was lost from her social housing budget. When we consider the previous three monitoring rounds, we can see that the Minister has underspent her budget. In June, she surrendered £50 million from social security, which the Executive allowed to be transferred to a social housing development programme. In September, she bid for £68.4 million, and she was given £15.5 million, plus £15 million from sales. In December, she surrendered over £31 million from social security, which went into the pot to tackle the serious economic crisis that we face.

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No.

Could that money not have been used to bring forward newbuild programmes planned for social security offices? That would have provided a much-

needed injection of resources into the construction industry and would have dealt with the serious morale problems among social security staff.

We could be forgiven for thinking that housing is the only brief in the Minister’s Department, but she is also responsible for dealing with need and social deprivation. At a time when many community and voluntary groups working on neighbourhood renewal across the North are under severe financial pressure, the Minister gave back £1.6 million from that budget in December. Why was that money not reallocated to halt the job losses in that sector or the closure of projects?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No.

The strategic business review is another example of proposed changes and potential job losses, and I ask the Minister to consider that again, and then do the decent thing and scrap it. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McNarry: I wish to inform the House that the motion has been tabled without legal advice being given to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. In November, a proposal to seek legal advice was voted on, but because two parties can outvote four parties — and did so by five votes to four — the proposal to seek legal advice on the strategic stocktake was summarily rejected by the DUP/Sinn Féin coalition that operates here. That begs a question: did DFP take legal advice on the introduction of a strategic stocktake in the first place? Perhaps we are on shaky ground, because last week in the House, the First Minister told us of the rock-solid commitment to the Programme for Government and its link to a three-year Budget.

However, according to the Finance Minister’s remarks on the same day, it seems that all is not so rosy. His concerns are not alleviated by unified corporate ministerial action. On the contrary, the Finance Minister is petrified to find himself entirely at the mercy of arrogant and ruthless Ministers.

Talking of which, before I set the First Minister aside, how is it that despite having fewer staff than it did five years ago and the smallest of budgets, his Department has increased its monthly payroll by more than £330,000 in five years, to a staggering £1,395,448? Why is it that, as of last week, OFMDFM was the only Department yet to return a report on its efficiency savings? How many times have Members been berated in the Chamber by OFMDFM about efficiency savings?

Last week, the media headlines agreed with my assertions about the existence of a billion-pound black hole — it even got its own cartoon in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’. The media cannot all be wrong. Yet, the Minister denies that such a hole exists. How deep, and what colour, is the pit? Is it a vivid red to match the

forecast figures that he cannot see? What will he do when it dawns on him that the strategy behind his strategic stocktake was flawed in the first place? The Minister talks of pressures like an inventive diversion, because he is dependent on underspending to reduce those pressures. On the one hand, he pleads that there is a difficulty in predicting and measuring pressures, yet on the other, he boldly states that recent history shows that whatever the pressures are, they are manageable. In other words, the Minister hopes that underspending will save his bacon.

We know that the hole was created long before the downturn kicked in — it was always going to manifest itself. However, its impact will be worse in the current circumstances, and only DFP, Sinn Féin and the DUP argue otherwise. We are left with a Minister who is stuck with an inherited economic landscape and glued rigidly to yesterday's plan. He seeks salvation through in-year monitoring, but shakes at the very thought of Ministers spending every penny of their budget allocations and having nothing left on the books. That is a very risky high-wire strategy, which, if unearthed and proven — and it may be soon — is nothing short of negligence and incompetence.

What are we taking note of today? Is there some type of poker game in progress, in which Ministers hold or fold? If so, the Minister is sticking with an outdated and ineffective Programme for Government and the corresponding Budget that he was dealt. We will be back in the Chamber soon for a proper debate, on which there will be a vote to test the two-party coalition and, not least, the nerve of the Assembly. It is crystal clear that we must rewrite a new creative action that fits today's circumstances. It is time to take note of those requirements and to remove the old remedies.

Mr O'Loan: To summarise the outcome of the strategic stocktake, the Minister has sat long and produced a mouse. Incredibly, the Minister's statement did not offer a single new initiative or change of direction, yet it is called "strategic" — that is an affront to the English language. At most, this statement was a survey of the financial and economic landscape. It is a bleak landscape, and there is no chart of it. The Minister is certainly no Shackleton.

We all know that we are in a very serious economic situation, and there have been major changes since the three-year Budget was created in autumn 2007. Every day, we hear reports of job losses. Also, there is a credit crunch, and businesses cannot get the money to invest. There is a lack of confidence and uncertainty. The business world is looking to the Executive for leadership, but it is not getting it in the Minister's statement.

Members might have seen an article by John Simpson in yesterday's 'Belfast Telegraph'. I do not think that many people regard him as polemical or as

an anti-establishment commentator, but he agrees very much that the Minister needs to do more. His article is headlined: "Time to reshape budget to tackle the downturn". In it, he states that the Executive need to move on with plans to revitalise the local economy. I could not agree more.

John Simpson is very specific. He advocates shifting a further £50 million to £100 million within the Budget. His first focus is on enhanced skilling and retraining.

Mr Hamilton: I can anticipate where the Member's speech is going. If he is advocating moving £50 million to £100 million, will he tell us which Ministers will be told that their budgets are going to be slashed by that amount?

Mr O'Loan: There is no question that in calling for a revised Budget, all of that would have to be looked at. I am saying that the Executive, through the Minister of Finance and Personnel, must reconsider their priorities. I am perfectly open about that when I make that statement.

Moving £50 million to £100 million into enhanced skilling and retraining would be a meaningful response to give when many people around us are losing jobs. However, the Minister has not responded in such a way.

John Simpson has also called for the capital programme to be confirmed and enhanced. From where will the money come when capital realisation has dried up? People are aware that there is a problem with the £260 million acute hospital in Enniskillen and that HSBC has pulled out of the PFI scheme, but the Minister has told us nothing of such problems or of the remedies for them. In fact, he has said nothing at all on such matters.

The Minister's officials agree that something needs to be done about the Budget. At the Finance Committee last week, a senior official said:

"Some spending programmes initiated a year or more ago were valid spending programmes in the context that applied at that time. In the different economic and political context that now exists, some of those programmes might have run their course."

There is no better argument than that for a revised Budget. That is what the Minister should be presenting, but he has not done so. The Minister has failed.

Officials have told us that the major pressures on the Budget are water charges and equal pay. In relation to water charges, the Minister has lost £200 million from his Budget for the next two years. The total pressures on the Budget are £1 billion over two years, and what is the Minister's answer to that? Incredibly, his officials told us clearly that his answer is to ignore half of that, as it is just bluff from the Departments, which are simply fluffing up demands into material that is not real. Nevertheless, that leaves a substantial amount. However, half of £1 billion is £500 million, over two

years, so what is the answer to that? The Minister's officials told us that there are always reduced requirements year on year — they say that what they call the “churn” will deal with it.

That is all that the Minister has to say in response to the biggest economic crisis in our lifetimes. The Minister's response is this: something will turn up.

Mr McGlone: I wish to address some comments that were directed previously at our party colleague and Minister, Margaret Ritchie, from Members to the right geographically, in the Chamber, and politically, in terms of the Thatcherite right. They supported a Budget that will ultimately lead to cuts in childcare and that made no provision for an anti-poverty strategy, which we have heard much about today.

In other words, the Budget that they brought about and supported is leading to the underprovision of resources and is counteracting the measures that deal with poverty.

3.00 pm

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

Dr Farry: I will pick up where Mr O'Loan left off. The point is well made, if I may speak on behalf of the SDLP — I was amazed that Sinn Féin signed up to the Budget last year.

The stocktake has exposed serious problems in Northern Ireland's public finances. Although it is relatively easy to point the finger at the economic downturn, in the sense that it is a convenient scapegoat, the reality is much different, because the problems are in some way self-inflicted. At the outset, many questions were asked about the Budget and whether it was capable of meeting all its stated objectives. Since then, further wounds have been caused by Executive decisions.

The existing budgetary framework in Northern Ireland is already very tight. Members would expect me to say that the cost of division causes difficulties in that major opportunity costs are incurred because resources are tied up in providing duplicate facilities. However, I will not labour that point; it has been well made many times in the past. On top of that, we had to deal with the UK Treasury's difficult and tight comprehensive spending review. When that is coupled with the existing structural problems in public expenditure, the situation gets even more difficult.

The Executive's decisions have drawn the Budget even tighter, leaving little room for manoeuvre and large expectations with regard to efficiency savings and asset sales. Efficiency savings are a popular topic of discussion across the country. To me, efficiency savings are about changes in policies and practices — we should do things differently and more effectively. Far too often, efficiency savings are becoming simple cuts

in public services, with the result that we are just doing less, and the reaction across the board to that is extreme.

I note that the DUP has tabled a motion about the Health Service in which it calls for proper efficiency savings rather than cuts. You reap what you sow, and the DUP has a barefaced cheek to table that motion. The situation in the Health Service is a direct outworking of the Budget that the DUP designed and supported, and it should not be surprised by what is happening in the Health Service.

Populism has been placed ahead of prudence, and that can be seen in the number of big announcements and headline figures that the Executive have produced. There is a revenue funding gap of £450 million over the next two years, more than half of which is due to the decision to defer water charges. Furthermore, there is a capital funding gap of £610 million. I appreciate that the Minister said that those gaps can be closed via underspends in previous years, but even if we take the midpoints of those underspends over the past two years, that still raises only £740 million, leaving a gap of £360 million. We must acknowledge that we are in a sui generis situation and that past assumptions about underspends may not come to pass. Beyond that, Departments are required to surrender money in a timely manner if the gap is to be plugged and if they are to avoid losing funds at the end of the year. Other demands to spend money will emerge over time; this stocktake has not foreseen all the challenges that will arise.

The Minister and his party colleagues made a point about lecturing MLAs for making proposals for funding without identifying where the money will come from. That is a perfectly fair point to make, but I would turn that back on to the DUP and point out that in making its decisions, it has done exactly that which it preached against. The decision to defer water charges for two years cost well over £200 million, but the resources to facilitate it were not in place. That decision may be right and it may be popular, but it has been made without regard to the available resources. The same thing applies to the health budget, which has first call on the monitoring rounds.

The real damage to the Budget may not be the effect on our ability to plug gaps — I am sure that those can be patched over in some shape or form — but to the opportunity costs of investing in our economy at a time when Governments around the world are seeing the need, not just to mitigate the effects of the downturn, but to invest for recovery. Northern Ireland is standing still because our Budget is not capable of producing the necessary investments that must be made in order to rebalance our economy.

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member aware of the financial mismanagement by the Minister of Education, the result of which is that the schools capital programme

will be £90 million out of line with the resources needed for the 100 major schools projects that are in the pipeline? Failure to secure additional resources will mean that some projects must be slowed down or stopped, at a time when children need the best possible learning environments and when the building industry could do with the work that those projects would mean.

Dr Farry: I concur with the Member. I know of huge frustrations across the board with respect to capital spending on education projects, which should be going ahead, but are not for various reasons. That points both to the challenge of current capital spending, and to that of bringing forward proper investments. We have had a useful debate on the green economy and renewables, but we are not doing enough on those matters. The action does not match the rhetoric.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I wish to comment, on the Committee's behalf, on certain aspects of the strategic stocktake. The Committee considered the Department for Social Development's strategic stocktake submission at its meetings on 16 and 23 October 2008. Additionally, the Minister for Social Development briefed the Committee on the funding issues relating to the social housing development programme, and other Housing Executive programmes, on 15 January 2009.

The public service agreement targets for housing include the provision of 10,000 additional social and affordable homes by 2013, and the improvement of energy efficiency and other standards in existing social housing. To achieve those goals, the Department set itself annual targets for new house starts and improvements to existing social housing. In the current financial year, the new house starts and the new home improvement targets are likely to be missed.

Those outcomes, should they arise, would be most unwelcome. Such a setback at such an early stage of the new housing programme is regrettable, and it will be important that the Department makes up the housing stock over the next 12 months. The possible failure to achieve social housing improvements is also most undesirable. However, the Committee understands that some £10 million has been identified to ease the problem.

The problem is funding. Social housing programmes were to be funded by land and property sales but, as everyone knows, land and property throughout Northern Ireland have been seriously and significantly devalued. As a consequence, the Department's housing programmes face a shortfall of around £140 million.

We all recognise that there will always be more pressures than easements. Why, when funds are so limited and when there is such a significant economic downturn, should precious resources be redirected to housing programmes? The Committee for Social Development suggests that housing represents a

special case. Additional social and affordable housing will not only serve a social purpose, but will provide additional economic benefits. New and improved social and affordable housing will mean building activity, jobs, and spending in the construction industry and in the local economy generally. Investing in housing is therefore a value-added spending option.

The Social Development Committee agrees unanimously that to deliver on the public service agreement targets for housing, the Department will require additional financial support. There are other social pressures on the Department, which include the mortgage-rescue and mortgage-interest-support schemes. Both provide an important safety net for homeowners who find themselves unable to pay their mortgages. The extent of the financial support that may be required for those schemes over the next two years is, unlike the sums required for the housing programmes, hard to predict. It is important that future monitoring rounds include some flexibility to support those schemes over the next two years.

Notwithstanding what I have said, the Committee supports the view, expressed by the DFP Minister, that the Department should consider all funding options and meet resource requirements, where possible, from internal sources.

All the Committee Chairpersons who speak today will welcome the DFP Minister's exhortation that Committees should challenge Departments' spending plans and priorities. On behalf of the Social Development Committee, I assure the House that we will continue to make suggestions, and scrutinise and challenge DSD spending plans and priorities during these difficult times.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak to this motion as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for Finance and Personnel for bringing this vital issue to the House and giving Members the opportunity to debate and discuss it. It is important that the Committee created this opportunity for issues to be discussed in the House.

The strategic stocktake must be seen against the backdrop of the growing economic downturn in which we, like so many other parts of the world, find ourselves. This situation cannot be said to be of our own making. This downturn is not the same as those of the boom-and-bust cycles of previous decades. This downturn is a result of an adjustment to the global banking and credit system, and creative solutions are required in order to bolster the local economy and to protect the most vulnerable in society. We must also continue to invest in skills, training and innovation so

that we are well placed to make progress on jobs and the economy when the downturn ends.

Those issues must not be forgotten in our consideration of the strategic stocktake. The Committee for Employment and Learning has been at the forefront of highlighting the effect of the economic downturn here. The impact of the redundancies about which we seem to hear on a daily basis will be felt by the Department for Employment and Learning, which provides a range of demand-led skills and training-focused initiatives. Those programmes will see increased uptake as the economic downturn continues to bite, and the Committee signals its approval of the uplifts in the Department for Employment and Learning's budget over the remainder of this financial cycle. That is not to say, however, that the Committee will not be scrutinising the fallout of the Department's reduced requirements.

The Committee has consistently promoted the message that, in this time of hardship, it is vital that investment in up-skilling and re-skilling workers continues and expands, and that those who are made redundant are not left idle and without hope. The Committee for Employment and Learning will also follow the progress of the considerable capital investment set out by the Department over the remainder of the financial cycle. We urge other Committees to ensure that capital projects are not allowed to slip, because they will bring much-needed jobs to our beleaguered construction, and allied, industries.

We should be assessing the up-and-coming industries now, and putting in place training that is appropriate to those industries. That will allow us to be quick off the mark when the upturn finally comes. We will be first in the queue with a skilled workforce, and to capitalise on any opportunities that come our way. The economic downturn makes the sensible use of our budgets all the more important. On behalf of the Committee, I again thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and the Committee itself, for giving Members the opportunity to say a few words. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. Every Minister has a very difficult period ahead as a result of the economic downturn, and all Departments will be under pressure.

I want to concentrate on the public housing sector. I understand that the Minister for Social Development has a problem in that the income that the Department expected from the sale of property will be reduced because of the current economic climate. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has made great efforts to assist her by providing an additional £20 million as part of the in-year monitoring process. That should address the core function of any Government in

ensuring that people have decent housing and affordable rent. On a more positive note, however, the economic downturn presents an opportunity for the Minister to get more for every pound that she spends on social housing. I urge the Minister to ensure that that is a reality.

Some Members have decided to twist the facts to try to make out that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has deprived the Department for Social Development of funding. Every Member and every Minister knows that the Department submitted bids for funding way in excess of what was going to be the reality. Those seven bids were, I believe, for almost twice the moneys available. Therefore, I hope that members of the Minister's party will come clean and admit that the Department for Social Development and social housing are very much a priority for the Executive.

There is no doubt that there are still tough choices to make, but they must be made based on fact, not on speculation and political agendas. There is no doubt that the economy will take time to recover, and that it will, effectively, budget plans for some time. Therefore, all Departments must make their core targets those that were set out in the Programme for Government. However, it is a relief that we have a steady hand on the financial wheel at the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that those targets are met without lumbering future generations with debts, which some Members think that we should take on and expect our children and grandchildren to pay for. I support the motion.

3.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee has considered the Department of the Environment's submission for the strategic stocktake, and I am stating Committee members' concerns that the Department anticipates relinquishing more than £185 million in this budgeting period. That is a significant expenditure.

The Department made a bid for £200 million for the budgetary period 2008-2011 to provide funding for councils to cover up to 50% of the overall capital costs of compliance with the EU landfill directive targets. The Committee has been advised by the Department that the three waste management groups established to address the waste management needs of the North's 26 councils have not been in place long enough to be able to use the resources that have been made available by the strategic waste infrastructure fund. The Department now wants — on its terms — to re-phase the money into the next budgetary period.

Mr Dodds referred to that unspent money in his strategic stocktake statement last week. He stopped short of giving a commitment that sufficient funding

would be found for waste management in the next budgeting round. That is particularly worrying when considered alongside the fact that there is likely to be a net reduction in the block grant — relative to the position when the budget was agreed last January — over the period 2009-2011.

The importance of waste management must not be underestimated. We are obliged to meet statutory targets to reduce the impact of our waste. By 2020, 50% of our household waste must be recycled, and the amount of biological municipal waste going to landfill must be reduced to 35% of that produced in 1995. Those targets will not only be challenging to us over the next decade, there are obligatory intermediate milestones to be met in 2010 and 2013, which will be used to indicate that we are moving in the right direction to meet the goals set for 2020.

The three waste partnership groups have told the Committee that there is a long and complex road ahead to establish the structures and policies necessary for the North to meet those waste management commitments. It is essential that reassurance is given that the necessary funding will be available in the next budgetary period in order to facilitate that. Without it, we will create difficulties for our local councils, which are responsible for waste management; for our citizens, who are trying to deal with their own waste, and for the long-term financial position of the North should penalties emanate from Europe for failure to comply with the EU waste directives.

My Committee has also scrutinised the emerging pressures identified in the strategic stocktake by the Department of the Environment. The inescapable requirements of just over £11 million for a range of issues were deemed to be necessary and were supported by members. The Committee believes that the reallocation of the Department's underspend is very unfortunate, and should have been avoided.

The Committee urges the Minister of Finance and Personnel to recognise the importance of reinstating the necessary funding in the next budgeting period. It supports the Department in the recognition of the emerging pressures of £11 million and accepts those as valid and necessary.

I will now speak in my capacity as a constituency MLA. The Executive, as a responsible Government, must start to prove themselves by supporting increased investment in our construction industry. We are experiencing growing homelessness and Housing Executive maintenance needs. There is a growing need also for increased investment in newbuilds. We need to ensure that people, many of whom are living in inadequate housing at the moment, have proper and decent homes, and that there are proper maintenance

budgets. We need to get people, many of whom are now unemployed for the first time, back into work.

Mr A Maginness: I have listened very carefully to what the Member has said about housing in particular. Does he agree that, over the next two years, there will be a shortfall in the region of £200 million in the housing budget? Does he also agree that it is therefore necessary that the Budget be revisited and that there should be a major reprioritisation of the Budget objectives?

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I agree with my colleague: it is a no-brainer. Everybody — from those in the various construction organisations, to tradesmen, suppliers or builders' merchants — is saying the same thing to us.

A less difficult way to kick-start any economy is to invest in construction and maintenance. People are crying out for housing and for work. Let us make the investment and get back to basics by doing what any other Government would do, which is to respond immediately, albeit in a relatively small measure in world economic terms. If that starts the process of bringing people — be it those now doing part-time work, claiming jobseeker's allowance, or forced to take sick leave — back into meaningful full-time work, as they understand it and see as traditional, it is not only the right thing to do economically, it is the right thing to do morally.

Mr Paisley Jnr: We are all familiar with the story of the farmer who, when stopped by a group of tourists and asked for directions, said, "Well, if I were you, I would not start from here." The Minister of Finance and Personnel probably feels like that farmer; if he wanted to try to put Northern Ireland on a particular economic footing, he would not choose to start with the hand that he was dealt. Rather, he would choose to start with a clean slate and from a better economic basis.

Let us be clear; absolutely no one predicted the economic downturn — no one in the House and no one in the Executive, least of all the Minister for Social Development. That is what amazes me about the points that have been made by the party opposite; those Members claim that we could find a way out of the crisis in Northern Ireland if only we had a different Budget settlement. The fact is that the Minister for Social Development helped to negotiate the Budget; she endorsed it at Executive level, in private conversations around the table; and she walked into the Lobby in support of it.

That is why we have an economic plan for the next three years that will allow us to take on board a strategy that will help Northern Ireland get from where it is to where it wants to be. Everyone accepts that the Finance

Minister's room for manoeuvre is limited; however, I commend the excellent job that is being done.

Some of the contributions to economic debates in the House have been very good. Unfortunately, however, there are some Members who persist in scoring cheap points or in defending their Minister as the only person who can sort out all the problems in Northern Ireland — that is rather juvenile. I am a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and, week in, week out, instead of hearing a strategic argument to resolve Northern Ireland's problems, I hear a single argument — a mantra — from the SDLP: build social housing. In other words, give Margaret Ritchie more money, because she mismanaged the money that she had. That is the bottom line, and that is all that we hear from the SDLP.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No.

Mr Pengelly came to the Committee for Finance and Personnel last week, and I will quote his words from the Hansard report, instead of the paraphrased remarks that some Members have given us. He said:

“the Budget ... was agreed by the Executive and approved by the Assembly in January ... The downturn in the market, when it happened, took us all by surprise. With the benefit of hindsight, most people can offer a full and detailed articulation of the whys and wherefores of a situation.”

I think that we see that to be true today. Everyone on the other side of the House has, with hindsight, the answer to resolving the situation. The problem is that they did not predict it, or support the policies, at the time.

Now, at a time of crisis, they panic. The only way out, they claim, is to renegotiate the entire Budget. How stupid would that be for the Health Service, and for every other Government service? The only thing that the SDLP wants to do is build social houses. With a trowel in one hand and a brick in the other, Minister Margaret will solve the problems of the world. I almost believe that all it would take to fix the damage to the ozone layer would be for Margaret Ritchie to write to Al Gore and suggest building social housing. She is Minister Habitat for Humanity; the Minister of building houses to solve problems. We need more than the SDLP's sub-kindergarten approach to those matters.

I hope that that approach will start to be taken, rather than the nonsense that has been talked about.

Last week, I heard commentators run away with themselves and say that there is a billion-pound black hole in the economy. That characterisation of our Budget is nothing short of a black lie, because there is no such black hole. A strategy is in place to address the problems in the economy, and it must not be forgotten that the total amount of capital expenditure and investment this year will be around £1.5 billion. That is the largest

amount in a single year in the history of Northern Ireland. Some of us are trying to see that the economic problems are addressed, and addressed properly.

If a black hole exists in any economy, it is south of the border, where the Celtic tiger has become the Celtic pussycat. In the weeks ahead, I hope that more people come from the South to spend their money in our economy and on driving our country forward.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. The main purpose of the strategic stocktake was to assess the overall financial position in advance of the 2009-2010 in-year monitoring process. It considered several issues, including departmental progress against action plans, the identification of reduced requirements, and emerging pressures for the next two years. Over the past few weeks, some of those issues have been discussed in the Assembly. The need for financial and project management in Departments, which would help them to meet their targets, has been discussed.

The Assembly has also discussed the need for Departments to identify the reduced requirements early, in order to ensure that the end-of-year accumulation can be redirected and spent on other priorities. The economic downturn and the mounting pressures on end-year flexibility are elements of concern, and, as was said earlier, a big pot of money is not available. Therefore, the money that is available must be used as carefully as possible, and we must identify where to prioritise the money — collectively.

No Member can fail to have been affected by the current economic downturn, the sharp rise in unemployment and the number of businesses that has had to close or go into receivership. Although it must be recognised that that big pot of money is not available, people still have expectations of the Assembly to deliver the changes that are necessary to try to offset some of the difficulties that they are experiencing.

Sinn Féin believes that the block grant from the British Government is inadequate, and, in the context of that financial shortfall and in the absence of a developed all-island economy, we will continue to carry the burden of trying to match limited resources with the increasing needs of people until we have control over our own fiscal powers.

The recent injection of public money to steady the banks has not cascaded to businesses or the consumer. Some banks are now under public ownership, and many others are being supported by millions of pounds of public money. I know that some Members have met representatives from the banks to try challenge that, and that must continue. Money is still not readily available, particularly for businesses.

The Executive have already set out their commitment to seek to maximise social and employment opportunities for everyone, particularly through their public-procurement process. That is an essential part of the investment strategy, because it is now more important than ever that that opportunity be grasped. Existing jobs must be secured, and new jobs must be created for the people who have lost theirs. Public procurement in works, services and goods, equality of opportunity and value for money can all be incorporated into contracts to meet conditions, including good wages and employment of apprentices. That will contribute to local economic welfare and growth.

Small and medium-sized enterprises account for almost 99% of businesses in the North, yet almost three quarters of them, including those from the social-economy sector, do not even apply for public-procurement contracts, because they feel that the tendering stage of the process is stacked against them and weighted firmly in favour of larger companies. An opportunity exists to develop on that. The advancement of capital-build projects for which Departments have already budgeted must also be a priority.

During this debate, and during debates over the past week, it has become clear that some parties are adopting narrow party political agendas, as well as a silo mentality in which Ministers seek to protect their party's interests.

In doing so, they abdicate their collective responsibilities as part of the Executive — an approach that has already been evidenced in the House by the behaviour of Ministers whose parties have publicly adopted oppositional roles. Other Ministers, however, set a good example by demonstrating that, if the political will, leadership and skills exist, it is possible to achieve results outside their party constraints.

3.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member aware that the Minister of Education has, to date, failed to budget for teacher redundancies, to the extent of £20 million? That means that the education and library boards, as the compensating authorities for teachers in controlled and maintained schools, do not have the resources to facilitate redundancies. If those resources are not secured, schools will be plunged into crisis, and teachers will face the spectre of unplanned, compulsory redundancy, with all the consequent disruption to schools. Is that the type of good management to which the Member refers?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That was quite a long intervention. The Member can have an extra minute. However, I encourage Members to keep their interventions short.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for his intervention in the form of a prepared speech. However, Ministers must not be allowed to abdicate their responsibilities by insisting that they simply do

not have enough money. We face many tough choices, and unless we develop greater fiscal freedom and strengthen the local economy, many difficulties lie ahead. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: Much criticism has been levelled in the debate at my party over its stance on the strategic stocktake, which is little more than a descriptive exercise. It certainly has no serious prescriptive element. On that basis alone, it is right and proper to criticise that particular exercise by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Furthermore, none of us in the Chamber could have predicted the radical change in economic and financial circumstances that has taken place since the Assembly approved the original three-year Budget.

We regard our position as being very reasonable. First, I reiterate that we, quite rightly, opposed the Budget for reasons that we outlined at the time. Secondly, it contained various flaws, but one of the main criticisms of the Budget was that it was based on the realisation of capital assets. We do not resile from that position. However, even were we to do so — we will not — it remains necessary to revisit the Budget.

I cannot think of any other legislature on these islands or in Europe that does not have an annual Budget process. It is most unusual and abnormal not to have such a process. I say to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and to colleagues in other parties, that, sooner or later, we will revisit the Budget, because of the dire economic and financial circumstances in which we find ourselves.

On 23 January, Mr John Armstrong of the Construction Employers Federation warned that we are facing a serious crisis. He stated that the depth of that crisis could be measured by the fact that, in all probability, there will be 30,000 people unemployed in the construction industry by the summer.

Mr McGlone: Mr Paisley Jnr, in an attack on my colleague Margaret Ritchie for daring to care about people who are homeless, for daring to care about those 30,000 people potentially out of work — *[Interruption.]* — Mr Paisley Jnr finds the matter enjoyable and laughable, which is disgraceful. He should apologise to homeless people and to people who face potential unemployment. His behaviour in the Chamber is an utter disgrace.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must reiterate what I said to Mr Bradley. The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the timely intervention by my good friend Mr McGlone.

Mr Armstrong maintains that 30,000 construction workers will be unemployed by summer 2009. He has said on behalf of his organisation that the Government must take immediate action, which he characterises as “urgent and unprecedented intervention”, which is required to safeguard the industry.

If people do not accept my party’s critical view of the housing sector and, indeed, of the wider construction sector, I urge them to listen to the views of Mr Armstrong and the Construction Employers Federation, which is clear and which happens to correspond closely with the view that the SDLP has expressed in the Chamber during the past several months.

My party has taken soundings from people throughout the North of Ireland. We have listened to builders, tradesmen, suppliers, engineers and professional people who are involved in the construction industry. They are crying out for Government intervention — whether it be in Derry, Fermanagh, Armagh, mid Ulster, or anywhere in Northern Ireland. They want to see significant investment in social housing. That is the demand from people who know what is required to revive the economy and for society to climb out of the depths of recession.

In conclusion, the old Budget must be revisited. The Assembly cannot rely on Micawber’s approach and hope that something will turn up. The fact is that action is required and that the Budget process must be revisited in a radical way. If people do not believe me and my party colleagues, they must listen to the Construction Employers Federation.

Mr B McCrea: The Assembly has been asked to examine budgets and identify pressures in order to determine whether there is a problem. When I examine the stocktake, I see that there is severe pressure on the Department of Education in particular. I accept that the material is published and that people are aware of it. Nevertheless, all Departments have pressures. In respect of the Department of Education, there is pressure of £50 million during the coming year, and £45 million next year. There are also difficulties with phasing capital expenditure.

As the Minister of Finance and Personnel pointed out in his statement, the key point is that resources are tight and if the Assembly cannot persuade the Prime Minister or the Chancellor to honour the CSR, there will be serious problems. There are serious problems already. Services are at risk if money cannot be found. I understand that every other Department has similar pressures. I understand that instead of getting £80 million from land sales in 2008, DSD received only £10 million, and will receive only £10 million in 2009. I understand that there is pressure throughout Departments. However, many of the figures in the Department of Education’s budget are inescapable.

They relate to reviews of job evaluations, pensions, and so on. That money must be found — if it is not, it will mean cuts in services.

I am particularly concerned about provisions for pensions and early voluntary redundancy. Previously, around £60 million was paid in respect of those provisions. That figure is now around £20 million. If teachers cannot be incentivised to take voluntary redundancy, efficiency savings of 3% will not be made.

Worse than that, the latest census figures tell us that pupil numbers have not fallen as we had thought. Indeed, those figures are higher than we thought, meaning that we will not be able to get rid of the teachers who want to go — we will certainly not be able to pay them. In considering the challenges that face us, the education and skills authority budget proposals factor in a wage inflation of 25% over a three-year period, albeit in only a small part of the education budget. That 25% figure reflects the reality, but it is only 2% in our budget in the CSR.

There are other issues that I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be able to address. One of those concerns the much-touted problems that are associated with the framework arrangements, the cost of which I understand to be some £4 million. Does the Department of Education have the authority to spend that amount? Will it be left with the Department of Education, or will it be taken on by the entire Executive? Significant problems will arise if that does not happen.

I want a co-ordinated response to the economic crisis facing us all; that is the real issue that needs to be tackled. It is right and proper that we look at our figures, and I have done that. However, I think that the long-term future of our society depends on our education system. I join other Members in saying that we must find a way of increasing funding for schools in the primary sector. All Members have agreed on that point.

Yet, as Mr Hamilton rightly pointed out in his introductory remarks, if more is to be spent in a particular area, a decision has to be made about which Department that money should be taken from. It is the Executive’s corporate and collective responsibility to sit down and work out —

Mr Storey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: I am quite happy to take an intervention from Mr Storey if he wishes to make one.

Mr Storey: When it comes to the Ulster Unionist Party, my mathematics is sometimes a wee bit confused. Is the Member talking about a four-party mandatory coalition or the two-party coalition that was referred to earlier? How does the Ulster Unionist Party pick and choose when there is collective responsibility?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be given an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: I am glad that Mr Storey highlighted that point. I call it as I see it: there is no four-party coalition; there is a two-party coalition in which the two parties carve up whatever it is that they want to do. I can speak only for our party, but we are prepared to be responsible and to work collectively with the Member's party in order to tackle the problems facing all the people of Northern Ireland. We need to find a way out of this mess, and party-political bickering is not the way to proceed. *[Interruption.]*

That response merely exemplifies my point; those Members are not listening carefully to what I have to say. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education should know about the pressures that exist, and he will assess them and be as concerned as I am about whether we will be able to balance the budget. I do not think that we will be able to do that. I am not pointing the finger of blame at anyone, because we find ourselves in a dire situation.

I bring these matters to the attention of the Minister of Finance and Personnel with due respect and humility, and I ask whether we can find some way of working through the problems collectively. As I have said in the past, we will work with him, but we need to take corporate and collective responsibility. That is not an unreasonable position to take.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): In order to ensure that the Deputy Speaker does not reprimand me for things that I may say later, I will make the point that I will make only the first part of my speech in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

I will inform the House of the position that the Department of Education registered in the stocktake exercise. A total of £60 million of resource pressures were identified for 2009-2010, and some £50 million of resource pressures were identified for 2010-11. The Department also registered a capital bid of £90 million for the schools capital programme for 2010-11.

In late November 2008, the Committee received a briefing from senior departmental officials that detailed those pressures, and we questioned officials again at last week's Committee meeting.

The details of the bids have been posted on the Committee's website should Members wish to consider and examine the make-up of those significant budget pressures.

3.45 pm

As Basil McCrea said, key resource pressures arise from the cost of job evaluations, pay reviews, teacher pensions and redundancy costs, and rises in energy and utility costs, which are all classified as inescapable

pressures. A bid to address a shortfall in the extended schools programme is also included. The Committee is concerned that such pressures need to be met but recognises the need to explore fully the scope to reprioritise spending within the £2 billion education budget.

I will outline an example of an initiative that is under way, for which the Committee pressed the Department during the second half of 2008. It should bring £27 million into mainstream funding to support primary schools from April 2009. Funding support for the new curriculum under the Making a Good Start scheme and foundation-stage funding together with funding for primary-teaching principals' release time should be fully delegated to primary schools under the common funding formula allocations rather than being earmarked budgets. That will allow primary-school principals and boards of governors to use their funds more flexibly in line with their needs and priorities and will reduce the Department's administration costs.

The Department and the Minister must proactively explore such initiatives and innovations on the use of finite education resources. The Committee for Education will continue to scrutinise the education budget through its processes and through the system that the Committee has established and will press for ways to use education funds more effectively and efficiently.

The Committee was alarmed to find a £90 million shortfall — or long fall, depending on how one interprets it — in the capital budget for 2010-11, which, apparently, goes back to the Budget settlement of 2007. The Committee was told that some projects, particularly PPP projects, will have to be slowed down or halted. We will question officials on the implications of that matter at next week's Committee meeting.

I will now speak as a Member of the House rather than as Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments on whether it is not regrettable that the three Departments that did not identify, reprioritise or assist in releasing additional resources during the exercise that we have undertaken in recent weeks and months were the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development? It is worth noting that the Ministers of those three Departments are members of the same party.

Mr D Bradley: The Minister of Education claims to be the champion of the socially disadvantaged. Does the Member agree that her handling of the budget for the extended schools programme will result in a £6.4 million shortfall in that budget this year, and that that will lead to a significant loss of momentum in that programme and occasion a stop-go approach that will not serve the socially disadvantaged very well?

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

Mr Storey: The Member has identified another problem with how the Department and the Minister address those particular needs. Everyone talks about priorities and the importance of placing children — in an education context — at the centre of all that we do. However, the Department's priorities do not always reflect that notion. The Committee has accepted — and, as a Member, I accept it, too — that there are inescapable pressures. However, if we are unable to prioritise a £2 billion budget in order to deliver for extended schools and all the needs of our education system, then that surely questions the Minister's ability, on that issue and on many others, to do the job that she was elected to do?

Mr Weir: As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I welcome today's debate. Although a lot of what has been heard today has been heard before, some novel remarks have been made. I was particularly taken by Stephen Farry's acknowledgement that the decision on the deferral of water rates may even have been the right decision. At the very least that is progress on behalf of the Alliance Party.

I welcome the debate because I think that a strategic stocktake is the way forward. Unlike the amateur astronomers in the Assembly and the media, who seem to be finding black holes around every corner, I think that, although the finances are very tight, they have been soundly handled by the Finance Minister. There are undoubtedly issues in the Departments over how that has been handled, as has been indicated on a number of occasions, and those are under ongoing examination by the various departmental Committees. However, given the tight financial circumstances, it is right that we should have a sharp, focused debate. That is why a strategic stocktake is the right way forward.

There have been proposals from Mr McNarry, Mr Maginness and others, who have spoken of the legal advice and the inappropriate nature of the process. I have a twofold reply. First, in regard to the issue of legal advice, for all that that has been brought up, there has not been any attempt at a legal challenge to the process, and that is because the process is utterly robust in that respect, and any legal challenges would be without foundation. Secondly, on the fundamental issue as to whether there should be a stocktake or a Budget process, there is an element of navel-gazing with some in the Assembly, which focuses —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will in a moment.

That navel-gazing focuses on process above delivery and examination of the best way forward.

Mr B McCrea: Although I am broadly supportive of what the Member says, there are certain technical problems with the process. In relation to education, we rely upon in-year monitoring to fund extended schools, but the education and library boards need to make decisions now. There must be some way of providing reassurance that we can protect vulnerable programmes; there must be a way of dealing with that.

Mr Weir: We should always be looking at how we protect vulnerable programmes. The point I am making is that, from a process point of view, there are better ways in which the money available to the Department of Education could have been spent. The point is that if we are hung up on the process, and the issue of whether there is a Budget or a strategic stocktake, we miss the real point.

In relation to the remarks made by Mr McNarry, I was slightly perplexed — not for the first time — by the Ulster Unionists. When the Minister made a statement last week, it seemed that some were welcoming the direction to be taken, and yet Mr McNarry now says that we are on the wrong track. The somewhat schizophrenic attitude of the Ulster Unionists is perhaps not surprising, given the fact that Mr McNarry's attitude seems to be "spend, spend, spend", whereas the attitude of his Conservative overlords is "cut, cut, cut". We have to see where the balance lies.

Mr O'Loan reflected the general obsession of the SDLP with social housing as a means to solve all ills in our society, but when pressed, could offer no solution as to where the money should come for that.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, briefly.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Regardless of the SDLP's view of social housing, will the Member comment on the Construction Employers Federation's grave concern about investment in social housing and other infrastructure?

Mr Weir: The Executive have committed to hundreds of millions of pounds worth of construction, which goes beyond social housing. That includes record amounts on hospitals, schools and roads. There is therefore a strong commitment, and I am sure that the Minister will deal with that in more detail. The Member's party has this narrow obsession with social housing. There would be more sympathy for the Minister for Social Development were it not for the fact that, in the most recent monitoring round, her Department was allocated an additional £20 million, yet on a number of occasions she has been unable to spend her budget in the first place.

Mr O'Loan said that the Finance Minister was no Shackleton. I am a great admirer of Ernest Shackleton — not least because of the fact that he stood as a

unionist candidate in Scotland in the early 1900s. Despite his many qualities, however, he failed in his objective to reach the South Pole on his first expedition; his ship sank on his second expedition; and he died before his third expedition began its work. We should not emulate that example.

I consider our Minister to be much more like Roald Amundsen — professionally dealing with a range of challenging circumstances, and overcoming those odds and delivering. The strategic stocktake is an important and worthwhile exercise for the Executive. There has been change, and there is a commitment to capital investment. I commend the work that has been done, and I welcome today's debate.

Ms Lo: A key priority for the Department for Social Development is building social housing to solve the serious problem of housing shortage. There is no doubt that we have a huge housing need — nearly 40,000 people are on the housing waiting list. The Housing Executive faces a dire shortfall in its building programme in this financial year. The target of building 1,500 new homes is unlikely to be met; the Housing Executive proposes to build only 400 new homes at the start of the next financial year — April 2009.

Approximately one third of the Housing Executive's spend is dependent on revenue from house and land sales — a system that is bound to be affected by economic fluctuations, of which we have very clearly seen evidence. The 2007 budget allocation was based on significant receipts from house and land sales for the Housing Executive programmes and for newbuilds. The forecast level of receipts was based on the trend of previous years during the economic and housing boom. They were, therefore, agreed before the recent downturn in property values and the credit crunch.

It is now projected that house and land sales that are required to fund Housing Executive programmes will drop by £60 million in 2009-2010 and £50 million in 2010-11. In addition, as a result of the economic downturn, there will be a shortfall of £55 million in 2009-2010 and £35 million in 2010-11 from land sales, housing association borrowing and contributions from developers that are earmarked for the newbuild programme.

Mr P Maskey: Does the Member agree that the £31 million that the Minister for Social Development gave back during the December monitoring round would have went some way towards addressing the problem that has just been outlined?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Lo: It would have helped, but a lot more is needed in order to meet the targets that were set in the Programme for Government.

The Executive endorsed the Department for Social Development's housing agenda. They saw it as a priority for all our communities. Housing is a big issue for all communities in Northern Ireland. The downturn in the economic situation here should not penalise those communities by not giving the Housing Executive the required allocation to build the necessary housing units.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member accept that there are innovative ways in which to assist the construction industry and other firms by allowing contracts that are already agreed to commence immediately, and by allowing payments to be deferred until the next financial year in order to safeguard employment and the stability of firms that are currently looking for work?

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that we are running out of time, I remind Members that interventions must be short.

Ms Lo: Absolutely; the construction industry is crying out for such measures, which would ensure that people do not lose their jobs left, right and centre. Therefore, I urge DFP to review its Budget allocation to the Department for Social Development, taking account of the severe slump in land- and house-sale receipts, so that the Department can meet its objective of providing decent homes for all citizens.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate on the strategic stocktake of the Executive's plans for the financial years 2009-2010 and 2010-11, following my statement to the Assembly last week.

Although I would hope that my ministerial colleagues and I already have a strong understanding of the issues and of the concerns of Northern Ireland people, and I believe that we have demonstrated that understanding, this debate is important because it provides the Executive with an opportunity to hear the Assembly's opinion about the public-expenditure position for the next two years. However, it is equally important that that is a two-way process and that Members now have a better understanding of the constraints facing Ministers. Moreover, I hope that they will take that into account when carrying out the vital role of scrutinising the public-expenditure plans of Departments.

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

In that context, I wish to record my gratitude to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its contribution to the strategic stocktake process, and, in particular, to the Chairperson of the Committee for tabling the take-note motion.

In addition, I am grateful for most Members' comments about the strategic stocktake, and I shall attempt to respond to as many as possible of the points that they raised. In doing so, I shall focus on several matters that were raised after my statement, and which some Members raised again today. Those matters relate to the desire — as Members put it — for a more fundamental review of the Executive's spending priorities, as well as the misunderstanding, and in some cases, the deliberate misunderstanding, that has arisen about the scale of the issues raised by Departments in their strategic-stocktake returns. However, I am glad that the fact is finally getting through to some Members that a strategic stocktake is precisely that — a stocktake of strategic issues, and not an in-year monitoring process. Therefore, I am grateful that, slowly but surely, some Members are beginning to catch on to what is happening.

I am, I suppose, caught between the argument, on the one hand, that the Executive are spending too much and, on the other, that too little has been allocated to Departments. Sometimes, one is tempted to say that perhaps one has got it just about right.

I shall begin with the review of spending allocations. No one could disagree — and Ian Paisley Jnr, in particular, emphasised the point — that circumstances have changed significantly since the Budget was agreed and that several Departments have been particularly affected by the downturn in the local property market.

With regard to the points raised concerning the Department for Social Development, we all recognise the importance of social housing to the people of Northern Ireland, as David Hilditch highlighted in his remarks a Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. That recognition is reflected in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland allocations for the next three years: £612 million is allocated for roads; £647 million is allocated to developing water infrastructure; £565 million will go to primary healthcare and hospital modernisation; and £855 million will go to schools and colleges.

I am sure that every Member will agree that those are substantial sums. For housing, however, the allocation is £925 million, and that is, I believe, testimony to the massive investment and priority that the Executive put on social housing in Northern Ireland, and anyone who says otherwise is simply not in command of the facts. However, that would come as no surprise to most of us who regularly follow these debates.

The proposal from the local commentator John Simpson for the Executive to increase their response to the economic downturn by up to £100 million was mentioned, and I have carefully considered that. Obviously, that is an important matter, and I have the

utmost respect for commentators. However, I feel that different conclusions would have been reached had people been fully aware of all the factors that lie behind the approach agreed by the Executive in the strategic stocktake.

Reference has been made to the £50 million to £100 million reallocation. I said it last week, and I repeat it today: if we are to have a fundamental review of the departmental allocations, and if Members want more money for a particular service or Department, they will have to state from which existing service the money should be taken. To be fair to Basil McCrea, he acknowledged as much in advance of making a plea for the Department of Education. I also heard a plea from Mr McGlone in relation to the Department of the Environment. Pleas were also made for the Department for Employment and Learning, and even more were made for the Department for Social Development.

We did not hear anything for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Basil McCrea talked about the collective nature of the Assembly. Almost half of the total expenditure has been allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. If we are going to reallocate resources, a primary source of those reallocated moneys would have to come out of the big-spending Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education.

When Members are making challenges, they say that these are matters for the Executive to resolve or that somebody else should come up with a solution. They never say that what they are actually advocating are cuts to, primarily, health and education services. Let them be honest and admit from where the money will come.

Later, I will talk about the work that is being done in those vital areas, but Members must remember that capital spending in those Departments is helping the construction industry. To cut money from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education would be to attack the construction industry as well as cutting health and education services.

Members need to be realistic in this debate and use some common sense. They must not adopt the immature position that, somehow, there is extra money out there. The money has to come from somewhere. The entire Budget has been allocated over a three-year period and with the Programme for Government, has been agreed unanimously in the Executive. There are no extra resources coming from Westminster; in fact, if anything, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are vying with each other to see who can make the greatest cuts. I heard what Mr McNarry said in the

debate, but, unfortunately, he is absent from the Chamber and will not hear my response to his contribution. He did not mention that his new party masters in the Conservative Party would, if they were in power, implement massive cuts in public expenditure in Northern Ireland and across Whitehall from April this year. Even greater cuts are planned by the Labour Party for 2010-11.

Let us have some realism in the debate. To blame everyone else and to refuse to take responsibility — as Mr McNarry does with regard to his Conservative colleagues and masters' approach to public expenditure — is the height of irresponsibility. There is no doubt, however, that that issue will come back to haunt him and others.

With regard to increasing the scale of the investment programme, I remind Members that the downturn in capital receipts has impacted on the whole Executive. However, we have to deliver on our ambitious plans. I mentioned the importance of the investment programme. We hear talk about intervening to help the construction industry — currently, there are seven major projects under construction in the Health Service. Back in December, we announced that £400 million worth of projects would come to the market before the end of the financial year, and that £115 million would be taken out of the frameworks to be allowed to be procured project by project — so ensuring that none of them would be stopped. We also ensured that the work of the Planning Service was being done more quickly as a result of performance and efficiency delivery unit working with the Department of the Environment.

There are plans for investment of £1.4 billion to £1.5 billion for this year, and that will rise to £1.7 billion next year and £2 billion the following year. That is £265 million in the Health Service towards the building of important health facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, Downe Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and in Portadown. From which of those areas in the Health Service — and the associated construction work — do the Members who propose that money be taken from one area and reallocated think that that money should be taken.

Let them tell us which of those health or road projects should be cut. Members talk about social housing being the only means of stimulating construction, but I had a meeting with the quarry producers the other day, and they identified road maintenance and development as the way forward.

A point was raised about referring to the opinions of expert commentators. The CBI's submission in October 2008 mentioned social housing, but also raised a host of other ways to stimulate the construction industry. All those issues are important, but they are all

competing demands. Members who made critical statements during the debate failed to suggest any solutions, other than wish lists based on the economics of fantasy rather than reality.

Members should look at what has been achieved: £127 million has been invested in the Belfast sewers project; £89 million in waste-water treatment projects; £83 million in four major projects in the Department for Employment and Learning, and £200 million in 14 projects being constructed by the education and library boards. Which of those projects should be halted? If the issue is to be addressed seriously, those questions must be answered.

Reference was made to a so-called black hole in the economy. Not long ago, the Assembly was being told about a £500 million black hole in this year's Budget. That has now disappeared and is no longer mentioned, because it was subsequently seen to be completely wrong.

Mr McNarry is not present to hear my response to his simply incredible allegations. The basic thrust of his argument was that it is fundamentally wrong to rely on in-year monitoring and overcommitments. He argued that taking such an approach is dangerous; other Members, although they were not explicit, hinted at that, too. However, on 15 December 2008, his colleague Mr Beggs, during the debate on the monitoring statement, said about me:

“that in extending belatedly the amount of overcommitment, he is reversing the decision of his predecessor and that he will be implementing one of the ideas that was suggested by the Ulster Unionist Party in its submission on the draft Budget”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p115, col 2*].

Mr McNarry is now criticising what his party colleague, on 15 December, praised as being part of the UUP's submission on the Budget.

Another idea that has disappeared down the black hole of Mr McNarry's imagination is the proposal that he made before Christmas for an equity release scheme. Members will recall that he produced, with a great fanfare, his idea that the Treasury would somehow give the Assembly an interest-free loan on the basis of valuing all its assets, and when prices subsequently rose, the Assembly could sell all its assets and pocket the difference. That proposal does not feature at all now; it was just another of Mr McNarry's typical crackpot schemes that he thinks up on the back of an envelope; none of them address the issues.

It is our sensible, logical and rational approach that is delivering the way forward. It seems that Mr McNarry has never heard of pressures; he needs to take a crash course in economics. The logic of his proposal to meet in-year pressures and reduced requirements, and the alternative to in-year monitoring, is to tell Departments that DFP will slice off 2%, 3% or 10% from their capital budgets and transfer the money into a central

fund. To ensure that every single demand for money would be met, DFP would then sit on that money until the Departments needed it. The inevitable outcome would be that, at the end of the year, DFP would have tens or hundreds of millions of pounds that were unspent, and it would have to give that money back to the Treasury.

The reason why we adopt the approach that we do, which has been tried and tested over the years, is because it means that Departments can continue to spend money, but, if in-year pressures emerge at the centre, any money that does not need to, or cannot, be spent, can be reallocated. If Members are saying that they want a fundamental review of the Budget, they must agree to put all the money on the table. As the amounts spent on education and health are by far the largest, that would, effectively, mean removing money from those two areas and reallocating it.

4.15 pm

We heard today that, when that starts to happen, not only will the Department for Social Development be in there but so will Mr Basil McCrea and others on behalf of the Department of Education. The Department for Employment and Learning and, no doubt, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will also have something to say. Mr McCrea said that a collective decision is needed. I would very much like to hear what the Minister of Health would have to say about any suggestion that his budget be cut. I would be interested to hear either the Minister for Social Development or the Minister of Education suggest that something in their budgets could be cut. However, I do not hear that suggestion from any Minister. All I hear is that budgets cannot be cut. Therefore, let us have a degree of realism.

As far as the investment strategy is concerned, the Executive have announced capital projects and investments throughout Northern Ireland — for schools, healthcare, hospitals, housing and the environment. We are spending 40% more than was spent in 2007-08. We are spending £1.4 billion to £1.5 billion this year. Under direct rule in 2003-04, that figure was £670 million. The Executive have been asked about what they are doing for the construction industry. We are already pumping in far more capital investment, which will help the construction industry, than was ever done under direct rule, and we are planning to do even more next year, when the value of capital expenditure will rise 6% or 7%. There will be even greater rises in the following year. Members must recognise all of that.

If I have time, I will deal with several other issues. Jennifer McCann raised the issues of fiscal powers in Northern Ireland and our receiving the block grant from the UK Treasury. It must be recognised that

Northern Ireland benefits significantly from being under the UK public-expenditure system. That is ever more illustrated when one looks at what is happening in the Irish Republic. I did not hear much reference in the debate to the glowing example of the Celtic tiger economy down South. If we were in the same position as the Irish Republic, we would have to make massive cuts to existing spending programmes. However, not one Member from the SDLP, or from Sinn Féin for that matter, cited the wonderful example of what the Irish Republic is doing with its economy. Significantly, not a single reference has been made to the Irish Republic or its handling of the economy, and that speaks volumes for our being under the UK public-expenditure system.

We heard the issue of annual Budgets raised again and again. When those Members talk to their ministerial colleagues, they will tell them that they want certainty on funding and more effective management of public services — at least that is what they tell us. That is reflected in the general UK approach to a three-year spending review. Northern Ireland is not unique in that respect.

One or two Members picked up on the more important emerging pressures, such as efficiencies that the Chancellor suggested in the pre-Budget report. It is important to note that in my recent discussions with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, we picked up on that issue, and there is much common ground on how we address that issue and other issues. I was struck by the large degree of commonality in our approach.

However, I, and, I hope, all Executive colleagues, recognise that we must continue to bear down strongly on the difficulties in the economy, and we must continue to help local businesses, local households, people and families at this difficult time. That is why we included support for families and businesses over the next three years, and that is why we decided to freeze domestic regional rates over the Budget period, marking a clear break from direct rule, when rates bills increased, on average, by around 10%. That is why we have taken measures to bring rate relief to senior citizens and vulnerable households, such as the lone pensioner allowance, the right to defer rate payments and the reduction in maximum capital values.

It is why we recently announced a package of £8 million over the next year to help local councils make up a deficit caused by a shortfall in rates revenue. It is why we have also taken measures to defer water charges for a further year. It is why I negotiated a £900 million financial package with the Prime Minister to meet the pressures of water charges, among other issues. It is why, just last December, we allocated extra money — £20 million — for social housing, and £10 million for health and social care services, as well as for a range of other issues as well. It is why we

addressed issues to help the construction industry, the Department of Agriculture, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Education. It is why we took the decision to bring in a small-business rates-relief scheme and to freeze business rates in real terms. It is why the Executive decided not to proceed with the direct rule policy of introducing industrial rating at the level on which the direct rule Administration had decided.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

Therefore, we will continue to work hard to deliver for businesses, households and hard-working families in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions and the Minister for setting out the context of, and the rationale behind, the strategic stocktake. The debate has generally been constructive and useful. Some 18 Members contributed, and they raised a number of issues. Members will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to give a blow-by-blow rehearsal of each contribution. However, like the Minister, I shall reflect on some of the key themes that emerged in the debate.

We heard different views from Members on the merits of the approach taken to the stocktake, and, in particular, on whether a new formal Budget process should be embarked on. On the one hand, the argument has been made that the changed economic climate warrants a reopening of the existing departmental allocations through the period up to 2011, with a formal process to realign and reprioritise resources to meet current pressures. The counter-argument is that given that there is no prospect at all of significant additional resources, the present focus should be on the delivery of the Executive's priorities, and on ensuring maximum impact from the finite resources that are available, with reallocations taking place through the in-year monitoring process. That view was underlined by the fact that no member of the Executive came forward to surrender elements of his or her budget. The Minister reiterated that point very powerfully. There was no identification of where resources could be taken from one budget to strengthen or develop another. That all means that we must deal with the resources that are available, through a collective approach by the Assembly and the Executive. That point was developed in discussions that my Committee had with senior officers of the Department of Finance and Personnel last week.

Opening the debate, the Deputy Chairperson explained that the Committee gave careful consideration

to the implications of the Executive's decision that the strategic stocktake would be undertaken in the context of the three-year budgetary process. That included a consideration as to whether the Committee should explore the legal position in that respect. The Committee eventually decided against that.

Today's debate and last week's ministerial statement represent part of the outcome from the Committee's deliberations on the matter and the representations that we made to the Minister, to which I believe he has responded. Those discussions were scheduled for the purpose of providing Assembly input into the overall strategic stocktake process. A further outcome was the co-ordinated submission to the stocktake, which the Committee compiled on behalf of the Statutory Committees.

At this point, it would, I believe, be useful to refer briefly, as did the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, to the terms of reference from the stocktake. They include a review of departmental progress against agreed plans; the identification of reduced requirements and emerging pressures for the next two years; and proposals for addressing pressures through adjustments to existing plans and priorities.

It is important to put on record that the Committee and departmental officials were very concerned that it would appear that some Departments, in their responses, had ignored or not fully addressed those terms of reference. The level of professionalism and competency is an ongoing concern for my Committee with regard to underspend, financial projections and project management, and that is an urgent requirement for departmental budgets. Whatever about economic downturns, there were already pressures for Departments. However, if we do not use the most efficient and effective delivery mechanisms, and measure progress throughout the year, we end up with the nonsense of end-of-year underspend and the surrender of money to the Treasury and to the end-of-year stocks — and, of course, we now face significant difficulties in accessing those stocks.

Several Members mentioned the plight of the local construction sector. In his response, the Minister set out in detail the action being taken. The Committee considered the measures that have already been agreed at Executive level as well as other possibilities. As Members know, the Executive have already taken steps to speed up the payment of invoices, thereby helping with cash flow for small and medium-sized enterprises. Public-procurement policy and practice can be re-examined to maximise the opportunity for local businesses. I raised that matter with the Minister at Question Time yesterday, and the Committee is engaged on an inquiry on that issue, which will hear the views of small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises.

The issue of greater flexibility has also been discussed with the Committee with regard to the interpretation or application of procedures in order to cut out unnecessary bureaucracy. As the Minister said, my Committee raised that issue with him with regard to the recent proposal from the Quarry Products Association. That proposal concerned bringing forward roads-maintenance schemes immediately in order to maintain and sustain work crews and workforces, and an agreement by association members to defer submitting invoices for work carried out until the incoming financial year. Although I am mindful of the importance of the accounting rules, the Department should look for flexibility — if necessary, by the Minister raising the issue through urgent direct negotiations with the Treasury — so that the Executive can respond positively to such proposals in the context of the exceptionally difficult economic circumstances.

I also hope that DFP opens up negotiations with the Treasury to enable the Executive further to increase capital spending to boost the building industry. The Committee has been told how Treasury rules prevent the Executive from bringing forward capital spend from one year to the next, despite a three-year CSR settlement being in place. However, it was mentioned in the debate that the Scottish Government have brought forward £230 million of capital projects into 2009-2010, which demonstrates flexibility being explored to the optimum. There is also a question as to whether additional borrowing powers can be accessed in these circumstances, on which a collective judgement would be helpful.

In short, these are exceptional economic circumstances, which require exceptional responses, and I hope that the Minister proactively pursues all available options further to support our local construction industry.

Some Members addressed the issue of competing budgetary demands and the funding gaps caused by what can be best described as the aspirational bids that were made by some Departments and Ministers.

4.30 pm

The Minister dealt quite powerfully with the question of what can be done, as opposed to marking out in an aspirational way what the Departments would like to do. There is the issue of capacity and of finite resource. It has been pointed out that, for many years, Departments have had a track record of putting forward unrealistic bids without identifying how they will be met from within existing departmental allocations. Indeed, they may not have any real expectation of them being met in the final analysis. DFP officials, in their evidence to the Committee, agreed with that.

Members have made cases for priority in individual departmental portfolios. That is inevitable, even in the tenor of this afternoon's discussion. It is obvious that competing or partisan positions would inevitably be presented. However, we heard arguments for additional resourcing for social housing, enhanced skilling and retraining, healthcare, schools capital projects, the construction sector and waste management.

Leaving aside the partisan element, those are priorities for the Assembly and the Executive, and the real issue is how the competing demands can be prioritised and funded. We should all recognise that the present funding arrangements under the Barnett formula — coupled with very limited powers available to raise revenue, except from rates — means that there is a limited pot of money to go around, and constraints exist on the Executive's ability to generate additional or new finances.

The allocations received under the Barnett formula do not take account of our local needs. All parties have made that point from time to time, and, in fairness, Ministers have also made it. Therefore, we have to divide the cake as equitably as possible, and we have to take account of existing pressures. Hence, there is a need to prioritise our spend, to continually raise the performance of the public sector, and to maximise the impact on the value for money to be achieved from the available resources.

The Minister pointed out that overall the level of resources available over the next two years is expected to reduce, rather than increase, as a consequence. However, Departments and Ministers are making bids for significant and unrealistic sums of additional spend, which raises the question of whether people have grasped the value of having carefully thought out and costed Budget proposals in the first instance, and, secondly, in terms of the strategic stocktake, taken account of changing circumstances, economically and otherwise.

The role of Committees and the wider Assembly in actively scrutinising in-year departmental expenditure, including efficiency delivery plans and investment delivery plans, continues to take on more significance every day in the current climate.

We should be mindful that Departments have considerable scope to reallocate resources within their existing baselines to meet new and emerging pressures. Again, Committees have an emerging role — which was there all along, but it is now coming sharply into focus — to ensure that Departments are actively pursuing it. Committees are proactively examining the Departments' activity in that regard and setting out the priorities for the Departments, which, in effect, represent a mature and considered response to existing circumstances.

The fact that many pressures declared by Departments for 2009 must be dealt with in subsequent monitoring rounds provides the opportunity for the Executive to consider the importance of the monitoring round system. Some Members were critical, but I did not hear proposals about how that could be improved. There are four such monitoring rounds in any 12-month period. It is possible that there might be a more focused approach if there were fewer rounds, because some of the earlier rounds are, in fact, just a numbers game.

There is no realistic possibility of either definitive patterns of underspend emerging that would be of assistance, or of any Department giving up resources in the earlier part of a financial year. It might be more productive if we were to reduce our expectations and ensure that we have a much more transparent and accountable approach to the issue of the monitoring round process. In the current circumstances that might take on even more significance, given that the global economic downturn will continue to affect us for the next few years.

The severity of the economic downturn surprised many economists and commentators, including, with all due respect, John Simpson. That means that the Executive are now faced with the challenge of achieving targets in an environment that is markedly different from that which existed when the Programme for Government and the investment strategy were agreed.

I take some reassurance from what the Minister said today and what senior departmental officials are telling us about the strategic investment programme. Completing that programme will be a difficult, but not impossible, task. Those Members who take the approach that a huge black hole is opening up are, perhaps, not fully exploring the substantial power over expenditure that is available to the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Given the restricted Budget, let us work together, support each other and allow all Departments to produce a spending programme that will sustain our local economy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Executive's budget position for 2009/10 and 2010/11, in the context of the strategic stocktake as conveyed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the statement on 20 January 2009.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Shared Future

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

Dr Farry: I beg to move

That this Assembly states its concern at the failure of the Office of the First and deputy First Minister to meet its own deadlines for the publication of a draft strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, incorporating the Racial Equality Strategy; expresses its concern at the marginalisation of the existing Shared Future Framework and Action Plan and the resultant absence of a clear policy on community relations; and demands that the Department urgently brings forward detailed proposals for addressing the continued problems and consequences arising from division and segregation.

I shall begin by declaring an interest as a member of the Community Relations Council (CRC). My colleagues and I are happy to accept the SDLP amendment.

The motion encapsulates the frustration that is growing in many quarters of the House — though not as many as I would like, given the attendance of some parties in particular — and in wider society, about the absence of a credible policy for community relations, good relations or a shared future, call it what one will, in Northern Ireland. That absence is growing and is becoming embarrassing. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has given us a litany of promises about when we can expect a draft strategy to be published for consultation, never mind a finalised policy document. Those promises keep falling, and the gap is widening.

We can all speculate as to why that may be, and we can come up with different theories, such as the differences between the parties that occupy the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or, indeed, major issues of substance. It is to be hoped that the reasons for the delay can be properly elaborated on by Members as the debate continues.

In some respects, CSI (cohesion, sharing and integration) may be an appropriate acronym for the draft strategy, because the way things are going, we might need a crime scene investigator to find it.

A Member: Was that a joke?

Dr Farry: If the Member wants to laugh, he can.

The question of whether we should have a policy for community relations in Northern Ireland is something that we must face up to.

This is not a luxury that we can choose to have; it is not an optional extra. It should be central to any consideration of the future in Northern Ireland. The Executive talk of prioritising the economy, and there are many questions as to whether their actions match their rhetoric. We will judge them on that commitment. However, one cannot grow the economy in Northern Ireland without considering a shared future. Similarly, it is difficult to build and consolidate a shared future unless you have a growing and prosperous society. Those two aspects of policy go hand in hand; that is the incentive for the Executive to get on and produce something.

This delay is not new to devolved government; it is a paradox of Northern Ireland community relations policy that most progress has occurred under direct rule. That is something of which the Assembly should be ashamed. Ultimately, we have responsibility for the nature of our society and should not rely upon a Government accountable to people outside Northern Ireland to produce solid policy consequences. We must face up to that reality. A Shared Future stalled under the first mandate of the Assembly; only when suspension occurred in 2002 did action and documents follow. With the restoration of devolution, a Shared Future and the action plan were sidelined by the incoming Executive, which promised to produce their own policy, which they have called cohesion, sharing and integration.

I have no difficulty whatsoever with a local devolved Administration, particularly when different parties come in, taking on lead responsibility and producing their own alternative strategy in which they have a greater sense of ownership. That is their prerogative, and we respect it. However, we cannot respect a failure to produce. A Shared Future was a good strategy, though it may not have been perfect. If the Executive want to try to improve upon it, we will welcome anything along those lines that they produce — but, yet again, there is a vacuum.

The rationale for having a policy on community relations or good relations is perfectly clear. Continued divisions in our society, the problems of sectarianism and other forms of prejudice, and the ingrained patterns of segregation all carry major costs that we have to bear. They affect us all. None of us can isolate ourselves from those problems. There are major financial implications, but I will not go back over that territory. There are also major economic considerations.

Divisions cause problems for labour market mobility, deter inward investment and affect where investment goes in Northern Ireland once we manage to attract it. We need to face up to those problems. Segregation has major human and social implications; one has only to look at the area of education, where there is not only a cost, but an opportunity cost which

arises when children of different backgrounds are denied the opportunity to mix with one another.

It is no coincidence that the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland that suffer most acutely from poverty are those that are most segregated. When we talk of dealing with poverty in the Assembly, let us look at segregation and the impact that it has.

Of course, we cannot forget the environment. Divisions impact upon the nature of our local environment. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has proven that divisions lead to a heavier carbon footprint in Northern Ireland. If we are to tackle climate change, we must address the divisions and build a shared future.

From that analysis, it is clear that community relations cuts across all aspects of government and cannot be placed in a small silo. Things may be getting better; there are indications from across the board that people from different backgrounds are more willing to mix, share and integrate from one another. We are also becoming a much more diverse society, and that is something that we should warmly welcome. The diversity that is coming to Northern Ireland enriches us all, and we stand to benefit from it. A well-known academic Richard Florida points out that cities and regions that are able to attract a diverse population are better able to nurture creativity and, therefore, greater prosperity. That should put in context the remarks made by one member of the Executive over the weekend.

4.45 pm

At the same time, we must realise that many people in Northern Ireland are missing out on the opportunities that are available to others. There is a real danger of a two-speed Northern Ireland emerging — one in which an underclass is marginalised and lives in a ghettoised environment and, consequently, misses out on opportunities. That situation is perhaps most acute in our two main cities, Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. However, it is also a problem in rural communities. A very good report that was produced by Katy Radford, among others, illustrates that situation extremely well.

Looking to the future, obviously we want the draft strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration to be published as quickly as possible so that consultation can get under way, because it will take some time for the policy to be put in place.

However, we are also concerned about what will be included in the strategy. It is important that we do not slip backwards from 'A Shared Future'. That document was good in the sense that it recognised that "separate but equal" was not a viable way forward and that benign apartheid is a fallacy. It also recognised the importance of cross-cutting actions among

Departments and that community relations cannot be held in the silo of OFMDFM only. There are fears, however, that the draft strategy might create a situation in which we slip back to those ways and in which community relations goes back into the silo of OFMDFM, because no real burden is placed on the other Departments.

On one hand, more money will be made available in departmental budgets for community relations; however, OFMDFM will have control over that. Therefore, other Departments, such as the Department of Education, will not be under pressure to introduce their own policy initiatives.

The SDLP's amendment focuses on the issue of housing. I pay tribute to the work of DSD. At present, it is perhaps the only Department that is moving matters forward and trying to build a shared future, particularly at the housing level by taking forward shared-future housing initiatives and examining the number of the urban regeneration programmes.

However, a major problem exists with the way in which the Housing Executive approaches mixed housing. That must be exposed and challenged. The Housing Executive's policy is to allow people to choose whether they live in a mixed area or a single-identity area. On the face of it, that may seem perfectly benign to some people.

However, the implications of that policy are not benign, because single-identity areas will have to be maintained, thereby denying people the ability to live where they wish. I do not believe that that is a tolerable way forward. Certainly, if that policy were based on race, as opposed to religion, it would be condemned internationally. Although I welcome the amendment, the matter of mixed housing is one that the Minister for Social Development and her Department must address.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and further calls for these detailed proposals to be fully budgeted and to recognise the potential of social and affordable housing initiatives aimed at tackling sectarianism, promoting reconciliation and advancing the creation of a shared and integrated society.”

I acknowledge the presence of junior Minister Kelly in the Chamber this afternoon. It is much appreciated that at least one member of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is present for this debate. Given junior Minister Donaldson's concurrence with the comments that Minister Wilson made at the weekend, he, too, ought to be here to hear the content of this debate.

During an earlier debate, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said robustly that no ideas were being suggested as to where cuts could be made. If he were to examine the 'Cost of Division' report — which was

published but subsequently binned by members of Sinn Féin at the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — he would find that Northern Ireland, at its upper limit, spends an additional £1.5 billion per annum on a per capita basis on its public services. That includes direct costs and costs arising from duplication.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon all Ministers in the Executive to examine the issues of sectarianism and how we might tackle the biggest challenge that continues to face our society — racism — which has become an unfortunate trend in Northern Ireland now that it is more diverse in nature. That cannot be left unsaid.

It is most regrettable that, since April 2008, Members, including Mr Molloy, Mr Dallat, Dr Farry and me, as well as the Committee, have been told that OFMDFM's programme for cohesion, sharing and integration will be with us shortly.

We were told that the strategy was at an advanced stage of development and would be brought before the Committee, which junior Minister Kelly said would happen before the Hallowe'en recess. We are now at the end of January 2009, and we still have not seen any detailed programme.

One of the points that I want the junior Minister to respond to is that what is now referred to as a programme was initially referred to as a strategy. I would like reassurance that a programme is not a lesser commitment than a strategy. I acknowledge that there is a clear pledge by OFMDFM to achieve reconciliation and integration, no matter how it is presented. Although action to tackle sectarianism remains the biggest challenge, action to tackle racism is most welcome.

The motion tabled by the Alliance Party appears to accept that a racial equality strategy should form part of a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. There are two good policy initiatives there, and there is a danger that, in trying to put everything in the one pot, things will get lost and confused. Although we accept that a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy should tackle sectarianism and racism, we do not want to see the DUP and Sinn Féin duck the challenge or their responsibilities for tackling sectarianism, promoting reconciliation and building a better and shared society.

The sharing of power in Stormont cannot be the end of the journey towards a reconciled society. If anything, the recent DUP/Sinn Féin attempt at a carve up of power highlights that there is still some way to travel. In its amendment, the SDLP remains committed to a shared future and the promotion of reconciliation and good relations in our society. The amendment is evidence of that, as was our motion of 6 October 2008, which called for the immediate publication of the CSI strategy. The motion was accepted unanimously at that time.

There has been, and continues to be, a lack of progress, despite lip-service by the DUP and Sinn Féin in October. As well as committing to delivering detailed proposals in support of the creation of a shared future, any such proposals must be clearly budgeted and money ring-fenced. I acknowledge that additional funding was set aside at the outset of the comprehensive spending review towards the shared future strategy. It is noteworthy that in the monitoring rounds over the past year, money has been returned unspent and reallocated to other Departments because there has not been a robust action plan and the new programme has yet to be introduced.

In 'A Shared Future and Racial Equality: Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report', published in 2006, one of the priority outcomes for OFMDFM is:

"Northern Ireland is a place where people of all backgrounds work, live, learn and play together."

One wonders how hollow some of those words ring today. However, the baseline report also stated:

"More than half of the population (55%) believe that better relations will come about through more mixing."

Those people said that shared housing in particular was one of the ways in which that could be done. The regeneration of the Girdwood and Crumlin Road prison sites offers huge potential to enable that to happen. Many of our people desire and want to be a part of that as we move to a new, better and shared future.

Such a commitment will require a budget, and I believe that there are opportunities to ring-fence such spend. Clarity and commitment need to be built in. Without them, there is a risk that any proposals to promote cohesion, sharing and integration would not be fully and effectively implemented.

Members will be aware that the SDLP fully supports measures to encourage mixed housing; that is clear from Minister Ritchie's prioritisation of housing as an important route to a shared future in Northern Ireland. In Banbridge in my constituency such a pilot scheme was launched several months ago and has been tremendous success. Fortunately, unlike the days when I grew up, there is now a greater acceptance of mixing across the two main communities in the North. That is to be encouraged. People who want to live together should be enabled to do so.

Over the next three years, DSD plans to develop at least 30 shared-future housing neighbourhoods within existing Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates. However, the recent smash-and-grab from DSD's budget is clear evidence of how little importance other parties give to investing in a shared future. Although Members might spout platitudes about a shared future, the facts speak for themselves; money was taken out of DSD. Before Members say that the Minister could not spend the money, let me explain: the Minister sought

that money, but was required to get Executive approval to reallocate it, even within her own Department. She had ideas for doing that which would have led to better outcomes for those most marginalised in society and would have gone some way toward the creation of a better and shared future.

Across civic society there is some doubt as to how inclusive and participative a democracy this Assembly seeks to be. I note that the DUP has tabled a motion calling for the removal of the Civic Forum. The Civic Forum was always viewed as a vehicle to take forward the debate on a shared future. It is a body that can work without the silos of Government Departments and can add real value and fresh perspectives to the challenges facing Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society dealing with issues such as sectarianism, inward migration and interfaces.

Earlier today, at a meeting of the all-party Assembly group on ethnic minority communities, some members expressed concern about the Civic Forum. They had put a lot of work into developing proposals and hoped that their voices would be heard. Representatives from ethnic minorities were very concerned about the comments, which, over the weekend, emanated from representatives of OFMDFM and the Executive. Perhaps junior Minister Kelly will have an opportunity to refer to those comments. If not, I look forward to junior Minister Donaldson's comments later today. There must be leadership and outright condemnation of such remarks.

We all know, only too well, the causes of the conflict in our society over the past 40 years. If we do not stand up for the Poles and Lithuanians, for equal opportunities for all and for a fair and diverse society, today's Pole could be tomorrow's Catholic.

Mr Shannon: There is an old proverb, which illustrates that, at times, we are so caught up in the individual threads that we cannot see the piece that is being embroidered. The Alliance Party wishes to see a better Northern Ireland, and I am with it on that. That is my goal, and the goal of a lot of the parties in the Chamber. I understand the Alliance Party's reason for pushing the issue. However, as a member of the OFMDFM Committee, I am in a position to see the individual threads and how they contribute to the end product that we desire. We are aiming for cohesion, sharing and integration — CSI. Probably all Members are aware that I am a 'CSI: Crime Scene Investigation' fanatic; I watch it every night when I get home. I am not really into forensic science, and I cannot explain how they always get the end result within an hour. Nevertheless, they always do.

We are committed to cohesion, sharing and integration. Although, as yet, there may not be a final product, the DUP is committed to producing a strategy

that provides the right results — a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland. That commitment and that work ethic are already in action through the OFMDFM Committee; projects are in motion, and the Committee is responding to them.

Richt noo OFMDFM haes a' guid freenly unit, whuch brings tha tither woark fae aw iver tha Proavince sic as woarkin wi' groups fae aw sieds, as weel as yung yins an' ethic minority groups.

This soart o' woark is oan gaun an is weel abel tae staun oan it's ain, an isnae dependin oan a' puttin tha tither o' a paper dokumint. An as we spauk it is poorin it's woark intae fowks lievs

At present, OFMDFM has a good relations unit that co-ordinates work across the Province by working with community groups, youth teams and ethnic minority groups.

That work is ongoing and steadfast, and it is not reliant on the production of a paper document; it is poring into people's lives as we speak.

5.00 pm

OFMDFM also works closely with the Community Relations Council and funds the work that it does in the community. CRC works with local councils on projects that enhance and encourage communities to live peaceably with each other and to work within a framework that breaks down community divides while allowing each community to retain its independence and cultural identity.

OFMDFM has constantly promoted the ideal of a shared future, and it is certain that we are seeing the fruits of the efforts that have been made by hundreds of people. For example, North Belfast has benefited from the youth work that has been carried out there and the work that has been done to reduce interface violence in that area. My colleague Nelson McCausland will probably wish to speak about that later in the debate.

Ethnic minority groups have received funding of almost £1 million in order to promote integration. In my constituency of Strangford, community groups have received funding to put on international days, during which residents of all the ethnic minority groups in the Ards borough can build bonds with their neighbours. Those schemes have been successful in my own area and throughout the Province.

Personally, and as a DUP Member, I welcome much of the 'A Shared Future' document; it has a role to play in moving Northern Ireland forward. However, its ideas are already being integrated into community life, and although the documentation has not been completed, the work has not stopped.

That is not to say that things are perfect; they are not. One need only look at the attacks on Orange Halls

to see that things are not as they should be. Those attacks are damnable, and it is imperative that they are stopped immediately in order for us to move on. It appears to me that projects that work with affected people and young people are the best way of ensuring a better future for everyone. That is the reason why OFMDFM —

Mrs D Kelly: Given that we are talking about true integration and full equality, will the Member then call upon his colleague Minister Wilson to withdraw his remarks that people who have roots here and live here should have preference for jobs over others?

Mr Shannon: He will have to answer for himself, but I have no issues with that. I am happy to promote jobs for everyone, and I make that my business wherever I am.

There are better ways of ensuring a better future for everyone, and it is for that reason that OFMDFM has been working and will continue with its work and provide funding.

The SDLP amendment refers to housing. Tomorrow morning, the Minister for Social Development and I will speak about a new housing scheme that involves 40 units in Newtownards. That shows that we are working within the process.

The DUP wants a resolution to the problems with getting the document finalised, but, in the interim, no one is sitting back on their heels; we are on the ground and doing the business. We are at the beginning of a long road towards a shared future, and we will see the journey through to the end.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the amendment. In common with the proposer of the motion, I want to see the publication of a cohesion, sharing and integration document. However, that must be a programme that delivers, and any attempt to eradicate the twin evils of racism and sectarianism must be based on true equality and inclusion. It is only when that foundation has been laid that the kind of shared and better future that everyone wants — in which everyone is regarded and treated equally — can begin to be built.

I am sure that the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment will share my hope that the CSI framework will act as a road map towards that society. I welcome the commitment that the deputy First Minister made to provide the necessary financial resources to roll out the programme, and I am sure that the First Minister would also make that commitment. I also acknowledge the ongoing work and the ongoing funding arrangements that are in place to promote equality and good relations while we await the publication of the document.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was informed that funding to support the integration of minority ethnic groups rose from around £600,000 in 2007 to £1 million in 2008. It was also told that the budget for the good relations programme rose from £21 million in the previous Administration to £28 million, an increase of 33%. As was mentioned earlier, £500,000 was committed to youth interface projects. Nevertheless, I understand people's frustration at the delay in publishing the document. However, millions of pounds of public money have been poured into failed strategies in the past, and many of those strategies have changed nothing.

A Shared Future, which is a legacy policy, ignored the reality that the past structures of the unionist regime and British state actively promoted sectarianism through a wide range of direct policies and deliberate outcomes.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, you will have time to make your point later.

Divisions in our society, such as sectarianism and racism, manifest themselves in several different ways — as individual or group actions and attitudes or through processes. However, sectarianism and racism also occur, and thrive, within structural inequalities. A Shared Future did not acknowledge that fact, let alone do anything to address it.

We have also witnessed the creation of a quasi good-relations industry in which all kinds of groups and quangos have sprung up to take advantage of the public money that was being thrown into the shared-future agenda. However, that did little to change the reality on the ground. Therefore, although I share concerns over the delay, Sinn Féin cannot support any motion that defends the failed and flawed legacy of the old, shared-future agenda. Lessons must be learned from the mistakes that have been made or we are doomed to repeat them.

The new good-relations approach must be different. It must change outcomes, and if that means taking time to get it right, then, despite the frustration, that approach is correct. There are already many good examples of genuine cohesion and integration at community grass-roots level; one need only look at the joint-community initiatives that are taking place between the Falls and the Shankill, and elsewhere.

The CSI approach must build on those examples, and on the existing legal framework and practices, which are designed to deliver equality for all. There can be no hierarchy of equality. Any good-relations document must be based on due regard for the promotion of equality of opportunity and on addressing relations between all section 75 vulnerable groups.

Social need is also closely interrelated to cohesion, sharing and integration. Both the St Andrews Agreement and the Programme for Government set the context for tackling poverty through the criterion of objective need. Therefore, in rejecting the amendment, I hope that the determining factor for the allocation of houses is need rather than creed. That should, of course, be the case across all programmes and policies. At present, meeting the needs of people is being undermined by the pursuit of a flawed shared-future agenda that prioritises the social engineering of mixed communities over the objective need of those who are homeless — shame on it.

I hope that it is not the case that the proposer and supporters of the motion talk about how much they want a shared and better future while wishing to maintain the same structures, patterns and outcomes of deprivation that make people's lives a misery. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Elliott: Unlike Mr Shannon, I have no proverbs to quote. However, I will point out that the Ulster Unionist Party has a commitment built into its constitution to seek a shared society based on pluralism and a respect for diversity; values that we in the Ulster Unionist party bring to the debate.

It was interesting to hear Ms Anderson talk about the old shared-future agenda. I wonder what that was. Was it the bombing, shooting and murdering of people in this Province? I am not sure whether that was what she was referring to. Certainly, shared-future values are not blind to some of the harsh realities that we have lived through in the past 30 years of violence that has, inevitably, left a painful legacy of division, which must be approached with sensitivity and care.

No Government can make people tolerant or respectful of each other. However, it is the Government's solemn obligation to uphold and promote respect, tolerance and pluralism. That does not mean that we can be forced together. People in this society cannot be forced together. There is a responsibility to build relationships, which have not been good over the past 30 years.

Dr Farry: I understand the Member's point about not forcing people to live together, and I do not support any degree of social engineering. Does he agree that there is a demand from a large section of the population for mixing in education, leisure, workplaces and housing and that the state does not provide the facilities that will allow people who want to integrate to do so?

Mr Elliott: I accept that in many respects. The Member is quite right, and I thank him for his intervention. The difficulty is that people cannot be forced together in circumstances in which they do not want to be together, whether it be living, being educated or socialising together. However, the Assembly, as

society's political leaders, has a responsibility to attempt to build those relationships.

Since the return of devolution, however, the two main parties — rather than genuinely trying to share power — have held each other at bay in what has, basically, been a mutual stand-off of mutual loathing. Rather than making decisions that are based on co-operation and a genuine belief in a normalised and shared future for the people of Northern Ireland, they have carved up power and retained a them-and-us mentality.

Mr Ford: Get used to it.

Mr Elliott: That is a fact that we heard yesterday: get used to it. Certainly, we in this party will not get used to it just like that, and I am sure that that view is shared by others.

Recently, we witnessed Northern Ireland's Education Minister praising a convicted terrorist when she was speaking to children. We have witnessed the deputy First Minister describe the democratic political beliefs of over half the people of Northern Ireland as evil. The real evil in this society is the people who murdered, bombed and shot this Province almost to a standstill for over 30 years.

In the past, people have criticised organisations such as the Orange Order. The Orange Order has been to the fore in promoting civil and religious liberties for all in this society. Mr Shannon spoke of Orange Halls being attacked, just as GAA halls have been attacked. I condemn all such attacks on not only individual organisations, but on this entire society.

This society must be built on mutual respect. Although I do not agree with all the GAA's ethos, rules and regulations, I have a respect for those who do and who want to promote that organisation and play its sports. What I ask for is mutual respect from those same people for the organisations in which I believe and of which I am part. I want them to respect that and to show me the same understanding that I show them. That requires co-operation, listening to each other and being confident in one's own organisation and argument.

This week, the Assembly witnessed the two main parties accept none of the amendments to the Financial Assistance Bill that other political parties tabled in genuine faith. The Ulster Unionist Party believes in a Northern Ireland that is based on tolerance and respect. Those values are core to the British identity. The United Kingdom is a genuinely pluralist place that thrives on its diversity. That is evident in everyday life, and is becoming more evident in this Province of Northern Ireland.

We must strive to develop respect in such a way that different cultures and traditions can be celebrated in a

shared Northern Ireland. We must strive to learn more about our differences and to recognise that from those differences emerges genuine interdependence. Everyone in this society must learn to have genuine respect for one another.

Mr McCausland: I very much believe in a shared and better future, as is stated in the Programme for Government. Much is being done to move in that direction. The Department of Finance and Personnel has set aside £30 million over the next three years, which is a significant increase on previous funding, to make progress in that direction and to promote cohesion.

A good-relations group is chaired by the junior Ministers and involves people from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Community Relations Council, and others. Work is being targeted specifically towards North Belfast, which, again, is chaired by the junior Ministers. Recently, additional funding was directed towards other measures, such as bonfire initiatives and re-imaging communities, in order to help to improve community relations.

Therefore, much work has been done on a shared future, and the DUP is ready to make further progress on the issue.

5.15 pm

However, I must respond to Martina Anderson's point. She seems to believe that British and unionist rule is behind all the sectarianism and division in our society. Let me say clearly that that is a thoroughly sectarian analysis in itself. An honest assessment is that there is a problem with sectarianism in our society but that it is not restricted to any one community. Sectarianism is an issue across the board and, indeed, across the border in the Republic of Ireland. I suggest that it ill-behaves someone with Ms Anderson's record to lecture anyone on matters of sectarianism. I believe in a shared and better future, but I often wonder whether some of those who proclaim that message genuinely believe in it.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that Ms Anderson was perhaps talking about the old shared future agenda in which the west bank of Londonderry was disseminated and almost all the Protestant community left the area?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. We have seen ethnic cleansing in areas around the border and in North Belfast; however, I will speak about one of those areas in a moment.

I noted Dolores Kelly's comment about Crumlin Road jail and Girdwood, and I agree that the project there must have a shared site and be a shared initiative if it is to succeed. However, the SDLP and Sinn Féin regard that site as one that would accommodate single-identity and specifically nationalist housing.

Indeed, Alban Maginness, who I am glad is here today, once described it as a “windfall site” for nationalist housing. He also described Torrens as a “windfall site”, even though Protestant families were forced out of the area by a sustained sectarian campaign of intimidation.

On the issue of shared housing in North Belfast, the Housing Executive helped the local community of Carrick Hill to erect an arch over the entrance to the estate. Over that arch are a United Irishmen badge and a welcome sign in Irish. I wonder how many people from the unionist community will seek housing in that area. That must also be a shared site if it is to succeed, but it does not seem that that is on some people’s agendas at the moment.

Turning to the issue of education and particularly teacher training, there are teacher-training colleges at St Mary’s and Stranmillis. There is justification for having only one teacher-training college, yet there is a mixed college at Stranmillis and a Roman Catholic college at St Mary’s. If we are really interested in saving money, I wonder how much could be saved by amalgamating those colleges. Dolores Kelly and Stephen Farry spoke about opportunities and the need to save money. I wonder whether Dolores Kelly, in particular, will step up to the line on that issue.

Following on from Tom Elliott’s point about the Minister of Education, there is even a primary or nursery school — I am not sure which — in West Belfast that takes its name from Bobby Sands’s pen name so that he could be held up as an icon to the children in that school; indeed, someone associated with the school said that he was a “role model”. If that is the view that some people have of a shared future, I am greatly concerned.

Much can be done, even without waiting for strategy to be implemented. I ask people to examine the figures that the Equality Commission published recently about its own employment pattern. About one third of the Equality Commission’s staff come from the Protestant community and almost two thirds come from the Roman Catholic community. Indeed, the Equality Commission’s employment pattern has worsened year after year for the past five years. The Equality Commission is happy to lecture everyone else, including Sammy Wilson, on those matters, but it is time that such organisations put their own houses in order.

I intended to raise a whole range of other issues, but given that my time in which to speak is drawing to a close, I will finish with one passing comment. I commend the Irish Football Association’s work in tackling sectarianism. Once again, I encourage and urge the GAA to move forward into a shared future by abandoning the nationalist elements in its constitution and the republican trappings that are in the names of

some clubs, grounds and trophies. That would open the GAA’s doors to unionists as well as nationalists, which would be a step towards a better and shared future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Jennifer McCann, I ask Members to make their contributions address the motion as much as possible.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Divisions in society take on many forms in respect of the individual, the group and structural inequalities.

For me, one of the biggest flaws of ‘A Shared Future’ is that it still fails to recognise the state’s role in creating those structural inequalities. Tom Elliott and Nelson McCausland deliberately did not mention the violence of the state, which was directly or indirectly responsible for murdering hundreds of Irish citizens. It is a bit rich listening to them lecturing Members on this side of the House.

Mr McCausland: Does the Member accept that the DUP’s position on violence has been consistent and is rather different from that of the two Members from the same party who spoke and who both have a record of violence?

Ms J McCann: No; I do not accept that point.

The documents focus on the role of individuals and groups and are weakened by their failure to challenge institutional discrimination and by their lack of emphasis on the need for a national reconciliation unit to drive good relations on the island. It is not only about shared space or understanding; it is about tackling inequalities and discrimination, no matter what quarter they come from. We must challenge existing patterns of disadvantage and need in areas across the North, and we must challenge in particular the underinvestment in certain disadvantaged areas that has resulted in people living in need and in greater disadvantage.

‘A Shared Future’ must tackle all forms of inequality, including discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability. Diversity in society should be seen as something that enriches, rather than divides, communities. As some Members said, the community and voluntary sector plays a key role. In West Belfast, local community organisations work with people in interface areas. Those representatives can teach local people how to tackle sectarianism, racism and other inequalities.

The North of Ireland must be viewed as a changing society. An increasing number of families from all backgrounds and ethnic minorities live and work here. It is incumbent on leaders here, especially political leaders, to show those groups that they are welcome,

given that they contribute positively to life here and work in hospitals and so on. That must be recognised.

The Programme for Government calls for the North of Ireland to become a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous and stable society that is founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust with the protection and vindication of human rights for all. Everyone in society needs to enjoy equality of opportunity and be valued and respected. Equality is the key to building a shared future, and no one in the Chamber — or outside it — should be afraid of equality for all. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of Limavady Borough Council.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate. A shared future is one the key indicators of true progress to a peaceful and stable future.

In the foreword of the document 'A Shared Future', the then Secretary of State, Paul Murphy MP, said that a move towards "relationships rooted in mutual recognition" is an important part of creating a shared future. I cannot disagree with that view. The document also outlines the:

"desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion".

Furthermore, it says:

"it will be incumbent on every individual and organisation in Northern Ireland to play their part to promote a shared Northern Ireland."

I can see the benefits that meeting those aspirations will bring to the people of Northern Ireland and to the Budget.

Part 1 of 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009' states that all individuals should be treated equally. I believe that many people in our communities are doing just that: treating each other equally. However, a major stumbling block exists to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different political opinion.

You may well ask why I see a stumbling block, and I am happy to supply an answer. As an example, on Limavady Borough Council, where I have served the entire community for 24 years, the six unionist councillors are treated as second-class citizens — with complete disrespect, and what borders on contempt. As long as that behaviour continues, the Utopia that the Members opposite say they want as a shared future is nothing but a pipe dream.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Robinson: No, I will not.

On 24 June 2008, junior Minister Kelly stated that he is:

"committed to the principle of equality for all citizens."

Perhaps that junior Minister and his party leadership should tell some of their party's local councillors that that is party policy, because they do the exact opposite. They cause division, they cause distrust, and they do not seem to care.

It also must be said that some of their SDLP colleagues continually support them, and cannot escape their share of blame for the distrust caused. On 30 May 2008, junior Minister Donaldson said:

"Social cohesion is based on changing mindsets."

Those are the most practical and sensible words that I have heard for a long time in relation to this issue. When Sinn Féin and the SDLP show respect for their unionist opponents in all elected bodies, we will be setting an example for the change of mindset that is required, and not before.

Mr B McCrea: It is easy for people to offer words; sometimes words can be used to benefit and sometimes to disadvantage. I heard Jennifer McCann talk about the need to see some leadership and to work together. She spoke about everywhere else except this place. I will take no lectures about a shared future — either from that side of the House or from the opposite side — when every time we try to put forward constructive proposals, we are cut down. There is an opportunity to avoid going back to the past.

Last night, I spoke to a group of young people of mixed backgrounds, aged 16 or 17, along with a panel of other folk. They got extremely exercised about the topical issue of the Eames/Bradley report. What I saw was that those young people, who know nothing of the past 30 to 40 years of bombing, shooting and maiming, have not learnt the lesson. They all want to go back and rake up coals, to poke their fingers into places to see what is there. If we continually rub salt into wounds, we are not going to move forward. There are people deliberately, in my opinion, misrepresenting the comments of others. They seek to take party-political advantage of things, and to say that they are right and everybody else is wrong. How can there be a shared future without some form of respect for another point of view?

Does a shared future have any credibility? Look at the sectarian carve up that happens in nearly every part of our society. Is there some agreement on a common identity; some sort of unified vision; some sort of commonality that would bind us all together? Talk about who has been to places — I have been to a GAA match; I have been to the SDLP conference; I have been to the Gay Pride parade. I have been to those events, because tolerance is not something that is preached, it is something that is shown. I see precious little of it.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes, I will give way, but it is not something that comes easily, because any time I try to make an intervention it is not accepted. I will accept the intervention.

Ms J McCann: The Member sits on Lisburn City Council; would he say that there is tolerance in that council for the Sinn Féin members? Unionists have deliberately excluded them from committees for years. Discrimination has gone on for years on that council.

Mr B McCrea: One can take any particular set of circumstances and find fault almost anywhere. The challenge for us here is to find a way of showing some leadership. I am not sure that I see it. There is talk of some sort of mythical people, and of people from working-class communities getting together, and everything is fine.

I do not see that — because I see the problems here in the Assembly. People are looking to the Assembly to keep up with the moves that they have made. I have a real fear that if we do not start putting emphasis on building a shared future, or a common future, or whatever one wants to call it, we will, at some stage, return to the trials and tribulations of the past.

5.30 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I think that the Member will get an extra minute — I am sure that everybody will be pleased to hear that. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the Member for giving way. Martina Anderson said that the strategy A Shared Future was set up under direct rule. It now transpires that Sinn Féin is adopting the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, which it binned, because the party could not come up with anything better in its absence. It was not the SDLP, the UUP or the Alliance Party that promised such a strategy — it was the two parties in OFMDFM that promised the strategy and failed to deliver it. Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin should look for the beam in its own eye?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for her intervention. It is good that I have an extra minute, because she took one minute and 30 seconds to tell me. It demonstrates that a certain amount of humour can go a long way. We sometimes point out the ridiculous position that others adopt, as she has just done.

I have had my fair share of people putting me right on a thing or two today — mainly when I have not been in the Chamber. I find that really disappointing, because I will take on anybody. I accept that there are people of good intent on all sides who want to produce a strategy on which we can work.

I will probably get it in the neck for saying this, but I sometimes wonder what OFMDFM is for. It is so

bereft of ideas that it tries to grab powers from other Departments. If building a shared future is the central issue, let us get on with it. Let us have genuine engagement and mutual respect for all the good points that were made on all sides of the House. It is a fundamental challenge, and this Assembly must show leadership. As my colleague Tom Elliott said, it is fundamental to the approach of the Ulster Unionist Party. We will continue to defend civil liberties.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The wording and intent of the motion need to be examined. I want to look at particular aspects of the motion and — like my colleagues who spoke previously — the framework for a shared future. I will also talk about community relations, division and sectarianism.

‘A Shared Future’ was a direct rule and NIO strategy document that this Assembly inherited, and it consistently failed to address the reasons why people have been — and continue to be — excluded. The emphasis of the analysis has always been on the need for people’s attitudes and values to change — that everything could be different if the two problem communities could be brought together. That has been the message that community relations, and shared future, enthusiasts have peddled, and it needs to change.

The emphasis of a new strategy must be that it has the principle of equality at its very core. We need to incorporate the structural and historical inequalities that have led to deprivation and marginalisation in all of our communities. As an elected representative for North Belfast — and like many others who live in the area — I work each day to try to make a difference for the people who live there.

The problems of sectarianism, homophobia and racism must be tackled head on. The task of building and developing good relations needs to take place on our streets, and that will continue to be one of the biggest challenges that I will face as an elected representative. I have no difficulty with that — in fact, it is a privilege to face that challenge. However, it is imperative that we get the CSI strategy right.

I do not believe that anybody will ignore, ridicule or duck the challenges of national reconciliation, building good relations and having a shared and better future for all Irish citizens. In the past, there was too much of a negative agenda concerning equality matters and objective needs.

Interface violence and sectarianism cannot, and should never, be tolerated. We must tackle sectarianism head on and investigate its root causes, not just its symptoms, which is what the existing shared framework does; that is why we must ensure that we get any new CSI right.

I have no doubt that the proposer of the motion wants the same as I do, and most Members agree with the intent expressed by Basil McCrea. However, I disagree with some Members' analysis, and that is what political debate is about — it is my prerogative to disagree with people. I do not disagree with those Members' intent or with their principled positions; I disagree with their analysis.

Mr Ford: If I recall correctly, when this matter was debated in a slightly different form in October 2008, the Member and her colleagues did not disagree with statements of principles or intent. Can she tell us what has changed in the past three months?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Can I assume, a LeasCheann Comhairle, that I will be allowed an extra minute?

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I totally disagree with the existing shared-future framework, and I have made that clear. Nevertheless, I agree that we must have a shared, and a better, future. However, in all seriousness, debates such as this must take place on the streets where people live, and as elected representatives, we must be aware of what it is like for families to live in fear or to have three generations living under one roof.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I was interested to hear her refer to the rights of every Irish citizen and say that debates must happen on our streets. Does the Member accept that there are those who do not consider themselves to be Irish citizens? Furthermore, the history books tell us that when partition occurred in Ireland, 12% of the population in what is now the Irish Republic were Protestants; today, that figure is 2%. At the time of partition, nationalists made up 20% of the population of Northern Ireland; whereas, they now make up more than 40%. Can the Member explain why the Protestant community was excluded in the Irish Republic?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his intervention; however, I will not go into the annals of Irish history to explain what happened. I accept that the Member considers himself to be British, but as an Irish republican, I consider myself to be Irish.

The SDLP has revealed its hand; rather than deliver on objective need, it proposes that shared-future housing be built on the Girdwood site in North Belfast, so I thank its Members for clarifying that point. In order to implement equality measures, we must consider targeted outcomes on the basis of objective need, because only then will we have a shared, and a better, future for all. We must get used to democracy and to the cut and thrust of debate; however, I will not get used to accepting historical and structural inequalities for ever more. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: The Ulster Unionist Party believes in a Northern Ireland, and, indeed, a United Kingdom, based on respect and tolerance for all. It believes in a shared future for everyone, and if that is to happen, politicians must take great care with their language, which can affect those who are less articulate or less able to reason. If we behave intolerantly, there is a danger that others may follow our lead.

Let us remember that, for many years, when the economy was successful, Northern Ireland employers struggled to fill vacancies, and without skills and labourers from other parts of the European Union, companies such as Moy Park might have moved its employment elsewhere. Indeed, in my constituency, Schrader Electronics found it difficult to fill some skilled engineering posts.

Without the skilled engineers who came from other parts of the United Kingdom and the European Community, companies in Northern Ireland might have been unable to fill their customers' demands and, subsequently, they would have lost market share.

Members need to be careful in what they do and say and recognise the skills that have come here. We need a shared future for everyone. Eva Grossman, a self-employed entrepreneur in my constituency — and someone for whom I have a great deal of respect — is quoted in the Morning View item in yesterday's 'News Letter'. She said:

"Any form of discrimination is not good especially now during the time of difficulties and hardship for everybody".

She went on to ask:

"Would the hardship experienced by a person born in Northern Ireland be any different from those from outside?"

She is saying that everyone is affected in times of economic hardship. We are suffering an economic downturn, and jobs are being lost.

Another factor that has contributed to the situation is the decline in the value of the pound against the euro. Many people who have come here to take up jobs have found that they are working for much less money than they had been previously, and they have less to send home or to save and take home.

Members and Ministers should be careful and tolerant in their language. Everyone hopes that our economy will improve and that we will return to full employment. Perhaps, some time in the future, we will be dependent once more on those who are willing to travel and fill our job vacancies.

One must remember that Northern Ireland companies are successful in winning work elsewhere. Farrans and Grahams have won a £100 million contract in Scotland. How would we feel if their employees — many of whom come from Northern Ireland — faced prejudice as they move to other parts of the United Kingdom to

work? We should ensure that we are tolerant in all that we do.

When local politicians use language that is similar to that used by the BNP, they start to set themselves, and Northern Ireland, apart from national British public opinion. Such language can appeal to the worst fears and prejudices of some.

We need a shared future if we are to maximise any economic opportunities that arise. If we are to obtain the best value from our Budget, we need to look at shared services and how we can position key public infrastructure in locations that everyone can use safely so that savings to our Budget can be made. We cannot afford large duplication in our services.

Martina Anderson ranted against unionists; however, she overlooked her own personal history and the pain that she has caused to individuals. Furthermore, she failed to recognise that actions by herself, her party and their colleagues in arms who used violence against their neighbours, helped to create barriers in Northern Ireland. They prevented a shared future, and they are trying swiftly to distance themselves from those events.

Jennifer McCann also failed to acknowledge those actions. Provisional Sinn Féin was responsible for a vast amount of violence and deaths in Northern Ireland; it was responsible for the majority of violent events. It is, therefore, important that a shared future is recognised and that people do not have double standards.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order. On several occasions, the Speaker has ruled on the term "Provisional Sinn Féin". I also take great exception to the Member's comment that Sinn Féin was involved in the killing or murder of anyone or violence against anyone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand that there is no party called Provisional Sinn Féin.

Mr Beggs: I think that I referred to their colleagues in the Provisional IRA, to which few doubt they are closely linked. It is important that they recognise their failings of the past and move forward together.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will it always require someone from this party to raise the issue as a point of order without the Speaker or Deputy Speaker dealing with it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member questioning my ability to chair the meeting?

Mr A Maskey: I certainly am not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I was about to speak, but your colleague intervened before me.

Mr Beggs: It is important that people recognise —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. *[Laughter.]* I call the junior Minister Mr Gerry Kelly.

5.45 pm

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A series of criticisms have been made about the delay in bringing forward a policy on cohesion, sharing and integration. That is a fair criticism. OFMDFM is trying to bring forward a strategy that will right the wrongs of the past and that will help to heal the many divisions in our society, which many Members referred to. There is no easy way or quick-fix solutions to those problems. OFMDFM wants to get it right, and it is committed to bringing forward that strategy.

The previous Shared Future framework was a direct rule strategy, and it was from a different time. The Assembly and the Executive are now working, and we have enhanced equality measures designed to protect all members of our community. We also have a growing and welcome number of ethnic minority communities. Therefore, we need to bring forward a new strategy now.

As a representative of North Belfast — a constituency bisected by interfaces and which has suffered from thousands of sectarian attacks — I accept the legitimate criticism about the delay. I, along with others, have worked to reduce the tension and end violence. I see the work being done continually by many people who work on the ground at night and during the weekends. I, and OFMDFM, support all that work.

I want to provide a direct challenge to the proposers of the motion. I am concerned about the accusation implicit in the motion, which claims that the vision of a shared and better future for everyone no longer matters to Ministers in OFMDFM and the parties that they represent. I want to emphasise in the strongest possible terms that that is completely untrue. It is not unreasonable to criticise and question. However, the issue is too important to play party politics with.

It is almost two years since I took up office. During that time I, and others, have been proud to have played a part in taking practical steps to nurture the positive progress being made on the ground to build strong cross-community relationships. Dealing with the debate on the basis that does not recognise the reality of the situation is disrespecting the substantial progress that is being achieved.

As I said already, our priority is to be active in practical ways, so that we can be judged on our record, and not by what others say. I remind Members what the Programme for Government for 2008-2011 states about our vision for achieving a shared and better future for all:

"equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for all of our policies and programmes across Government."

The promotion of good relations cannot be divorced or separated from equality. Equality is the foundation and prerequisite for building good relations. To that end, the Executive have made equality central —

Mr Ford: Will the junior Minister confirm that the statement about equality is the considered opinion of OFMDFM, rather than his personal opinion?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): As the Member will know, these speeches are generally passed through the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I am speaking as a junior Minister for the Executive.

The motion asked Members to express their concerns about the marginalisation of good relations. Let us examine our track record and analyse the validity of that marginalisation claim. Let us examine whether we have been true to that vision.

Through the 2007 spending review, we successfully increased OFMDFM's budget for good relations and good race relations from £21 million to £28 million over the CSR period, which has been referred to by several Members. That is a 33% increase on the funding made available by the previous Administration. Are we marginalising a shared and better future? I do not think so.

Funding to support the integration of minority ethnic groups into communities increased from approximately £600,000 in 2007 to £1 million in 2008, and will continue at £1 million for 2009. That is a 66% increase. Are we marginalising the importance of new communities? Hardly.

Funding for targeting resources at on-the-ground projects for young people to prevent them being drawn into interface disturbances over the summer months increased to £500,000 in 2008. Are we marginalising at-risk or high-risk young people? Absolutely not.

We successfully piloted schools projects in association with Rangers and Celtic, who acted together to address sectarianism, specifically in sport. Therefore, the criticism that we have put sectarianism to the side is also wrong. We have commissioned a short, sharp research project to identify effective longer-term intervention and support ideas for at-risk young children.

Mrs D Kelly: Perhaps the junior Minister could share those statistics with his party colleagues, who seem to be at a loss to understand that the Shared Future framework and action plan, although flawed, is delivering on some of its priorities?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I am giving the statistics to everyone. Anna Lo did not get a chance to speak, but she knows that when the issue of subsuming the Shared Future policy arose at the commemoration of the Chinese new year last night, we said that we are building on it. We are making a massive improvement

on that, and the work is being carried out by Ministers and Departments.

We have also worked proactively with all relevant agencies, local councils and the PSNI to address key problem areas. We have provided over €50 million to match-fund Peace III funding for measures that OFMDFM is accountable for — that is not a marginal contribution to financial resources. Although some may claim that they have heard that before, others must not have taken it in. I say again, especially to Dolores Kelly, that it bears repeating.

Rest assured that we have a joined-up approach to ensure that people in communities with needs see that they are not on the margins of our work. Some projects were mentioned earlier, so I will explain what goes on, regardless of whether it is for people in Dungannon, Craigavon, Derry or North Belfast. Our job is to resource and empower people who work for the benefit of their communities and their neighbouring communities. When I talk about our record, I am not trying to claim credit for what those dedicated people do. However, talking about our role is the way to counter the message that we are marginalising such work, which is the criticism that is implied by the motion.

As a Minister, I am also financially accountable — I must prove that the large amounts of money to which I refer actually make a difference to how we all live. I have evidence to show Members that we pass the financial accountability test. My evidence, which is based on independently sourced research and NISRA official statistics, shows continued improvements in the range of good-relations indicators. There was a 12% drop in the number of racist crimes between 2006-07 and 2007-08, and a similar percentage shift in the number of crimes with a sectarian motive. In 2007, three out of every five young people — 60% — said that relations between Protestants and Catholics were getting better, which is a significant improvement on the 43% who said that in 2005. Approximately two thirds of adults — 66% — in 2007 agreed that community relations were better than they had been five years ago, compared with 52% in 2005.

The vast majority of people continue to believe that better relations will come about through more mixing between the two communities, which several Members mentioned. Support for mixed-religion neighbourhoods remains high, but, as was pointed out, that situation cannot be forced. People have to agree to it.

The number of parades at which disorder occurred decreased from 34 in 2005 to 10 in 2007, which is a 70.5% reduction. The proportion of enrolments for minority-ethnic pupils has increased from 1.8% to 2%. Few people now think that flag-flying happens more than it did five years ago. Those are indications of positive outcomes and are selected from independent

data and research. We all recognise that challenging work remains, which is why there will be an incremental increase in the budget over the current year.

What is the basis for the ongoing investment? Reports have highlighted several challenges that still have to be overcome. For example, in 2007, there was a clear increase in self-reported prejudice towards people from ethnic minorities — 35%, compared with 24% in 2006.

The number of applications to industrial tribunals on the grounds of racial discrimination has increased from 79 complaints in 2005-06 to 108 in 2006-07. Support for inward EU migration — people who think that it is a good thing — has fallen from 76% in 2005 to 68% in 2007.

Advancing social transformation and the inclusion of all our people is essential if we are to deliver the peaceful, fair and healthy society that we all want. Real progress has been made in recent years, and our society continues to be transformed. However, significant challenges remain to be addressed if everyone is to be given the opportunity to contribute to, and to benefit from, a shared and better future.

We have always emphasised the importance that we attach to the equality agenda, and I reassure Members and communities that we are ensuring that all our legislation meets the standards set by European directives. At this stage, we continue to achieve that by amending regulations to existing legislation. By promoting good relations in that practical way, we seek to challenge and support our communities to become places where any person, regardless of who they are, can live, work, rest and socialise in respect, acceptance, safety and freedom from violence — words that were used by many Members today.

At central Government level, strong political leadership is essential for the success of the strategy. We envisage that the establishment of the new ministerial-led good-relations panel will oversee the work across Government, in local government and with key stakeholders to tackle the issues that I mentioned.

A strategic action plan and locally delivered action plans will be developed and implemented, which will skilfully take account of all good-relations and good race-relations issues through complementary bottom-up, top-down approaches.

The amendment asks us to recognise the potential that social and affordable housing initiatives offer to the goal of creating a shared and integrated society. The provision of social housing must, in the first instance, be based on objective need. Homeless people and those who are living in cramped or unsatisfactory houses need homes, and we need to provide them. We also need to build not only estates, but communities that are safe, secure and open to all. Equality means

that housing should meet objective need, regardless of race, religion or membership of any minority group. People have the right to live wherever they choose.

I want to give credit to the innovative work of the Housing Executive with local people who want to see their segregated communities become places that are safe and welcoming, where anyone can live. Therefore, I give credit to communities in Springfarm in Antrim, Carren Crescent in Enniskillen, Ballynafeigh in Belfast, Clanmil in Lisburn and in the village of Sion Mills. One or two other projects were also mentioned earlier. Those communities are turning that large percentage of people who would prefer to live in mixed neighbourhoods into reality.

By way of confirming that we recognise the importance of those initiatives, only last Thursday, OFMDFM facilitated discussions between community relations officers in all 26 district councils and the staff in the Housing Executive's International Fund for Ireland-sponsored project, to co-ordinate that very issue, along with the effects of the re-imaging communities, community bridges and Peace III programmes.

Those are ambitious and comprehensive objectives; they are essential for us all to accept. I also firmly believe that they are achievable, and that we are reflecting the aspirations of all our people.

Many Members spoke, and I dealt with many of the issues earlier, but there are some pressing matters. Stephen Farry praised direct rule, which does not surprise me, because, under direct rule, the Alliance Party was involved in all the quangos, and it still seems to be involved in them.

Dolores Kelly mentioned the strategy, and I said earlier that it will be brought forward around Hallowe'en. We will give a commitment to try to bring forward the strategy as soon as possible and work towards that. That is another commitment that I have given.

Martina Anderson made a point about equality and good relations, and the fact that equality —

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

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): A commitment was made to make resources available for equality and good relations, and, as we have already said, OFMDFM will fulfil that commitment.

6.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Mr Alban Maginness to make his winding-up speech, I must inform Members that we tried very hard to call Anna Lo because of her special contribution to the debate. I regret that that was not possible.

Mr A Maginness: The debate was comprehensive, and many issues have been unearthed. One of the main reasons for the motion and the amendment was to determine the nature of the Administration's thoughts on the shared-future concept. Having listened to junior Minister Kelly, I am no wiser about what the Administration thinks. Its approach appears to be confused and, at best, cryptic; they do not give any clear and coherent leadership on the matter.

Furthermore, there appears to be a serious difference between the three Sinn Féin Members who spoke during the debate and junior Minister Kelly on the issues that he raised and the comments that he made. Those Sinn Féin Members talked about equality; it seems to me that they are prepared to accept equality, but, at the same time, separation. The whole aim of any good-relations policy is to integrate the community and bring people together where, traditionally and historically, we have been divided. If one is to wait for absolute equality in our community, one will be waiting for ever. One can never bridge differences to the point at which equality is perfectly established. That seemed to me to be Sinn Féin's basic thesis.

It seems to me that a fundamental problem exists between Sinn Féin and other parties in the House, and the DUP in particular, which at least pays lip service to the idea of a shared future. The other parties — the Ulster Unionists, my party and the Alliance Party — all agree on a shared future, and that we must mend and bind together the divisions of the past.

It is all very well to say that inequality is the reason for our divisions. It is about more than inequality. We had a civil war here for 30 years in which many people were killed. Those who were responsible for that, in part, were those who purported to be the provisional republican movement, and it bears a major share of the responsibility for that division. However, it does not own up to, accept or tackle that responsibility. It is now time that they did.

Many Members have expressed a wish to move forward on a shared basis. To criticise ideas such as integrated housing and integrated education, as some people have done, is quite wrong. If the community voluntarily were to come together by way of shared housing or shared education, it would be a good thing. However, one of our fundamental requirements is goodwill in the House and in the Administration. I do not see any evidence of that in this Administration between the two major parties. I see evidence of a power carve-up, but that is co-existence — it is cold war instead of active war. That is no way to run an Administration or to encourage people in the community.

The Good Friday Agreement was a conflict-resolution process, not a conflict-substitution process. However, some people see it as a conflict-substitution process,

and believe that the war should continue by some other means.

We must end that mentality. The two political traditions, which we cherish and should respect, must show some goodwill towards each other; without that we will not make progress. However, Members must give good example to the community and show leadership, as Mr Beggs said, and voting for the motion is one way of showing that leadership. At least among some parties there is unity of approach.

Mr Ford: In proposing the motion, Stephen Farry outlined the motivation for it: the failure of OFMDFM to live up to the rhetoric that it inserted into the Programme for Government; and the failure to deliver on anything more than a slight updating of the shared future policy, which, if I remember correctly, was not quite published during the first period of devolution and delivered under direct rule. Mr Kelly is correct: so far, direct rule has been better for community relations in Northern Ireland than devolution. Dr Farry also emphasised the importance of a shared future as the key to dealing with some of our other problems, especially those of growing the economy by dealing with matters such as labour mobility, attracting inward investment and coping with the situation revealed by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors Northern Ireland report on our carbon footprint.

We, at this end of the House, have no problem in seeing OFMDFM develop a strategy: the problem is that it has not yet produced a strategy and is not developing one.

Dolores Kelly, in proposing the amendment, emphasised points that the Alliance Party holds in common with the SDLP. She spoke of the cost of segregation and referred to the motion that she and her colleagues tabled in October, which called for the publication of the strategy. We seek to update that call today, and we have done so appropriately. We accept the amendment. There are other issues besides those relating to DSD; but the DSD issues are a part of the matter.

I was interested, as ever, to hear Jim Shannon's contribution. He said that, as a member of the OFMDFM Committee, he could see the threads of a policy being woven together. Mr Shannon may see that happening, but the rest of us — including my colleague on that Committee — see precious little evidence of it. I welcome Jim Shannon's endorsement of the concept of a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland, but, unfortunately, he did not use the word "shared". However, that is forward movement by the DUP, and we welcome it in the spirit in which we seek to promote good relations in this place.

The next contribution was by Martina Anderson who told us, yet again, that equality came first; as far

as I could make out, it also came last in her analysis. That is utter nonsense. Must we wait for ever or until there is full equality in society before we can address the problems of good relations? That is a counsel of utter despair. It is complete nonsense, and it carries no weight in this Chamber unless, possibly, with members of Sinn Féin. To suggest that nothing could happen on good relations until the DUP agree with Sinn Féin on the wicked sectarianism of unionism in the past and the failure of the sectarian British state shows that she plans to implement a long agenda before countenancing any forward movement in good relations. Her points were supported by Jennifer McCann and Carál Ní Chuilín.

When Jennifer McCann listed for our benefit all the categories listed in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, she did not say that section 75 refers to “promoting good relations” as well as to equality. Every Sinn Féin member who spoke showed the same blinkered vision when it came to that. Carál Ní Chuilín also spoke of a shared future as a failed policy. She fails to accept that all that is being implemented by OFMDFM is the outworkings of the existing shared future policy because that Department does not have a strategy of its own.

Tom Elliott, backed by his Ulster Unionist colleagues Basil McCrea and Roy Beggs, also supported the motion and felt a need to defend unionist culture. In view of all that was said in the Chamber that was hardly surprising. One might have hoped that they would have gone a little further. However, their references to tolerance and diversity in the UK are to be welcomed. In particular, Roy Beggs’s references to the economic contribution to some of our new citizens must be endorsed.

When Nelson McCausland said that the DUP believes in a shared and better future, he included the word that Mr Shannon missed, so I congratulate him for that. He also said that the DUP wants to move forward. It was interesting to note that he then chose to immediately disagree with the points made by Ms Anderson, the principal speaker for the DUP’s principal partner in this Government. I wonder whether that is an indication of where the problem lies in the failure to do anything about the CSI strategy. Today, it appears that DUP Members are prepared to reach in the direction of those at this end of the Chamber to a certain extent. However, Sinn Féin, Members are giving absolutely nothing.

If I had been cynical enough to have blamed David Trimble for the failure to move forward in the past, I would now apologise to the Ulster Unionist Party and I would also acknowledge that it is not the Ulster Unionists and the DUP that appear to be creating the biggest block at this point.

It is unfortunate when someone such as George Robinson merely states his problems with being treated as being in the minority in Limavady Borough Council, which allows others to cite their problems with how they have being treated as being in the minority in Lisburn City Council. If Members cannot get away from the notion of simply being concerned about how they and their immediate colleagues are being treated, this strategy will not move forward. The problems are legitimate and true, but we need to reach beyond such simple points.

The response from Gerry Kelly, speaking as Minister, was interesting. He acknowledged that criticism of the delay was fair — at least that is something. After all that we have been through during these past few days in debating the Financial Assistance Bill, it is good that the junior Minister has provided that level of acknowledgment.

I do not believe that there was an implication that OFMDFM does not care about what we are saying. However, there is a clear implication that it does not care enough to put together a proper strategy. We have seen and heard junior Minister Kelly’s party colleagues dismiss the strategy as out-dated and inappropriate, but we have yet to see them develop anything with which to replace it.

Spending money on the old position does not seem to tie in with Mr Kelly’s financial accountability as a junior Minister. He highlighted that he should be ensuring that there is a proper, up-to-date and fit-for-purpose strategy that he and his colleagues can implement and can be fully accountable for. However, there were two things missing from his contribution: first, the recognition that issues around a shared future and good relations are not a small part of OFMDFM; they are a key cross-cutting theme for what is supposed to be a power-sharing inclusion Government; secondly, the promise of something specific. At the end of his statement he promised something soon. However, I was taught some time ago that the word “soon” is not a date. It really is time that we had something much more specific.

In that respect, I believe that Alban Maginness’s comments about the lack of leadership from OFMDFM are accurate. He suggested that Sinn Féin was proposing that a form of separate but equal — and I can think of a rather rude word for that strategy — was desirable. It is not desirable: it is the absolute opposite of what we need if we want to move forward. I recognise that some DUP Members seem to understand that point.

Thirty years ago, fair employment was some kind of pipe dream. Now, it is effectively in place. Today, the demand for integrated education, or different forms of shared education, and integrated housing, are growing. Sports bodies, such as the IFA and the GAA, are engaging

and working together, yet the body that is supposed to be providing leadership to the community — the Executive, led by OFMDFM — are failing to deliver.

When one looks back 40 years to the assassination of Martin Luther King and to the way in which other societies in the world have moved on, the types of ideas that Sinn Féin speakers have raised would have been laughed out of court in the US; they would have been laughed out of court in South Africa; and, please God, they will soon be laughed out of court in Zimbabwe as well.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: Our community has been enriched by a wide variety of people from different backgrounds, whether they arrived three months ago or 500 years ago. That is the key message that must go out today. It is not a matter of saying: let us pretend that we can live in some separate but equally miserable set of communities. We must oppose the nonsense that Sinn Féin Members have said in that respect.

6.15 pm

Whether it is called community relations, good relations, or cohesion, sharing and integration, it is not an optional add-on; it is a vital necessity as a cross-cutting theme of every aspect of Government policy. There are sound social, economic and environmental reasons why a shared future should be given a much higher priority, and why the CSI strategy is badly needed.

I thank those Members who have supported that in different measures, and I urge the House to support the motion as amended.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 22; Noes 39.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray,

Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

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

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 18; Noes 40.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGlone, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Ms Lo.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs O'Neill and Ms S Ramsey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not convention that when the House divides, Members are supposed to go through the Lobbies? Are you satisfied that every Member who voted on the motion did so?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That issue has been drawn to my attention. Members should know that they enter the Lobbies through the doors at the bottom of the Chamber. I would ask the party Whips to ensure that that happens in future.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Employment of Foreign Nationals

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I call the junior Minister the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson.

Mrs D Kelly asked OFMDFM, in light of junior Minister Donaldson's concurrence with the view of Minister Sammy Wilson, that employers should give jobs to locals ahead of foreign nationals who live and work in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their skills, experience or abilities; and recalling the longstanding body of UK and European legislation outlawing discrimination on grounds of race or nationality, to explain how these remarks align with legislation to promote good relations, community cohesion, and integration between people from different racial groups.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister received the private notice question from Mrs Kelly.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive agreed to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government makes clear that equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be the watchwords of all our policies. We have underlined that by making £1 million available under the ethnic-minority development fund for projects and developmental work with ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland.

If a person is legally entitled to work here, as most EU citizens are, the law is very clear that employers are required to recruit staff on a fair basis.

The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 applies to all employment applicants and employees who are legally entitled to work here, and outlaws discrimination on the grounds of colour, race, nationality, or ethnic or national origin.

Mrs D Kelly: It is regrettable that junior Minister Donaldson merely reiterated part-speeches that were given to various gatherings on the responsibilities of OFMDFM. In light of what the junior Minister said about EU legislation and about legislation in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, I draw his attention to the comments that Minister Sammy Wilson made at the weekend that firms should give jobs to locals ahead of foreign nationals in the current economic downturn.

On BBC's 'Stormont Live' television programme, the junior Minister concurred with some of those remarks. Will the junior Minister now ask OFMDFM

to ask Minister Wilson to withdraw his remarks? Will he also acknowledge that if local firms were to follow Minister Wilson's advice, they would be prosecuted under existing legislation, and that the comments send out a very poor message to foreign nationals who have come to work and live here? Indeed, some of those foreign nationals work in the Assembly.

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): I will not ask the Minister of the Environment to withdraw his comments — that is not my job. Immigration rules dictate who is entitled to work here, and the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 applies only to those people who are entitled to work here. Employers must comply with the statutory obligations of any employee who is entitled to work here.

However, in times of economic downturn, it is perfectly legitimate to question whether immigration policy needs to be restricted further for economic migrants. Minister Wilson is entitled to participate in that debate and discussion. Indeed, that debate might be more rational if others contributed to it in a more rational way.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Retention of Jobs and Benefits Office Posts and Services in Omagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In 2006, management at the Social Security Agency (SSA) initiated a strategic business review to assess its operational structures in order to ensure that the service could continue in light of funding cuts outlined in the comprehensive spending review. The Social Security Agency management also cited staffing problems and raised part-time working, term-time working and sick absences as issues that needed to be addressed. I suggest that that is contestable.

The review had various phases, but it concluded with one preferred option — a centralisation of back-office processing on 16 sites in the North, each of which would deal with one benefit only. In many cases, that would mean staff moving from their current place of work. It has been calculated that 850 Social Security Agency staff will be forced to redeploy and that 200 jobs will be lost. That is in addition to the 674 posts that were already lost as a result of 2004's 'Fit for Purpose' review.

The Minister for Social Development approved the public consultation that was launched on 27 November, and I understand that that consultation closes later this week. It is for that reason that I tabled this Adjournment topic with the Business Office on 6 January. The title of the debate is, "The Retention of Jobs and Benefits Office Posts and Services in Omagh". I record my appreciation of the Minister's attendance. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully and remedy the situation by taking the appropriate and necessary action as soon as possible.

I pay tribute to the highly professional staff in the local jobs and benefits office in Omagh who do a first-class job. People in Omagh felt so strongly about the proposals that they lobbied their local government representatives and district councillors to hold a special council meeting to address the issue. Chairman of Omagh District Council, Councillor Martin McColgan, convened a special meeting to discuss the matter.

6.45 pm

How will the proposals impact on the public? We know that face-to-face contact on a walk-in basis will no longer be available and that interviews — which could take weeks to arrange — will be available by appointment only. We know that the proposals are contrary to the findings of a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey that was commissioned by the agency management, which found that the majority of customers who were surveyed stated that their problems could be resolved by direct face-to-face contact only.

Anne Marie Fitzgerald, who is a councillor on Omagh District Council, recently recounted, at a council meeting, her experience of making representations on behalf of a young male constituent who had literacy difficulties. Members should remember that one in four adults in our society has problems with literacy. She did her best to secure face-to-face contact on a walk-in basis with the staff at the jobs and benefits office in Omagh in order to assist a constituent who would not have survived the telephony system. That story made an impression on me; if that service had been unavailable, somebody would have been lost in the system.

Many people from ethnic minorities do not use English as their first language and require more assistance. Therefore, many people would be lost if the new arrangements were to pertain. Public services would be greatly reduced, and the most vulnerable members of society will be the losers. Furthermore, the strategic business review will be used as a platform to realise further future staffing efficiencies. That is the true aim of the proposals — not delivering better services to customers.

Moreover, the new telephone systems are untried and untested here. That may lead to more unnecessary frustration for the public at a time when they need a vital service. Unemployment figures are currently soaring, and the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance, income support and incapacity benefit has risen steadily in recent months. Current forecasts indicate that the situation will continue for the foreseeable future. During this time of economic uncertainty and hardship, people do not need such upheaval in the jobs and benefits offices. Although I appreciate that resources and staffing levels have been increased to cope with the rise in demand, such upheaval is unnecessary.

The use of customer access phones has proven unworkable in Britain and many Jobcentre Plus offices have removed them altogether. The removal of 850 staff from front line local offices to centralised sites will take jobs away from towns that are already socially and economically deprived. That goes in the

opposite direction to George Bain's report, which identified Omagh as an important location for the retention and expansion of public-sector jobs.

I understand that the specific proposals for Omagh will retain the social fund administration function but jettison the income support function to Derry and jobseeker's allowance to Enniskillen, with a net loss of 19 posts — from 80 to 61 — in Omagh. Many staff co-signed a letter to the Minister on 16 December stating their concerns. Many contributors were women who reported facing lengthy travel on poor roads to reach work. They said that the arrangements do not contribute to a good work/life balance and outlined that the necessary childcare arrangements are not in place.

The review is just so ill-conceived that I must take this opportunity to call on the Minister for Social Development to shelve completely the strategic business review of jobs in benefits offices. I call formally on the Minister to do exactly that, to do it immediately, and without delay.

It has been said to me that, at best, the review is ill-conceived — particularly at this time it is having a hugely disruptive effect on the whole benefits system — and at worst it is unwise and irresponsible. I understand that Pat Doherty MP has also written to the Minister, and he has met with her to raise questions about equality impact assessments and how the absence of those impacts on workers in places such as Omagh and Strabane. People who work in jobs and benefits offices have emphasised to me the impact that it will have on their work-life balance, involving extra travelling time, and so on.

More than anything else, the issue is about the quality of service to the customer. The priority should be to retain and secure a quality, accessible benefits service for people, and to secure current satisfactory working arrangements for the valuable public-sector workers who carry out those administrative functions. The review is really about staff efficiencies; it is not about improving accessibility for applicants, or delivering a better service for customers. I am aware that there is considerable opposition to the strategic business review of the jobs and benefits office inside the Minister's own party. I noted in the Order Paper and the other documents that are provided by the Business Office that her party colleague MLAs in other constituencies have also been trying to raise this issue.

I call on the Minister for Social Development not to delay, not to pursue this foolish path, and to set aside immediately the strategic business review, which is not about caring for customers, but is really about management and staff efficiencies.

Mr Buchanan: I support the Adjournment topic. Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you have said that we have five minutes to speak, but if I run over that time, I

trust that you will give me a little leeway, as this is a very important issue for Omagh, and I would like the time to put forward the case. I thank the Business Office for ensuring that this important matter was brought to the Floor of the House, and also thank the Minister for being present for the debate. I hope that she will give due consideration to the concerns raised during the course of the debate and act upon them appropriately.

The strategic business review was initiated by the Social Security Agency in 2006, followed by the launch of a public consultation on 27 November 2008, which is due to close on Thursday 29 Jan 2009. That consultation includes proposals that, if carried through to fruition, will have devastating consequences for staff, for jobs, and most of all for the services continually provided in the Omagh jobs and benefits office to the most vulnerable in the community.

Although I am aware that the issue affects every constituency, I want to focus specifically on Omagh this evening. I will deal with three individual points — the staff, the jobs and the services. First, let us examine how the staff will be affected. The Omagh jobs and benefits office currently deals with the social fund, income support and jobseeker's allowance, and over the past 20 years has provided such an excellent level of service that the chief executive of the SSA has provided reports to the Minister, not only of targets being met, but of the excellent progress that has been made by the staff.

I commend those staff who, through their continual commitment, often while working with staff shortages, still deliver a first-class service for the community that should make any Department proud. However, the current proposals, which seek to relocate income support to the Foyle office in Londonderry, and jobseeker's allowance to the Enniskillen office, will mean that some staff will have a daily round trip in excess of 100 miles and others will have a daily round trip of 70 miles.

The knock-on consequences for staff who have commitments — such as taking their children to school or nursery — will effectively render it impossible for them to continue in their jobs if they are forced to relocate to Londonderry or Enniskillen.

Long travelling distances will also result in longer working days that will, in turn, affect the health of the staff. Their performance in work is likely to suffer because they will be stressed and tired as a direct result of the added travel and longer days away from home. I ask the Minister whether it makes sense for people to travel from Omagh to Londonderry while other people pass them as they travel from Londonderry to Omagh to work in offices. I cannot see the sense or the logic behind that.

In one of the local papers, the Minister said that the relocation of jobs would be within reasonable travelling distances. It takes one hour to travel from Omagh to Londonderry on a good day when there is not much traffic, and it can take one and a half hours when there is a lot of traffic or bad weather. Is that reasonable travelling time? Perhaps the Minister should come to West Tyrone and make those journeys. She may then begin to understand what the staff would face if the proposals become reality.

Let us examine the job situation. Under the Minister's proposals, those jobs are to be centralised. That is in complete contradiction to the Bain Report, which encouraged decentralisation. Where do the Minister's proposals fit into the Bain recommendations? I remind her that the regional development strategy identified Omagh as a main hub. It is the key town in the west, with a population of some 50,000 within a wider travel-to-work catchment of some 300,000 people.

A key feature of Omagh's economy has been the strength of its service sector, with 78% employment and over 50% of its workforce employed in the public sector. It also has significant development potential for office accommodation, which could be easily adapted for the decentralisation of central and Government jobs.

I was delighted to hear the announcement from TEREK Finlay this morning regarding the future of the Omagh plant. In the midst of today's uncertain economic climate, that company has taken steps to consolidate the position of its equipment with no planned redundancies. It has identified Omagh as a centre of excellence, and it has done what it could to make sure that it could remain there. However, rather than consolidating its position in Omagh, the Department for Social Development plans to wreak havoc in a service that delivers for the people, with the potential of job losses from the Omagh office, while completely ignoring the Bain Review, the regional development strategy and Workplace 2010.

Let us examine the service that is provided. What impact will the Minister's proposals have on the people who use the jobs and benefits office in Omagh? The impact on the public will be a severe reduction in the current service provision, as face-to-face contact will no longer be available on a walk-in basis. It will be by appointment only, which may not be available for weeks. Although there is much talk of a telephone system, the majority of people who require that service are elderly or are disabled in some way, which renders any telephone system inadequate to deal with the difficulties that they face on a daily basis. From talking to constituents who require face-to-face meetings with staff to resolve their difficulties, I know that no telephone system — irrespective of how good it may be — could compensate for such meetings.

Should the Minister refuse to listen and set aside her current proposals, she will do a great injustice to the most vulnerable people in the West Tyrone community who will, without doubt, suffer the consequences as a result.

7.00 pm

The consultation document is crystal clear. The review is not, as claimed, about delivering better services to customers; it is about staff efficiencies, which will be achieved through the centralisation of back-room staff, and that will deliver a severe blow to service-delivery standards. Therefore, I urge the Minister to review her decision and to ensure that vital public services, and adequate staffing levels, are retained in Omagh, so that a strong network can be provided to meet the needs of communities not only in Omagh but throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for your leeway.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I assure other Members that they will be afforded the same leeway — eight minutes in which to speak — because fewer Members will speak than was envisaged at the beginning of the debate.

Mr Elliott: Although I will put forward my case, I do not expect to require the extra leeway.

Job redevelopment — as I describe the process — is ongoing throughout the Province, so we are now thankful for public-sector jobs. In an economic downturn, particularly with respect to the construction industry and other sectors that are affecting employment levels in the west of the Province, public-sector jobs are vital. Omagh has one of the highest proportions of public-sector jobs outside the greater Belfast area.

A sea change appears to be taking place in Departments and agencies, which are moving away from affording customers — the public — front line, face-to-face access. The further that process continues, the more difficult it will be for people to access the services that they require. I am hugely concerned about the increasing reliance on telephones, email and, to some extent, the Post Office to access services. Those methods of communication do not have the same impact as face-to-face contact. Moreover, it is difficult for the most vulnerable people in society — the elderly, the disabled and people looking for work, who make so much use of public-sector services — to access services or get the information that they need.

Today, the Social Security Service issued a statement referring to that situation:

“Under the strategic business review, telephone arrangements to meet customers' needs will be enhanced and modernised to the latest industry standards.”

It should have used the word “tele-phoney”, because, having attempted to access Government agencies and Departments, I know that it can be an absolute nightmare — press 1 for this, 2 for that, and 28 for

something else. One must spend half an hour on the phone before reaching the person whom you want to talk to. Indeed, the new planning regime has adopted that system. However, out of respect for the flexibility that Mr Deputy Speaker has shown Members, I will not digress from the subject any further.

Customers in Omagh, like those in other parts of the Province, require face-to-face access. Therefore, I ask the Minister to review the provision of services. I want jobs to be decentralised to Omagh, Coleraine, Enniskillen and elsewhere, and that can be achieved by maintaining front-line services in the Social Security Agency and in other bodies, such as the Housing Executive.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This serious issue also affects Strabane, where I come from, so, although the Adjournment debate concerns services in Omagh, I support the motion. Given the hour, and the fact that it has been a long day, I appreciate the Minister's presence in the House.

I want to highlight the situation in Strabane. The general view is that the economic downturn has created a context in Strabane, where there is already a very low base.

I know that you have allowed some leeway, Mr Deputy Speaker, with regard to comments about other areas, and I will get on to the general topic. However, I want to put on record the situation in Strabane. It was raised yesterday by the MP for the area, Pat Doherty, and Councillor Michaela Boyle and Colman McCrossan, who deal with such issues in the constituency office daily.

Some 43 jobs in Strabane will be reduced to 10, and I want to put on record my concern about that. The Minister has a listening ear, and I want her to remember that statistic when we talk generally about the issue in Omagh, West Tyrone and elsewhere.

Mr Elliott mentioned the new "tele-phoney" system — that was very apt. I do not know how it is going to work. Automated call distribution — will this work? The experience of ringing a call centre is exactly as Mr Elliott described — press 1, and so on. There are some tunes that I know by heart, from ringing particular organisations.

I do not want that to happen in this instance, particularly as it will involve the most vulnerable in society, as has been said. It is those people who need to have face-to-face contact. One Member mentioned the importance of face-to-face contact; I think that it is a necessity. This morning, I spoke to my party colleague Mickey Brady about the issue. We were not talking about Strabane or Omagh specifically, but he said that there was no way that employment and support allowances could be resolved satisfactorily across phone lines. Applicants cannot be told how to fill in the forms over the phone. He has experience of this, and I would like the Minister to respond to that concern.

I was surprised to read that feedback from the Social Security Agency front line staff showed that most enquiries could be dealt with by phone. I am challenging that; that is not what we hear in our constituency offices — that most of the enquiries from the most vulnerable people in society, such as the elderly, the poor and people on low incomes, who need face-to-face contact, can be dealt with by phone. I was very surprised by that. I hope that I have quoted it correctly; I think that it came from a fit-for-purpose survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers. Social Security Agency front line staff said that most of the enquiries that they receive could be dealt with on the phone. That is not the information that we hear in our constituency offices.

The Minister has been in Strabane, in my constituency, a number of times. I hope that she thinks of West Tyrone, and of Strabane in particular. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome today's Adjournment debate. I thank the Member who proposed it and those who have participated. Although the subject of the debate is Omagh, where, I think, Mr McElduff's concerns are exaggerated, it allows me to put the Social Security Agency's strategic business review proposals into some perspective.

The publication of the proposals has generated a great deal of interest, but I am concerned about the amount of misinformation that has been circulated. Some people who are opposed to any change in the structures of the Social Security Agency have made claims about the proposals which range from wild speculation to simple untruths.

It is regrettable that much of the misinformation has come from the party that introduced the Adjournment debate, and I shall return to that point.

My aim is to ensure that the consultation is informed by balanced and measured discussions. Let me make it clear: no decisions have been taken, or will be taken, until we have had time to give full consideration to the responses to the consultation exercise. Incidentally, the consultation is still open, and Mr McElduff referred to the fact that it will remain open until Thursday 29 January. I appeal to everyone with views on the strategic business review — including Members of the House — to participate in the consultation. I repeat: no decisions have been taken.

Not only have no decisions been taken, but many of the claims that have been made about the proposals are entirely spurious. Under the agency's proposals, as they stand, there will be no office closures, no staff redundancies and no reduction in customer services. Customers who are entitled to benefits will continue to be serviced by their local office, and a walk-in, face-to-

face service will continue to be available. Anyone who says otherwise, such as Martina Anderson MLA who stated that in one of today's newspapers, is plainly wrong. However, plainly wrong is a regular experience for that Member.

The draft proposals do involve a significant amount of staff movement. I am concerned about that, and I have heard the views of Members here today. Of course, I do not wish to pre-empt anything that might flow from the consultation. Nevertheless, I have been aware for some time, not least from representations made by my party colleagues and fellow MLAs from across the Chamber, that important issues are involved. The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Tommy Gallagher told me this evening that he has constituents in Enniskillen who work in Omagh.

At the SDLP annual conference last weekend, I stated:

"I do not find acceptable a situation where hundreds of people will have to travel long distances to a new place of employment, particularly staff in part-time jobs or those on relatively low pay, or who have childcare responsibilities, and I am also aware that now is not a good time for major upheaval."

Nevertheless, the Social Security Agency cannot stand still. The current social security structures in Northern Ireland are over 40 years old. They are based on a service model that sees customers having to travel to offices, regardless of circumstances. Many of the people it serves have told the agency that if it were to introduce a free quality telephone service that would allow them to do business from the comfort and privacy of their own homes, that would be welcomed — and I take on board what Mrs McGill said.

At the same time, there is the desire for the existing face-to-face service to continue to be available locally. I want to emphasise the point that the package of modernisation proposals have been designed to complement — not replace — the existing quality front line service to customers. No existing front line services will be taken away as a consequence of these proposals, nor will anyone be forced to use the telephone, wait for a lengthy appointment, or deal with a call centre. They will be serviced by agency staff experienced in social security benefits, with the resources to resolve their enquiry. The real challenge is for the agency to deliver further improvements to the customer experience.

Members also spoke today about the potential loss of service caused by change. I want to emphasise that there will be no loss of service.

I will turn now to the issue of jobs. No member of staff will be made redundant. Indeed, just yesterday, I announced the recruitment of an additional 150 staff for the Social Security Agency, and more will follow if they are required.

Mrs McGill raised the issue of the employment and support allowance. I was concerned, because I knew that claimants could not get through on the telephone. As a result, we have appointed additional staff to deal with the high volume of telephone calls, and a large number of claims have already been completed through the telephone system. As of today, I have instructed officials to ensure that there is an MLA and MP hotline, as there is for other benefits, to ensure that public representatives have direct access to senior officials to resolve issues on employment and support allowance on behalf of their constituents.

Mr Elliott: There is an issue about cost savings, yet the Minister said that there will be no reduction in staff. I am trying to square the circle. Will the Minister clarify how we can ensure that there are no staff reductions in front line services and save money at the same time?

The Minister for Social Development: We are still in the midst of a consultation — there are only proposals on the table, and no decisions have been made. I am keen that there will be no diminution of service to our constituents, who are the people who urgently require the services provided by the Social Security Agency.

I must address a point that was made by one of Martina Anderson's colleagues. In the latest weekly sideswipe at my Department, he said of the review:

"It would create further levels of unemployment reducing staff levels, with up to 490 job losses."

That is totally wrong, but it is not surprising — Sinn Féin really must move on from that type of thing.

I am all too aware of the economic downturn and the need to ensure sufficient staffing to address increased unemployment registers. However, contrary to speculation, additional resources that were secured to address the current economic position do not remove my desire to improve the service. Central to the issue that we are discussing is the customer — the ordinary person in the street or the townland who requires our services and who should receive benefits if they are entitled to them.

I remind Members that the proposals are simply that — proposals. They are out for public consultation. I will listen carefully to all the views expressed and will not make any decisions until the consultation is complete. Mr McElduff mentioned the need for an equality impact assessment: that will be carried out. I gave Mr Doherty and his colleagues that assurance when I met them yesterday. I have also outlined areas where I have concerns.

There are shrill voices that make lots of noise but are devoid of any appreciation of the facts. Those people call on me to suspend the public consultation, but they will have to wait. The public shall have their say,

because that is their right. My Department and I will then do what is best for the people who use the agency, for the agency itself and for those who work in it.

Members raised many issues, most of which I addressed in my speech. If I have not answered any of those issues fully, I will write to the relevant Members.

Adjourned at 7.19 pm.