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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Transfer 2010

Monday 2 February 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

### ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Wells:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer to an item on today's Order Paper and to Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(3). When the Business Committee discussed the motion on the Consultative Group on the Past, no one could have known just how controversial the issue was to become.

Two amendments have been considered and accepted for discussion, and many Members wish to have the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. However, because of the amendments, unfortunately, only three Members from my party will have an opportunity to speak. I understand that many other Members are in a similar position. Is there any provision under Standing Order 10(2) or Standing Order 10(3), which will allow a suspension of Standing Orders to enable an extension of one hour to be added to the time allocated to the debate?

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you for your point of order. There is no such provision under those Standing Orders. In fact, a motion to suspend Standing Orders must be tabled on the Order Paper. I refer the Member to page 55 of the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion'. There are no provisions available today to allow for the suspension of Standing Orders.

**Mr Wells:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is clearly a glaring omission in Standing Orders when an issue of such great importance comes before the House at short notice, yet it is not possible to suspend Standing Orders to allocate extra time for the debate. Can the matter be referred to the Committee on Procedures to consider whether we can find a way round the problem?

**Mr Speaker:** I am happy to do that for the Member. The House does not have the authority to extend the time for a particular debate. That is very much set with the Business Committee. It alone decides the time that is allocated to a debate in the Chamber.

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on Transfer 2010.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Nuair a bunaíodh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin i mí Bealtaine 2007, bhí ceist an oideachais ar cheann de na príomhcheisteanna a bhí againn. Tá an méid seo amhlaidh go fóill féin. Ba é an 11 plus a rinneadh anuraidh an ceann deiridh.

When the Executive came into being in May 2007, education was one of the most pressing issues facing us; the same is still true today. Last year's 11-plus will be the last. I have reflected long and hard on what has been said to me over the past 16 months. In addition, I have taken detailed and considered account of the changing environment in which our education system is expected to function.

The education debate has become narrowly focused on the contentious issue of academic selection. In an ideal world, the debate of the past year would have been much broader. I cannot defend a system that is built around and geared towards the needs of 40% of our children. As Minister of Education, I am responsible for the education of all our children. Every year, thousands of children are failed by our education system. For the most part, they are already disadvantaged. They attend the schools that are suffering most from the impact of falling school numbers.

From the outset, therefore, it is important to state that the process that we are now involved in is one of necessary change. It is not simply change for change's sake. It is a process of change with the sole aim of building on the successes of the current system, while addressing the serious inequalities and weaknesses that also undoubtedly exist.

I have always been clear that I do not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach. I believe strongly in equality and social justice. I wish to have a system that is child-centred, and which delivers the educational outcomes that society needs for the challenges that we will face in the years ahead. That means building a system that will sustain a range of different types of schools and provision and which values them all equally. We cannot ignore the challenges that are presented to our system by underachievement and demographic decline. We must ensure that finite resources are used efficiently and are not wasted. It is much better to see the decline in the numbers of schoolchildren as an opportunity to bring about well-managed change that can deliver better outcomes for all.

As I have said, my responsibility as Minister of Education extends to all children and all schools. I cannot stand by and watch good-quality secondary schools and their teachers bear the brunt of demographic decline. As more and more grammar schools take in a greater percentage of children with B2, C and D grades at 11, in pursuit of numbers and funding, the pointlessness of an academic test at 11 is underlined. The flip side of that is a corresponding reduction in the number of pupils and teachers in the secondary sector.

Tá an fócas atá agam dírithe ar an bpáiste agus ar an oideachas a sholáthraimid dóibh; níl sé dírithe ar institiúidí a chaomhnú san fhoirm ina bhfuil siad faoi láthair díreach mar mhaithe leo féin. Lena rá i mbeagán focal, ní mór tús áite a thabhairt do riachtanais an pháiste seachas do riachtanais nó do cheanglais institiúid ar bith. Caithfidh an institiúid freastal a dhéanamh ar an bpáiste – agus ní an bealach eile thart.

My focus is on the children, and on the education that we deliver for them. It is not on preserving institutions in their current form simply for the sake of it. In short, the needs of the child must come before the needs or requirements of any institution. The institution must serve the child, not the other way round.

I appreciate those people in the grammar sector who continue to deliver a quality education for many children. My proposals will not affect that level of quality in the slightest; indeed, they will enhance it. However, a small number of schools cannot hold the vast majority to ransom. It is simply not tenable for around 30 schools to dictate education policy in their own narrow interests.

Those who have sought to prevent change must reflect on the reality of the new political landscape that we now live in.

This is not the old Stormont regime, nor is it government by remote control from Westminster. Local Ministers from across the community, who have been elected by local people and are accountable to them, are taking decisions. Republicans, nationalists and unionists are here on an equal basis. I was elected on the basis of a programme of change, and I intend to act on that. For decades, British Ministers ignored the weaknesses in our education system and avoided the contentious issues. A British, or indeed a unionist, education Minister would never have scrapped the 11-plus.

Sinn Féin's approach is different; we are not afraid to tackle the difficult issues. We are committed to a programme of change that delivers equality and social justice, addresses disadvantage and tackles institutional discrimination in education and every other facet of society. That programme will deliver for disadvantaged communities, nationalist and unionist alike. The children of the Shankill Road, for example, have been consistently

failed and disadvantaged by academic selection and rejection. I am not prepared to ignore that reality.

Those who put forward the notion that the only way in which quality education can be delivered is through academic selection ignore the reality across the world. In almost every other country, children attain quality education without there being recourse to academic selection. The best education systems in the world are non-selective.

Is cuid de chreatlach oideachasúil leathan í réiteach na ceiste faoi aistriú iarbhunscoile, réiteach atá bunaithe ar an gcuraclam athbhreithnithe nua a bhfuil soláthar roghanna níos fearr, deiseanna níos fearr agus torthaí níos fearr mar aidhm aige. Tá níos mó i gceist leis seo ná an díospóireacht faoin aistriú iarbhunscoile féin a bhí mar phríomhábhar sna ceannlínte le cúpla mí anuas.

The resolution of the issue of post-primary transfer is part of a much wider educational jigsaw, based on the new revised curriculum, which is about delivering improved choice, opportunity and outcomes. The debate is about much more than post-primary transfer, the issue that has dominated the headlines in recent months.

At present, some young people have as few as eight subjects from which to choose at A level. The entitlement framework will ensure that young people have a choice of at least 24 courses at Key Stage 4, and 27 at post-16, with a balance that ensures that at least one third of those courses are academic; one third vocational or technical; and the remaining third made up of an appropriate combination of the two. Those substantial changes will deliver positive outcomes.

Schools and colleges will have to co-operate, and share facilities and expertise, in order to deliver that expanded curriculum. In March 2008, I announced plans for area-based planning to facilitate the construction of a new system. That work is progressing. In December 2007, I announced in the Assembly the framework around which children would transfer to post-primary level; that the following year's 11-plus would be the final examination of that type; and that, in future, children would transfer on the basis of a menu of criteria — community, geographical and family. I also committed myself to further consultation with education stakeholders and political colleagues in the Assembly and Executive.

As a result of that consultation, I proposed a compromise, which, if accepted, would have allowed for a phasing-out of academic selection over three years. In May 2008, I brought those proposals to a meeting of the Executive, but DUP and UUP Ministers refused to discuss them. I offered to hold a single-issue Executive meeting on the matter. Again, the DUP rejected that proposal. I also wrote to every Executive Minister, offering to discuss my proposals with each

on a one-to-one basis. No DUP Minister availed himself or herself of that opportunity.

An tseachtain seo caite, chuir mé páipéar faoi bhráid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin arís; agus arís eile ní dhearnadh aon phlé air.

Tríd an bpróiseas ar fad, rinne mé iarracht teacht ar chomhaontú le comhghleacaithe ar an gCoiste Feidhmiúcháin agus mé ar lorg reachtaíochta don bhealach nua chun tosaigh.

Last week, I again submitted a paper for the Executive's consideration, and, again, it was not discussed.

I have attempted throughout to reach a consensus with colleagues in the Executive, and have sought to legislate for the new way forward. However, the DUP and UUP made their position clear. They support a system that was designed in the previous century to meet the needs of a previous century.

On many occasions, particularly in the Assembly, I have been disappointed by the nature of the debate. Instead of focusing on children, parents and teachers, some Members have sought to reduce the debate to personal abuse, insults and base politicking. I have refused to engage in that sort of nonsense. I am not prepared to allow an issue of such importance to be reduced to a contest of who can shout loudest. The issue is too important for that, and I believe genuinely that we could, and should, have had a much more constructive engagement over the past year.

*12.15 pm*

Despite the consensus among educational stakeholders on the need for change, that has not been mirrored at a political level. Indeed, it is clear from the public contributions made by the DUP and UUP that they will continue to block agreement, and will prevent legislation passing through the Assembly. However, we are where we are. The time for decision has been reached. The 11-plus is gone forever, and I welcome and celebrate that achievement. Regulations governing transfer procedures end this year. I have exhausted all the options for achieving agreed new regulations. We now need to make decisions about transfer 2010. I will not allow the DUP and UUP to block the process of necessary and well-managed change. I now intend to move forward. Parents, teachers and pupils need clarity and certainty.

Sa pháipéar a chuir mé faoi bhráid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin mhol mé moltaí comhréiteacha trína mbeadh trí bliana iontrálacha déthaobhacha. Dhiúltaigh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin iad a phlé, agus mar sin de níl mé sásta creatlach reachtach a iarraidh do na moltaí seo agus tá mé anois ag tarraingt siar an choimisiúin a thug mo Roinn do CCEA teist a ullmhú do phróiseas aistrithe 2010. Ní féidir le mo Roinn teist a chur ar fáil a mbainfear úsáid aisti i gcomhthéacs iontrálacha gan

chreatlach reachtach a shainmhíniú úsáid na teiste sin. Mar sin de, i dtaca leis an bpróiseas um iontrálacha iarbhunscóile sa bhliain 2010 ní bheidh teist á cur ar fáil ag an Roinn Oideachais.

In my paper to the Executive, I proposed compromise proposals for three years of bilateral admissions. The Executive refused to discuss them, so I am no longer pursuing a legislative framework for those proposals. I am, therefore, withdrawing my Department's commission to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to produce a test for use in the 2010 transfer process. My Department cannot provide a test for use in an admissions context without a legal framework defining that use. Therefore, for the post-primary admissions process in 2010, there will be no Department of Education-provided test.

In the absence of regulations, my Department is issuing guidance. Schools will be obliged in law to "have regard" for that guidance. On equality grounds, but also because of the risks of dysfunction, the guidance recommends that schools do not use academic admissions criteria. If a school chooses to use such criteria, it will have to provide for itself the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that such criteria require.

The guidance consists, first, of a clear, factual description of the legal context in which post-primary admissions will operate, and in which there is much continuity. Secondly, it contains recommendations to schools on admissions criteria. The guidance recommendations have been issued for consultation.

Moltar sa treoir go mbaineann gach scoil úsáid as modh mar chéad chritéar a chinnteoidh go mbaineann iarrthóirí atá i dteideal béilí saora scoile iontrálacha amach ag an leibhéal céanna agus a fhaigheann gach iarrthóir eile.

The guidance recommends that all schools use as their first criterion a measure that will ensure that applicants who are entitled to free school meals gain admissions at the same rate as all other applicants. For example, if 20% of applications to a school are from applicants who are entitled to free school meals, at least 20% of the school's places should be allocated to free-school-meal applicants. That is in order to address the current situation, whereby such children have been disadvantaged in access to grammar school places. One in 17 children in academically selective schools is entitled to free school meals, while one in four children in other schools has the same entitlement.

Thereafter, the guidance recommends, in no order, the following criteria: sibling; eldest child; feeder or named primary school; nearest suitable school; parish with nearest suitable school; catchment area with nearest suitable school; and random selection, which is a tiebreaker. The guidance recommends that the

geographical criteria — the parish and catchment area — are used in conjunction with the nearest suitable school criterion as a means of ensuring that rural and outlying applicants are not disadvantaged by their address. The school categories that define school suitability for the purposes of this measure, and for transport, will be as they are now. The guidance will assure parents, children and schools that although there will be no admissions criteria regulation for transfer 2010, much of the process will be as before.

The role of the Department of Education will be largely unchanged, and it will continue to set the admission and enrolment numbers for each school. Post-primary-school boards of governors will continue to be the statutory admissions authorities for their schools, and will continue to draw up and publish admissions criteria. Transfer booklets will continue to be issued to parents from November 2009 or December 2009, and those will contain each post-primary school's admission criteria for admissions in 2010. Primary schools will continue to assist parents in advising them on the best options for their children and will assist in completing the transfer form in which parents will show, in rank order, their preferred post-primary schools.

Primary schools are already teaching the revised curriculum. My Department and I will ensure that that continues and that the curriculum is no longer distorted by the process of selection. From February 2010, parents and children will apply using the transfer form and by listing their preferences. The system of preference application will be administered in precisely the same manner as is currently used; where schools are oversubscribed, post-primary-school boards of governors must select children for admission by application of the criteria. Admission decisions will be issued in May 2010.

In accordance with a 2006 legislative obligation, one new element is that the Department of Education will establish a body, which, in respect of children with exceptional circumstances, will arrange admissions to suitable post-primary schools outside the standard competitive process. That body is intended to be for those children with compelling medical reasons to attend a particular school and for looked-after children. Details on that will be given as part of the transfer 2010 communication process.

Beidh mé ag scríobh chuig príomhoidí agus chuig boird gobharnóirí bunscoileanna agus iarbhunscoileanna agus chuig boird oideachais agus leabharlainne; beidh mé ag scríobh go díreach chuig tuismitheoirí freisin. Tabharfaidh mise soiléireacht don phróiseas atá anois againn agus tabharfaidh mé muinín do thuismitheoirí go mbeidh próiseas bainistithe iontrála ann, cé nach ndéanfar rialáil ar chritéir iontrála sa dlí.

I will write to the principals and boards of governors of primary and post-primary schools, and to the education and library boards. I will communicate directly with parents. I will bring clarity to the situation that we are now in and reassure parents that although the admissions criteria will not be regulated in law, there will be a well-managed admissions process. There is still much to be gained from discussions around the key decisions made at 14 years of age, and I will continue to work on that with schools. The area-based planning exercise, which focused on the entitlement framework, will help to inform those discussions.

The guidance recommendations will be equality proofed and are being issued for a 12-week consultation: comments are welcome within that period. What are not subject to consultation are the facts, as set out in the guidance, about the legal position in which the process of post-primary admissions in 2010 will operate. From today, schools should have what they need in order to be able to respond to the anxiety of the parents of those primary 6 children due to transfer in 2010. In particular, grammar schools now know that they must decide whether to attempt to use academic admissions criteria, through the operation of their own tests, or, to cease to use academic admissions criteria. I hope that grammar schools chose to stop academic selection, not just because of the serious difficulties that are likely to accompany any independently operated procedures but because of the interests and needs of the children involved. Transfer 2010 represents, for the first time, an opportunity for all grammar schools to make their excellent provision available in a fair manner.

Transfer 2010 represents an opportunity to spare all children the ordeal of assessment for admissions purposes. It represents an opportunity to end the inequality of ability-based transfer in which grammar schools are disproportionately the preserve of better-off pupils.

I understand why a school with long-established traditions of academic excellence will wish to continue those, and I want such schools to continue those traditions. The Department's admissions guidance asks a grammar school to sustain those traditions, not by exclusion but by the quality of its teaching and learning. All grammar schools should ask whether, in order to succeed, they require an admissions process that fails most children. I believe that the breakaway grammar schools will, in time, accept that their pupils are better served if they are part of, rather than outside, the mainstream education system.

I am also convinced that when political colleagues see the educationalists working within the guidance and delivering a quality education for all children, much of the rancour of recent months will be replaced by a realisation that the old system could not continue. Perhaps, at that time, we will return to the issue of legislation.

Idir an dá linn, tá an treoír againn anois a dhéanfaidh rialáil ar iontrálacha chuig iarbhunscoileanna sa bhliain 2010. Iarraim ar na hiarbhunscoileanna uile breithniú cúramach a dhéanamh air seo agus a bheith ar chomhsheasamh linn agus córas á chruthú a dhíríonn ar riachtanais na bpáistí uile sa mhílaois seo. Bogaimis ó chóras atá bunaithe ar phribhléid agus ar stádas, ó chóras diúltaithe agus teipe agus leagaimis bunsráitheanna córais atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chothroime agus ar shármhaitheas; córas a thugann deis do na páistí ar fad a gcumas féin a bhaint amach; agus córas a chaitheann go cothrom leis na páistí ar fad.

In the meantime, we now have guidance to govern admissions to post-primary schools in 2010. I ask that all post-primary schools consider that guidance carefully and join with the rest of us in creating a system that is tailored to the needs of all children in this millennium. Let us move away from a system that is built on privilege and status — a system of rejection and failure. Let us lay the foundations of a system that is based on social justice, equality and excellence — a system that gives all children a chance to realise their full potential and which treats all children equally. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** Today marks the public admission of the failure of the Minister of Education to gain consensus. Regrettably, the Minister of Education of the Northern Ireland Executive has pulled down the shutters on consensus and on any way of reaching an agreement. Unfortunately, unlike her ministerial colleagues in Sinn Féin, she has taken an approach of do as I say, not as I do.

I want the Minister to be clear on a number of issues and, perhaps for the first time in this House, give us an answer. Much of the substance of the statement is the old rhetoric of the past. Has the Minister considered whether, without Executive agreement, she has the power to bring forward the guidance that she is publishing? Has the Minister taken specific legal advice on that issue in light of the provisions of the ministerial code and section 28A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which states that a Minister has no ministerial authority to take decisions that are, strictly speaking, Executive decisions? Those include significant or controversial matters. I am sure that the Minister will agree that transfer 2010 is a significant and controversial matter.

Will the Minister publicly publish today the correspondence that she has received in the past few weeks from the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE), the Catholic Heads Association (CHA) and the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) with regard to the use of a CCEA paper?

Will the Minister make all that information available today to the Education Committee and to Members, in order that they can see the nature of that correspondence and of the silo that she occupies alone, behind closed shutters?

12.30 pm

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for his question. First, no credible alternative has been provided to me. The only alternatives that have been provided by Members of the party opposite were alternatives with the status quo. I am not prepared to continue with the status quo, for reasons that I have outlined often. I am not alone in that. The vast majority of people want an end to the 11-plus and the creation of an education system that is fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. That is what we are doing.

The only proposals that I have had are to keep the status quo, which is an attempt to block change. Change will happen, because it must. Change must happen for our children. We cannot continue to fail children in the numbers that we are at present.

In relation to the question about powers, I have the legal power to issue guidance, which is what I am doing. I also have the power to ensure that last year's was the final 11-plus. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** Thankfully, the 11-plus has gone. I am acting within the legal advice that I have received.

On the matter of consultation, I made it clear in my statement that we now have a 12-week consultation period. I look forward to receiving people's detailed proposals on the Department's guidance. I will ensure that all such proposals are studied.

**Mr Speaker:** I once again remind the House of the convention that applies to ministerial statements. The Chairpersons of Committees get quite a bit of latitude when introducing their questions. That has not changed. However, from here on in, I expect short introductions to questions.

More than 29 Members want to question the Minister on her statement. If Members make lengthy introductions or ask multiple questions, we will not get everybody in. If a single question is asked, with a short introduction, the vast majority of Members will be able to ask their questions. It is important that Members use a short introduction and an actual question.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. As she said, parents, teachers and pupils need clarity. I believe that the measures that the Minister has set out provide that clarity. I welcome particularly the Minister's

commitment to write to boards of governors and to teachers to provide more information.

What advantages will there be for schools that follow the Minister's guidance?

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat. The advantage for schools that follow departmental guidance is that they will be part and parcel of the education system. They will not be operating outside that system. They will help to build and to show leadership in forging an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century — one that creates pathways for all our young people, whether academically inclined, vocationally inclined, or both.

**Mr B McCrea:** I was tempted to congratulate the Minister on her ability to build a consensus. Sadly, I cannot do so. I have difficulty with any statement from the Minister that uses "consensus" when the policies are so divisive, uses "equality" when the Minister discriminates against hard-working parents and pupils, and talks about "democracy" when what is meant is dictatorship.

The question that the Minister must answer has been put by other Members: will she publish the legal advice that she has received, in order that we may determine, once and for all, whether we are disappearing into an 'Alice in Wonderland' regime or getting down to the proper governance of the Province?

Will she admit that as far as the people of Northern Ireland are concerned, she has done more than any other politician to bring the Assembly into disrepute?

**The Minister of Education:** Rather than focusing on legal advice and guidance, it would be much better to focus on children's needs. I would much prefer to hear the Members opposite talk about the children of different working-class communities who are failed by the current system. Efforts must be concentrated towards those children. Clarity and certainty must be provided for parents, pupils and teachers. I have provided those in my statement. I ask Members —  
[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** I ask Members to put children, not legal debate or ideology, at the centre of the issue.

**Mr D Bradley:** Is it not the case that the Minister, rather than telling the Assembly anything new, reiterates existing non-academic transfer arrangements, which will do little or nothing to alleviate the anxiety of parents, pupils and teachers? It does nothing to avoid the unregulated system that will fill the vacuum that has been left by the Minister.

**The Minister of Education:** I note that the Member's party is opposed to academic selection. I

very much look forward to working with it and, indeed, all other parties to advance transfer 2010. I have explained clearly how transfer will work. I hope that all schools will choose to work with the Department; the vast majority of them will do so. There are 1,238 schools in the North of Ireland. A small percentage of them want to operate a breakaway system. Let us put the needs of 100% of children first. I look forward to the SDLP working with me and fulfilling its manifesto commitments.

**Mr Lunn:** The statement refers to the guidance that will govern admissions in 2010. It states that schools will be obliged, in law, to have regard for that guidance. Will the Minister explain what the terms "in law" and "have regard" mean, because they seem contradictory? If something is in law, it must be observed; if it needs only to have regard paid to it — for which, clearly, there is no legal basis at present — that is a contradiction.

**The Minister of Education:** For schools to "have regard" for the Department's guidance means that they cannot disregard it. It means that the guidance is an important document for them to consider when they develop their admissions criteria and in performing their roles within the admissions process. If a board of governors does not comply with its duty to have regard to guidance that is issued by the Department under article 16(b) of the Education (NI) Order 1997, the Department can issue a directive under article 101 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 to instruct it to do so. The Department can also consider issuing a directive under article 101 if the admissions criteria that are set up by a board of governors contravene any statutory provisions, such as equality legislation, for example.

**Miss McIlveen:** At last, the Minister has conceded that she cannot abolish academic selection. She has failed to answer the question that was asked by my colleague Mervyn Storey and by Mr Basil McCrea. For the record, therefore, what authority has the Minister received from the Executive to launch consultation on that guidance? Furthermore, what legal authority does she have to do that in the first instance?

She has been particularly evasive about the legal advice that she has received. Where did that legal advice come from? Did it come from the Departmental Solicitor's Office? Did she take advice from outside the system?

**The Minister of Education:** I approached the Executive on two occasions to discuss compromise proposals. The party opposite refused to even discuss those proposals. In the interests of parents, pupils and teachers, I have taken legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office. I have the power to issue guidance, which I have duly announced today. I

take my equality duties seriously. I have ensured that there will be a full consultation period.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister on her statement. I agree with her that the institutions must serve the child rather than the other way round; it is important to remember that. Will she outline the differences between the transfer systems in 2009 and 2010? Perhaps that will provide clarity for those in the Assembly who do not seem to be listening.

**The Minister of Education:** The difference between transfer 2009 and transfer 2010 is that, in 2010, children will not be selected on the basis of two one-hour tests provided by the Department of Education. In little more than four or five days, many children will receive the results of the test through their doors. They have already suffered the trauma of doing the test, and to add insult to injury, many of them will suffer the further trauma of receiving a piece of paper telling them that they have failed the 11-plus and cannot get into the school that they want to get into; that is the reality of the situation, no matter how we dress it up.

The difference between transfer 2009 and transfer 2010 is that the departmental guidance will ensure that, in 2010, children transfer on the basis of equality, social justice and excellence. The guidance will ensure that children have access to a wide range of schools that can meet their needs.

**Mr McCausland:** As a representative of the greater Shankill area, I must say that it is totally inconsistent, if not hypocritical, for the Minister to refer to the children of the Shankill to support her arguments, given that she withdrew funding programmes that were intended to support schools in that area. That shows how much she cares about those children.

This morning, Gerry Adams said that the Minister of Education:

“is charged with implementing Sinn Féin policy”.

Will the Minister acknowledge that the St Andrews Agreement secured the retention of the right of schools to select on the basis of academic criteria? Therefore, given that Sinn Féin is only one of four parties in a mandatory coalition, will she also acknowledge that she cannot implement Sinn Féin policy by prohibiting selection on the basis of academic criteria?

**The Minister of Education:** I refute the allegations that schools on the Shankill have not received the funding that they need.

**Mr McCausland:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** Schools on the Shankill have received funding, and I am glad that they do. I ask the Member to look at the statistics of what is

happening to young people and schools on the Shankill. Just like young people from the Falls, New Lodge, Creggan and other areas, children from the Shankill are not getting access to the education that they deserve. The reason for that is not due to any failure on the part of secondary schools — it is because of the failure of the system.

We have systemic failure; the system needs to be changed, and that is what I am doing. The changes that we are implementing will benefit children from the Shankill; the changes will benefit all children rather than just a small number of children. Once again, I ask everyone to work with me so that we can bring about those changes. Members know that I have prioritised the problem of underachievement; I have raised the issue at every single North/South Ministerial Council meeting. It is top of the agenda of every North/South Ministerial Council meeting, such as the one in Derry last week, and that will continue to be the case.

**Mr Elliott:** The Minister has continued her confusion in respect of the Province’s education system. In light of the non-answer that she gave to Mr McCausland’s question, I once again press the Minister to clarify that she will accept an academic selection process that may be used by post-primary schools in the Province.

**The Minister of Education:** I urge all post-primary schools throughout the North to administer the guidance that the Department is sending out today. I urge post-primary schools to work with us in changing the system. I have also made it clear that I do not think that any school should use academic selection, and the departmental guidance does not recommend academic selection. We do not need academic selection because it is irrelevant. We are in a new century, and we need to move forward on the basis of social justice, equality and academic excellence.

**Mr Adams:** On a point of order. Is it in order for the Chairperson — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am happy to take a point of order after the ministerial statement.

12.45 pm

**Mrs M Bradley:** Does the Minister agree that this debate will not comfort parents or teachers? If the Executive had discussed the paper at last Thursday’s meeting, how different would the content of today’s statement have been?

**The Minister of Education:** I am thankful that the paper brings clarity and certainty, and, as I said, I will communicate the information to parents, pupils and all schools. I would have preferred — had we achieved compromise — to have discussed the issue at the Executive in May. However, its inclusion on the agenda was blocked.

Furthermore, I would have preferred to have discussed it at the Executive last Thursday, but the DUP blocked its inclusion on the agenda. That party must ask itself questions: why is it afraid to create a world-class education system for all our children? How does blocking a discussion at the Executive help children in areas that DUP Members represent, such as Kilcooley, Shankill and Rathcoole? I suggest that it does not.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire inniu. I welcome the Minister's statement on the transfer test.

Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire maidir leis an teist CCEA.

The Minister mentioned the CCEA test that will form part of her compromise proposals. Given her statement today, what is the future and status of that test?

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat. The test was a contingency for an agreement. A test cannot function without a legislative framework that defines and regulates how it will be used. In the interests of compromise, my proposals featured a test in order to give grammar schools three years to adjust to a long-term future without selection and tests. That proposal will now not progress because others were not capable of equivalent concession and refused even to allow the proposals to be included on the agenda of the Executive meeting.

We need to put children and their needs — not institutions or tests — at the core. Over the years, the system has failed too many children, and from now on, the child will be placed at the centre in order to ensure equality and social justice for all children.

**Mr Poots:** I note that three languages have been spoken today, and that the Speaker received a translation of only one. The third language, gibberish, was not translated. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Poots:** Does the Minister acknowledge that she has moved from saying "I will" to "I wish" and that she can now do nothing — legally or with the consensus of the House or the Executive — to prevent grammar schools from applying academic selection as a criterion?

**The Minister of Education:** Bueno, gracias por lo que ha dicho. A mí me gustan las lenguas y creo que es muy importante que hay un debate muy bueno en esta casa. Como Edwin Poots, creo que es importante que las lenguas estan en las aulas.

I am glad that the Member supports languages. It is important to support languages, and the revised curriculum will ensure that we have the opportunity to teach different languages. While our children in P7 and P6 are practising tests, children in other European countries are learning languages. If Members travel

abroad, they will see children from different countries speaking English, Spanish, French and German fluently. I share the Member's huge interest in languages.

The second part of the Member's question relates to powers. The real stories are that the 11-plus is gone and that, under transfer 2010, children will transfer from primary schools to post-primary schools on the basis of fair admissions criteria.

If schools choose to become breakaway schools, or to depart from the system, that is up to them. However, I would ask them to put children at the centre; that is what I am going to do. For too long, everyone was making policies without thinking about the children. Think about those children as they get the results of that test next Saturday morning. Think about them. It is not fair.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and the fact that she is giving all children a chance to realise their full potential, and that she is creating a system that will treat all children equally. How will the guidance on admissions for children who are entitled to free school meals work? In addition, how would the Minister respond to those on the opposite Benches who claim that she is involved in social engineering? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Education:** What we have at the moment is social engineering, whereby working class children are disproportionately affected and disadvantaged. In relation to the admissions quota for children entitled free school meals, currently children who are entitled to free school meals are not transferred fairly. One in four non-grammar children is entitled to free school meals; one in 17 grammar children is entitled to free school meals. On top of that, children who have special needs are much more likely to attend secondary schools, so secondary schools have a lot of challenges in respect of the education that they provide. I want to put on record that many of them do an excellent job in very difficult circumstances.

The admissions quota that my guidance recommends will ensure precisely that applicants who are entitled to free school meals have exactly the same chance of admission as all other children. I am levelling an old inequality, not creating a new one. That criterion would not mean, as some have suggested, bussing around large numbers of children — and certainly not to the degree that it is done at present. I was looking at statistics in the Department on Friday, and it is shocking to see the number of young people who are bussed in to Belfast from other board areas. For those who are concerned about school closures and rural schools being affected, that is one of the key issues that must be examined.



**Mr Ross:** I note the Minister's vision for 2010. It is certainly clear that the vision is not 20/20 if those are the proposals that she brings forward. I was interested to hear the Minister say that she was attempting to find consensus with colleagues. If that is the case, why did the Minister refuse to set up a subgroup of the Executive, as has been the case for other controversial issues?

**The Minister of Education:** I wanted the Executive, as the highest authority, to discuss the proposals, because the education of our children is very important, and I know that all Ministers are interested in being part of those discussions. On two occasions I brought my compromise proposals to the Executive. On two occasions, the UUP and DUP refused to discuss them. I have, therefore, brought forward guidance. It is more important that the entire Executive discuss the proposals than a subcommittee. I also said that I would have meetings with all my Executive colleagues, and I wrote to them to that effect. No DUP Executive Minister responded to say that he or she wanted a meeting. I look forward to meeting to discuss the guidance, and to hearing people's comments during the 12-week consultation period.

**Mr K Robinson:** I listened carefully to the Minister's concern for the children of the Shankill Road. Perhaps she will do something for them by addressing composite classes, the underfunding of schools on the Shankill Road, and pupil:teacher ratios in Shankill Road schools, along with other primary schools. The Minister's statement refers to establishing a body to deal with exceptional circumstances. How will that body define exceptional circumstances, and how will it be assembled?

**The Minister of Education:** With regard to the Member's first point, of course all the policies that we are bringing forward — a jigsaw of policies that are interconnected, as I said in my statement — are to ensure that we deal with educational underachievement, and the Shankill Road is one of the areas in which that must be dealt with.

I am considering and reviewing the common-funding formula so that we can target on the basis of need and get money to the schools that have many disadvantaged pupils. That is very important, and I know that the Member shares my view. I have also put a serious focus on underachievement by establishing a literacy and numeracy task force and 'Every School a Good School'. We will not deal with underachievement overnight, but we will improve it.

Members will be aware that the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate issued a report last week. The chief inspector is in his first year in post, and his report was very interesting. He said that almost two thirds of year 12 pupils achieve at least five GCSE subjects, but that figure drops to just over one half when English and maths are included. He also

said that almost 1,000 pupils leave school each year without any GCSE qualifications. That concerns me greatly. Nobody in this House would like their children — after 12 years of school — to leave without any qualifications at all. That is simply not acceptable.

The Member asked a very discerning question about the exceptional-circumstances procedure. That is a very important procedure, so we will issue regulations and consult on those.

**Mr Gallagher:** I return to the Minister's point about welcoming and celebrating the end of the 11-plus. The real story is that the Minister still does not have a system to replace the 11-plus. The guidance that is before us today is a poor substitute for regulations.

Why is the Minister not giving more attention to the age of 14, which is a key age in the lifetime of schoolchildren? If she made proposals and listened to some of the partners in education, the Minister would find a great deal of support for a way forward based on a 14-plus arrangement.

**The Minister of Education:** The end of the 11-plus may not be the real story for the Member and for other people, but it is certainly the real story for the children who will not have to sit the 11-plus. For too long, too many of our children have sat a high-stakes test that classified a huge percentage of them as failures and gave them unequal pathways in their lives ahead. Thankfully, the good news story is that there is no 11-plus. We now have very clear guidance with very clear admissions criteria. I look forward to working with all the schools on the matter.

I have placed huge emphasis on the age of 14, as have the area-based planning groups that I set up. That is a much better age for children to make choices that determine pathways. At the age of 14, young people at least have power in making those choices. At the age of 10 or 11, it is not the children who make the choices. We need to empower our young people so that they are active participants.

Last week, Reg Empey and I launched a career strategy. Then — and again during my statement today — I said that 14 is one of the key ages. The SDLP is opposed to academic selection, so rather than carping at the proposals, I ask that party to join with me in bringing about the badly needed change in our education system. I very much look forward to working with the SDLP.

**Mr Weir:** Today, we have heard so much wishful thinking from the Minister that she would be better off sending her proposals to the 'Jim'll Fix It' programme rather than to the Executive, so much are they grounded in fantasy.

The Minister made a concession to my colleague Miss McIlveen in relation to the Departmental Solicitor's Office. In the interests of clarity and transparency, will

she outline the issues on which she sought legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and will she confirm whether she will publish the legal advice that she received from that office?

1.00 pm

**The Minister of Education:** I have brought forward guidance under article 30 of the 2006 Order, which gives the Department of Education the power to issue admissions guidance. Once again, rather than putting the interests of children first, a party is reverting to legal argument. Anyone who is interested in the future of children would not have blocked the discussion of transfer 2010 at the Executive table. Even at this stage, I ask the DUP to reconsider its approach to this matter. Let us put children at the centre, because that is what we are here to do.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Member who spoke previously should note that 'Jim'll Fix It' and unionist domination can only be found in history — they are over.

I welcome the Minister's proposals, which are a step forward. I too regret the failure by the parties opposite to reach a political accommodation on this matter. However, we must make progress and deliver definitive approaches to educating children. The Minister will be aware that several grammar schools — regardless of the sector that they are from — will put pressure on primary schools to teach towards a test. What support will the Minister give to primary schools to guard against such pressure?

**The Minister of Education:** Sin ceist an-mhaith. That is an important question. I have been meeting with primary-school principals, and, last week, in Hilltown, County Down, I met some principals to discuss proposals for transfer 2010 and how to create a more equal system. Thankfully, the vast majority of primary schools are delighted that the curriculum will no longer be distorted by the 11-plus.

I have discussed the revised curriculum with principals, and there is a statutory duty on them to teach it. In addition, the Education and Training Inspectorate has a role to play in monitoring and evaluating the revised curriculum. I will write to every primary school, and I will be working with principals to ensure that they do not come under pressure from the breakaway grammar schools that are attempting to dictate what they should, or should not, teach. The Department is the authority that is responsible for producing the curriculum, and the revised curriculum is in place. If parents or principals feel that they are coming under undue pressure, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has a procedure by which they can complain and, if after evaluation a claim is substantiated, the Department can act.

After the next set of results come out, for the first time ever, the primary-school curriculum will not be distorted and children will not have to sit tests in a primary school to determine their progress to post-primary education. That is a major step forward that will liberate primary schools, and all the teachers' unions — the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Ulster Teachers' Union and the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers — are delighted that there is no longer an 11-plus examination, because they are opposed to it.

**Ms Lo:** I suspect that there will be anarchy, rather than clarity, in the transfer procedure. Given that boards of governors will draw up admissions criteria, which will probably include a selection test, is the fact that children will have to undergo a series of tests not worse than the old 11-plus?

**The Minister of Education:** As the Member knows, the 11-plus is sat in primary schools. Thankfully, that will no longer be happening, so there will be no distortion of the primary-school curriculum, and that is a good start. Moreover, I hope that all schools work with me to implement the guidance, so that we can create a world-class education system without the need for academic selection — it is not necessary. We must put children at the centre. The status quo is the absolute worst option, and thankfully, we will not have that.

We have change in the system, and it is hoped that everyone will work with us. However, as I said earlier, there are 1,238 schools, and we cannot allow 3% of those to dictate education policy for all the schools. We have to move forward, and now is the time for leadership.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** In order to put some pieces of the jigsaw puzzle in place, will the Minister state whether she took advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office? What was the nature and scope of the advice sought and the advice received? Did she seek or receive legal advice outwith that of the Departmental Solicitor's Office? Will the Minister confirm clearly that all boards and schools are free to read and consider her guidance note but not to implement it? Furthermore, will she confirm that grammar schools are free to read and consider her guidance note but, subsequently, entitled to use academic admissions as a criterion for entrance to their schools?

Will the Minister confirm that she will engage with grammar schools, rather than refer to them as "breakaway grammar schools" that are outside the "mainstream education system", as she does in her statement. Does she accept that categorising the grammar schools in such a derogatory fashion does nothing to achieve the consensus that she claims to want to reach?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have informed all sides of the House continually that if Members insist on asking

multiple questions, the Minister can decide whether she wants to answer one, two, three, four or five of them.

**The Minister of Education:** Suffice it to say, I have answered the question already. However, in the interests of courtesy, I will answer it again. First, comprehensive legal advice was sought on the issue of guidance. Secondly, I have always said that I want to work with all the schools, and I hope that the breakaway grammar schools will work with us in relation to the guidance, because that is how our education system can progress.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister has created uncertainty, rather than certainty. Will she admit that her main proposals for determining admission to oversubscribed schools will be through random selection? How will putting children into a lottery create certainty for them? Is that a means of putting children first?

Does the Minister recognise that investment in early-years provision and extended schools is an effective way of tackling underachievement and more appropriate than trying to destroy something that is excelling?

**The Minister of Education:** I agree with the Member's comments in relation to early-years provision and extended schools, and I look forward to the support of his party — and that of the party opposite — when I introduce proposals for funding for the extended schools in the Budget. Members will know that this is a successful programme. We are carrying out an early-years review, and I share with all the Members the view that there is a need for substantial resources to be put into early-years provision. I look forward to their support in relation to that.

With regard to the earlier part of Mr Beggs's question, the guidance recommends that all schools use, as their first criterion, a measure that will ensure that applicants who are entitled to free school meals gain admission at the same rate as the other applicants. The guidance also recommends criteria relating to feeder schools; the parish in which the individual lives; the individual's siblings; whether the individual is the eldest child in his or her family; the catchment area; and the nearest suitable school. Therefore admission to schools will not be based on random selection, as the Member suggested; it is much broader than that. If the Member reads the proposals and takes an honest view of them, he will see that.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for her statement, which, she says, provides clarity to children, parents and teachers. It provides clarity in respect of the scope and status of the guidance that has been issued, but it does not remove the contention and confusion that will exist where we have an unregulated system, with schools running their own admissions criteria and setting their own tests.

If the Minister is telling us that she has had to park the idea of legislation, what would allow her return to

a basis for legislating? It will be a collective failure on the part of the devolved project if we have an unregulated system of school transfers.

**The Minister of Education:** I submitted compromise proposals, which the DUP blocked by refusing to discuss them in the Executive. I have to move forward in order to bring clarity and certainty — that is what I am doing, through the guidance. We can create a new, well-managed system, and schools can work with us to put that system in place. We must put the children at the centre of the process. I look forward to working with Mark Durkan's party in doing that.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How will the Minister's guidance deal with the issue of rurality? How will rural children be treated as a result of the guidance? I want an assurance that rural children will not suffer any inequality.

**The Minister of Education:** Sin ceist an-mhaith. On 15 May 2008, I made a commitment to ensure that the proposals would not disadvantage rural applicants. That is done by controlling the degree to which schools can prioritise local applicants. For example, if a popular Catholic grammar school, or a voluntary grammar school, which would attract children predominately from the Protestant community, were to follow the recommendation in the guidance, children who live 10 miles away, but for whom that is the nearest Catholic or voluntary grammar school, would enjoy admissions priority equal to that enjoyed by children qualifying for any geographical criteria that the school used.

The school categories that would define school suitability for the purpose of that measure are: denominational grammar; non-denominational grammar; maintained secondary; controlled secondary; Irish medium; and integrated. Under that recommendation, all children would be considered equally local when applying to schools nearest to them in each of those categories. Therefore, if the recommendation is followed, no child will be disadvantaged by virtue of having an outlying or rural address.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline how her announcement will avoid there being a postcode lottery?

**The Minister of Education:** What we have at present is a postcode lottery — the proposals will create a much more equal system. The biggest indicator that the current system is a postcode lottery is the fact that, of children who receive free school meals, one in four attends a secondary school and one in 17 attends a grammar school. We must ensure that we have a fairer system, in which children from disadvantaged backgrounds are entitled to equality.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I understand her frustration, but does she not recognise that she is creating a system in which there will be more anarchy? If it is inevitable that schools will have their own academic tests, is it not fairer and more responsible for the Department to impose its own tests, rather than have a free-for-all? Furthermore, if there is a situation in which pupils are not prepared at primary school, and their parents therefore feel the need to pay for tuition, is there not a danger that that will create more inequality in the system rather than remove it?

**The Minister of Education:** I thank the Member for his positive comments. I do not view it as inevitable that schools will conduct their own independent or breakaway tests. I ask that all schools work with the Department and adhere to the guidance. That is how we can create the best system. We will manage the system very carefully and in the interests of all children. We will retain our academic excellence, but we will ensure that that is available to more children than it is currently. We will continue with our revised curriculum and entitlement framework so that all children can access a very broad curriculum.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will you resign if —

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** I do not accept that there will be a free-for-all — the vast majority of our children transfers on the basis of the guidance that I have introduced. Some schools — a small number — have said that they will depart from the guidance. Let us see whether they do. I hope that they will reconsider, but I cannot continue to let the education of 3% of the school population distort the new policies for the remaining 97%. We must deal with underachievement and bring equality to the system.

Thankfully, we no longer have 10-year-olds sitting two one-hour tests. The Department will not provide a test; the Department does not consider it good practice for 10-year-olds to take tests with such high stakes.

1.15 pm

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome today's statement. The undoubted impact of this comprehensive statement is that there is now the opportunity to have a rational debate in which all sections of the community can participate and make their own judgments. I am grateful to the Minister for her contribution.

Given the blocking tactics and the increasing hysteria of the parties opposite, will the Minister confirm that there is no scope under the regulations to distort the revised curriculum?

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat. I agree with the Member that there should be a rational debate, because that is in the interests of all young

people. I look forward to developing that debate as the Department formulates its guidance.

As for the blocking tactics that the Member mentioned, I am on record as saying that I would have preferred all parties to have worked together in the past. However, let us put the past behind us and move the debate forward in the interests of all children.

The revised curriculum is working; teachers at every school that I visit say that they are beginning to enjoy teaching the revised curriculum and are seeing the benefits of it. It is starting to dawn on primary schools that never again will teachers in primary school have to teach to a test. Never again will children sit in a primary-school classroom and take two one-hour tests.

I was at Croke Park on Saturday night to watch Dublin play Tyrone, and I would like to congratulate Tyrone before Barry McElduff gets in. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** It was a wonderful celebration of the 125th anniversary of the GAA, at which I met many teachers. One teacher from Tyrone simply told me that she had been teaching P7 for 20 years and would never have to teach the 11-plus again. Her eyes were dancing, and it was wonderful. I told her that she would never have to teach the 11-plus again; that is the good-news story.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Francie Brolly. *[Interruption.]*  
Order.

**Mr Brolly:** I apologise for not being ready with my question.

What weight should grammar school boards of governors who intend to continue testing give to the guidance that the Minister issued today?

**The Minister of Education:** I hope that all schools will work to the guidance for transfer 2010 that I presented today. Everyone needs to take a step back, and I ask everyone, including the grammar schools that have said that they will operate breakaway tests, to read the guidance carefully, and consider their position. Many will see the benefits of the guidance, and I look forward to working with them.

**Mr Speaker:** That is the end of the questions to the ministerial statement. There are three points of order: Mr Poots, first of all, then Mr Adams and Carál Ní Chuilín.

**Mr Poots:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask the Office of the Speaker to study the Minister's statement, particularly her assertion that:

"The 11+ would never have been scrapped by a British or indeed a Unionist education minister."

My understanding is that, although Martin McGuinness started the process, Angela Smith, who was a British

direct rule Minister, concluded it. Will you clarify whether that is correct, and, whether, therefore, the Minister has been misleading the House on that issue?

Secondly, will you pay particular attention to the section of the statement that was used as a means to attack other political parties in the House? Will you rule on the appropriateness of such a statement being used to single out other political parties for attack?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. It is not the job of the Speaker, or the Office of the Speaker, to check the accuracy of ministerial statements.

**Mr Poots:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, is it in order for anyone to mislead the House? If someone has misled the House, should he or she not be brought to order, particularly when it is drawn to the attention —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to reflect carefully on what he is saying.

**Mr Adams:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. I appreciate that you and the previous Ceann Comhairle have tried to ensure that the debates here are robust, open but civic, and civil. During the debate, I noted, first, that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education — when he was present — consistently and persistently interrupted and heckled the Minister. Secondly, in the course of his remarks he used the term “Mein Kampf”. Will you rule on whether that is an appropriate use of language? Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** Order I hear what the Member has said. I am happy to look at the matter in the Hansard report. Ministerial statements are part of the business of the House, and I understand that some Members may get excited about some of the debates. However, I have said to Members on all sides of the House, irrespective of the topic of the debate, that it is important that they temper their language as far as possible. In some of the debates, that may not always be easy. I understand that: I have been there and, on many occasions, I have worn the T-shirt. Nevertheless, I have said, over and over again, that it is important, irrespective of the debate, for Members to temper their language.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Further to that point of order, a Cheann Comhairle, I assume that you check the Hansard reports. Will you check today’s debate and note that Basil McCrea said that Caitriona Ruane brought the House into disrepute? I believe those comments to be unparliamentary. Will you make a ruling on that? Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Mr Speaker:** My office goes through the Hansard report after all business in the House to read what Members have said, irrespective of the debate. We will do that today.

**Mr T Clarke:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have said that you read the Hansard report in detail. When doing so, will you look at the number of questions that were put to the Minister that were not answered? She went off on her normal rant —

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. I have said that it is not up to the Speaker to decide whether a Minister has answered a question. The Minister decides how he or she will answer a question. I raised that issue last Monday. Once again, Members are on their feet asking the Speaker to decide whether a Minister has answered a question appropriately. That is not the Speaker’s job, nor is it the job of the Speaker to sit in judgement on how a Minister might answer a question.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

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

That the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

Members will note that the statutory rule is brief and technical. It merely serves to update the list of registered housing associations that fall within the remit of the social sector standardisation process. It will be useful to the House if I provide some background information on standardisation before highlighting the changes that the regulations will bring about.

As the House will know, the new capital value system was introduced in April 2007. Direct rule Ministers decided that it would not be appropriate to apply it to the social rented sector — the sector where housing allocation is based on social need not market choice.

Furthermore, it was considered undesirable for tenants occupying the same sort of house in different locations to be paying significantly different amounts in rates. Under the old net annual value system, there was little or no variation in rates liability for similar houses in different locations within the social rented sector. Also, rents in that sector were, and continue to be, standardised according to property type. In addition, it is practice for the Housing Executive and the housing associations to collect rates with the rent, so standardisation of rate payments made a lot of sense.

Provision was made in the Rates (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to allow a system of standardised rates in the social rented sector. That was achieved through regulations made under article 23A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. The Rates (Social Sector Value) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 prescribed the housing associations to which social sector values apply. At present, that lists 37 housing associations. However, since 2007, a number of those have amalgamated, ceased to exist or changed their name. The updating of the list of housing associations contained within the schedule to the existing subordinate legislation is the sole purpose of this new statutory rule. It is essentially only a care-and-maintenance provision.

In order to prevent an affirmative resolution process having to be continually used simply to update the list of prescribed housing associations — possibly on an annual basis — I propose that any future amendment to the list could be made under the negative resolution procedure. I intend to bring that change forward through the rates (amendment) Bill, which I hope to present to both the Executive and the Assembly shortly.

Although I consider the current level of scrutiny to be somewhat excessive for such a minor technical change, the affirmative resolution procedure will continue for any other changes requiring substantive use of the enabling power in article 23A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. Members of the Executive and of the Committee for Finance and Personnel were advised of my intention to make the statutory rule. No comments were received on the proposed introduction, and the Committee was content with the regulations. I therefore recommend that the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the proposals for this subordinate legislation at its meeting on 3 December 2008 and was content with the Department's proposals. As the Minister outlined this morning, that legislation primarily facilitates a housekeeping exercise to update the list of housing associations contained in the previous Rates (Social Sector Value) Regulations 2007, to which a social sector value will apply. In other words, rates bills for properties in the social rented sector will be calculated as a proportion of the rent paid on the property as opposed to capital value.

The Committee subsequently considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 21 January, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee for Finance and Personnel agreed unanimously to recommend to the Assembly that the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support the motion that seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of that Order.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am very grateful for the comments from the Committee Chairperson, and I thank the Committee members and the Chairperson for the positive way in which they dealt with that particular issue. As I said, it is not a matter of great controversy, but I thank the Committee for its handling of the issue. I commend the Order to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

**COMMITTEE BUSINESS****Education Bill****Extension of Committee Stage****The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 30 September 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Education Bill (NIA Bill 3/08).

I want to explain to the House the Committee's reasons for requesting an extension to the Committee Stage of the Education Bill to 30 September 2009. I remind Members that the Committee encouraged the Minister of Education to bring forward a single Bill on the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA).

We were informed that that would not be possible, because it would cause major delay. Therefore, we have a unique situation where two Bills are part of one legislative programme — two intimately linked Acts that will establish the ESA.

*1.30 pm*

I remind Members the target date for the enactment and commencement of the Bill before the House is 1 January 2010. The second Bill will be introduced before the summer recess, and the target date for the commencement of its provisions is 1 January or 1 April 2010. Those target dates rightly reflect the immense amount of work that will have to be done to establish a fully functional ESA.

As I said during the Bill's Second Stage on 8 December 2008, several Committee members — myself included — had significant concerns about several important aspects of the first Education Bill, some of which impact directly on the second Bill. At that time, I detailed nine areas of concern. Since the Bill was referred to the Committee in December, the Committee has scrutinised several of those areas, and for some Committee members and me, significant concerns remain.

As I said, that reflects the immense amount of development work that the Department of Education and the ESA implementation team have to do with education stakeholders. The Committee needs to see those gaps filled and clarified for it to have the necessary confidence that the ESA can deliver better local and regional services to schools.

This Bill is extensive, with 55 clauses and eight schedules. The Committee questioned senior departmental officials about the need to have the Bill on the statute books by the summer recess. Given that

the Act will not come into effect until January 2010, in addition to the magnitude of the development work to be addressed that the Committee has identified and the fact that the Bill is significant and complex, the Committee has agreed an extension of the Committee Stage until 30 September 2009.

The Committee understands that extending its scrutiny until the end of September will not preclude the establishment of the ESA on 1 January 2010. There was another proposal for an extension until 1 June 2009, which was supported by two Committee members, compared with the seven-to-two support for the date in the motion.

The Committee does not want to delay the Bill unduly. If the Committee gains confidence in the first Bill, and in what the second Bill will bring, it can report to the House earlier than 30 September. Committee members emphasised the importance of prompt delivery of papers from the Department addressing the Committee's concerns in that respect.

The Committee has a statutory duty to scrutinise the Bill in a full and proper manner and to report to the House accordingly. I assure Members that that is the Committee's intention and ask that they support the motion.

**Mr O'Dowd:** My party does not support the extension of the Bill's Committee Stage, certainly not until September. We have deep concerns that any further delay to the implementation of the ESA will have a detrimental effect on education services.

Education boards are being wound down — senior staff are leaving, taking early retirement or moving on. Therefore, the services being delivered by our education boards are not what they were even six months ago. I respect the right of every Statutory Committee to scrutinise legislation, because that is their job — at the Bill's Second Stage, I said that the Committee had an important role to play. However, my party believes that that work can be done before the summer recess and that all the concerns raised can be ironed out. The Minister has allayed many of the concerns that Committee members raised, publicly and privately, with her on the Bill before Christmas.

The Minister said that the second Bill will be linked to the first Bill by a commencement Order. Therefore, all the concerns of Committee members have been answered. A certain member and a certain political party in the Committee have political objections to the Bill, and they have stated publicly that they will oppose it. Regardless of what happens between now and the Committee Stage, they will oppose the ESA Bill. For political reasons, they should not be allowed to delay the most important changes to education in a generation.

We will oppose the commencement Order. If the amendment is passed, I hope that the Committee for Education will move this important piece of work before the summer.

It is worth noting that countless Committees meet for many hours to consider Bills, but the Committee for Education meets for only two-and-a-half hours a week to consider this important Bill. There is nothing to stop us from meeting all day or even a couple of days a week to consider the Bill and to ensure that it goes through. If the Bill is delayed unduly, it will have a detrimental effect on the education services in this society.

**Mr B McCrea:** I suspect that the previous Member who spoke was referring to me and to the Ulster Unionist Party when he mentioned the opposition to the Bill. I wish to place on record that our opposition is not because we are worried about efficiency; it is because of the evidence that has been presented to the Committee. The Hansard report from the Committee's evidence session states:

"The Minister's recent statements outlined that the Bill is designed to deliver a proposition that differs from the original ESA".

We support the original intention. We do not support the current position, because evidence presented on 14 January states:

"ESA is a public body to deliver public policies, as signed off by the Assembly and the Minister. The political level and political process have to determine the policy. ESA can only take them and deliver."

We will not accept some political diktat on the issue. We are prepared to support the Chairperson and his Committee in asking for an extension to consider the issue, but, as yet, we remain unconvinced. I want to make it clear that we support the extension, but we have not changed our position. I believe that Members beside me also share those reservations.

If at some time we share the confidence of the Chairperson, we will review the situation. However, we remain very disconcerted by what we see as a Trojan Horse.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 30 September 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Education Bill (NIA Bill 3/08).

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Consultative Group on the Past

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allocate additional time where two or more amendments have been selected. It has agreed to allow up to one hour and 45 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Simpson:** I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of meeting the needs of victims; and condemns proposals from the Consultative Group on the Past which equate perpetrators of violence with innocent victims.

This debate touches on Northern Ireland's legacy of hurt, tears, anguish and broken hearts, and it deals with the very real loss that thousands of people live with every day. Metaphorically speaking, we are treading near the graves of thousands who lost their lives in our community. Those who perished in the Troubles were our neighbours, our family and our kith and kin. I hope that everyone will remember that fact during our deliberations on the matter. As someone who lost close family members to the Troubles, I know the stab and the sting of that. For that reason, there is much that I wish to say here today, so I must ask for patience from Members, as I will not have time to take interventions.

According to the Consultative Group on the Past, the nearest relative of a victim should be paid £12,000 blood money. Under that proposal, the families of the innocent people who lost their lives at Omagh, Greysteel, Claudy and La Mon, or on the Shankill Road and elsewhere, would be treated the same as the terrorists who were responsible — if those terrorists consequentially died as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The family of sectarian killer Thomas Begley would be treated in exactly the same way as his victims. That is something that we cannot, and never shall, accept.

The members of the Consultative Group on the Past seem to have persuaded one another that elevating murderers, bombers, gunmen and other criminals to the status of innocent victim is a noble course of action. They are very, very wrong and have made a gross miscalculation — one that has tainted the totality of their work. I understand why the Consultative Group on the Past has taken such pains to insist that what it has proposed should not be called "compensation". I agree — a better term would be "a bribe", "a pat on the head" or "hush money".



Can we ever imagine that a child murderer or serial killer, who acted because he or she suffered a psychotic breakdown, would be put on the same level as their victims, or that a child murderer or a serial killer, who acted because he or she had fallen under the spell of a doomsday cult, would ever be put on that footing? The answer, very simply, is a resounding no. However, we are asked to accept that child murderers and serial killers who acted out of sectarian hatred for their neighbours should be given that equal status. That is a monstrous suggestion.

In the same way, the people who planted, or abandoned, the 300lb bomb in Castlewellan at the weekend would be seen in the same light as the innocent men, women and children whom their device could have killed. Why are we asked to accept that offence against decency? There is only one answer: we have been asked to buy into the lie — for a lie it is — that, in some way, everyone is guilty and everyone is a victim. That was a lie when it was first coined, it is a lie today, and it will stand a lie for ever. Those who used their membership of the Consultative Group on the Past to pursue and promote that lie should hang their heads in shame.

I accept that the families of some dead terrorists may have known nothing about their relative's activities, but we should keep in mind one fact: in many cases in which terrorists died as a result of their terrorism, they were buried with full paramilitary trappings, and with the approval of their families. In those cases, those families gave their public approval and support to their relative's terrorist activities. Such cases should not be treated in the same way as the cases of innocent men, women and children who were slaughtered. I am forced to ask where the members of the Consultative Group on the Past have been living. In what cave, or down what hole, did they conduct their deliberations? On what planet did they draw up their report?

The report says much about remembering. For many people, the issue is not about remembering but about not being able to forget. They are not able to forget the sight of their loved ones, or, rather, what was left after the terrorists had finished with them. Now that group wants those people to be lumped together with remembrances of the one who visited that path of sorrow on them.

The Consultative Group on the Past was given its task by the Secretary of State, and its recommendations will ultimately have to be either accepted or rejected by the Prime Minister. During a recent intervention at Prime Minister's Questions, my colleague Nigel Dodds accurately judged the mood of Parliament on the issue. I wish that I could describe in detail to this House the sense of revulsion that honourable and Rt Hon Members of the House of Commons feel about

the matter. The loud cheers of agreement for my honourable friend's comments from Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat Members alike demonstrated that any proposal that is designed to create parity between murderous criminals and those whom they murdered will face significant and sustained opposition.

1.45 pm

The Eames/Bradley group was given a task of gaining consensus on how we might deal with the past in Northern Ireland. By any impartial measure, it has failed. There are so many things that I wish to say, and that need to be said. I know from personal and sore experience just how much so many families have suffered across Northern Ireland down through the years of the Troubles. They have so many needs, and we owe them so much.

However, that shoddy recommendation is not one of those things. It should never have been spoken. It will stand as a mark of shame, and I trust that it will never see the light of day. I commend the motion to the House.

**Mr Ford:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"takes note of the proposals of the Consultative Group on the Past, shares the grave reservations across the community at the suggestion for £12,000 'recognition payments', but recognises the potential for the other recommendations to provide an effective way to assist victims and to address the past and its legacy, consistent with the objectives of reconciliation and the creation of a shared future."

The Alliance Party tabled the amendment because, although, in broad, general terms, it welcomes the report of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, my colleagues and I feel that we have been seriously let down by the members of the group in the way in which they have conducted their business, particularly over recent months.

The Alliance Party was not the only one to hold meetings with the consultative group over an extended period while it was going about its business. I gather that other parties held meetings with it very recently.

The Alliance Party told the group that many difficult issues needed to be dealt with if reconciliation and a shared future for society were to be promoted. However, we gave broad, general support to the thrust of what it sought to do. At no time up until the group met journalists to give a briefing four or five days before its report was fully launched was mention made of the £12,000 payments — the so-called recognition payments. I cannot understand why a group that had engaged in such a wide way with people from right across society and with different political parties was completely incapable of realising the effect that those recognition payments would have on the public response to its recommendations.

Mr Simpson has already illustrated that response. I offer two short quotations from the early part of his

speech. He referred to “blood money”, which is not necessarily an assessment with which I agree, but it is one that is widespread across our society. He said that the report had elevated terrorists:

“to the status of innocent victim”.

It has certainly clouded the distinctions between different groups of people. That is a major problem. The report is serious and detailed, and with the exception of the recommendation for recognition payments, MLAs and others must work hard to assess the report and its recommendations, and consider what response to make.

It would be an absolute tragedy if the positive work contained in the report were to be lost because of one utterly unacceptable recommendation — that for these financial payments. There are other ways in which people from different backgrounds can learn to understand one another’s suffering. If a policeman’s widow were told that her story was to appear in the same book as that of an IRA member’s mother, in order to serve to recognise their suffering and what they had been through, that would not have prompted as negative a response as that which the idea of these payments has prompted. The recommendation has been hugely damaging, so it is not surprising that Mr Simpson has dwelt on that aspect of the report. Most of us accept the bulk of what he said and will agree that the motion is a response to the report.

It is, however, a response to only one part of the report. We must accept that there is no hierarchy of suffering, but there is definitely a hierarchy of circumstance. The suggestion of a blanket payment has clouded that distinction, and that is the major problem for people in dealing with the report.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** Does the Member feel, as many others do, that this payment was announced in line with what happened in the South of Ireland? The group took it for granted that what was done in the South could be done in the North.

Surely that shows that they were far out of the facts concerning the attitude of people from all sides of the divide?

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I think we can take it that Dr Paisley is not holding up the South as an example of good practice. I agree with him that it was an example of bad practice. It is not the case that two wrongs make a right. What was done in the South may or may not have been appropriate there — I am not an expert — but it is certainly inappropriate here. However, society needs to move on, and difficult decisions will have to be taken, but we must not cloud the moral distinction by that fairly arbitrary sum of money that is being suggested.

What concerns me about the motion is not what it says, but what it does not say. The motion ignores the details of the report — and it is a very detailed report — and its many positive proposals. Although it is an understandable — I might almost say knee-jerk, if that is not considered offensive — response a few days after the publication of the report, Mr Simpson and his colleagues, as much as everyone else in this place, will have to take serious note of other aspects of the report. There is a strong emphasis on the need to look at societal relationships, to promote reconciliation and to tackle sectarianism. Can anyone suggest that we do not need to do that in this society if we are to change? That is why there is considerable merit in the concept of a legacy commission, with three strands looking at reconciliation, justice and information recovery in order to promote peace and stability in this society.

Those who hold office in this place, and those who talk much about what they have done to provide for society by their leadership of the political process, also need to speak to their supporters on the ground, and those with whom they associate, to ensure that that mutual recognition and working together is engendered across society. The process is far too important to be left to the Executive, or to even the Assembly.

The timing of the report is, possibly, a bit late. Although I do not accept the idea of a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission, there is no doubt that the incentives in that process for people to tell the truth in a short timescale, were major, positive incentives. Those have been lost to us. However, I do not agree with those who suggested in various recent comments in the press that we can leave this process for another generation. To leave things for another generation — bringing up a generation in a divided society — is to run the risk of repeating the cycle of the past 40 years. That is something that we cannot allow.

We must ensure that there is a short and focused process — a five-year time limit seems about reasonable — in order to get movement in a timescale that would cement what has been done in this place into wider society. I welcome other aspects of the report. Matters that many found offensive, such as suggesting an amnesty for the on-the-runs, are clearly ruled out. Surely Mr Simpson and his colleagues are not going to run away with ideas such as that?

A balance must be found between justice and information recovery. The blunt reality is that, 30 and 40 years on, many victims will never see justice in the conventional sense, as much as we wish they could. If all that we can achieve for them is information recovery by way of incentives for people to tell the truth about what happened, that may offer some measure of consolation. It may, sadly, be the only measure of consolation available. However, it does not seem wise for unionists to continue to insist on the

process of justice when evidence is not available or accessible. They must recognise that in the report by the Consultative Group on the Past, there are ways forward that would represent a benefit to them, if not all that they would hope.

The full disclosure of information may satisfy the concerns of many who were bereaved or injured. We need to find encouragement to get that process moved forward. We need, too, seriously to examine building on the healing-through-remembering idea of a day of reflection and reconciliation, because we need to tell all our people that they have a part to play.

Although some of that activity may initially be done on an individual or small-group basis, let us see what can be done, through the recognition of mutual suffering — without in any way implying equal responsibility — to build things up and move people forward. I wish that there were an opportunity for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to engage in that process from 21 June 2009; however, that may be too much to hope for.

I am concerned about the suggestion in the report that parties should, at some future stage, sign up to the principle of non-violence. For some parties, that was never necessary, and for others, that has already been done; however, it is an example of what needs to be done on a broader basis. I agree with many of the sentiments expressed by Mr Simpson, and with the wording of the motion. I agree with much of what is contained within Sinn Féin's proposed amendment. There is a huge gulf of ideas around this issue, and, I believe, the amendment that I am proposing meets all those needs.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim leasú a dó.

I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "and" and insert

"recognises the grief felt by the families of all victims who lost their lives as a result of the conflict; and following publication of the report from the Consultative Group on the Past, urges everyone to enter a constructive debate on the way forward."

First, I want to commend the effort of the Eames/Bradley group for finding ways in which the legacy of the past can be dealt with. Over the past 18 months, panel members have devoted a lot of time and effort to compiling the report, and are to be thanked. Sinn Féin will now reflect on the proposals within the report, and I think that everyone should do the same — this is not the time for knee-jerk reactions. Individuals, and political parties, are entitled to their view; however, we should all approach the report with the degree of consideration and concern that it requires.

**Mrs Foster:** Although political parties have the advantage of being able to give consideration to the report, many victims have been re-traumatised by what

they are hearing in the media. On Friday, in my constituency office, I listened for two hours to a lady explaining how she had been re-traumatised. It may be grand for some people to reflect on the report; however, we must have cognisance of those for whom it is not.

**Mr McCartney:** I agree absolutely. Indeed, perhaps comments made by some people, particularly those in political life, have added to that trauma. It is disappointing to hear some of the language that has been used in dealing with the report. Last Thursday, I listened to Elaine Moore, a panel member, speaking on Radio Foyle. She said clearly that she understood and accepted that many people will not accept the report, and that they are entitled not to. However, she cautioned people, particularly those in political life, not to use language such as "repugnant" or "repulsive" in describing the report. I think that she was correct to say that, as that displays an arrogance that this difficult subject does not warrant or deserve. Those taking part in the debate should show leadership, and should, by all means, state their position. However, we must be mindful of other people's right to be heard, and — I agree with the Member — we should be very cognisant of the people who are being re-traumatised by the report and who may not have a political voice, or indeed, any voice at all.

Sinn Féin will now take time to go through the report in detail. We will continue our dialogue with various victims' and survivors' groups, and we will meet with the two Governments as part of the dialogue process. Sinn Féin is mindful of all the difficulties involved in truth recovery, particularly for victims and their families. However, we believe that as society seeks to leave conflict behind, so, too, there is a requirement on all of us to address the tragic human consequences of the past. Throughout, we will be guided by a number of principles, which formed the basis of our call for a truth recovery process — we were the first political party to call for such a process.

All those processes should be victim-centred and should deal with victims on an all-Ireland basis, not within the strict confines of the Six Counties. Full co-operation by all the relevant parties is essential to the success of any commission. There can be no hierarchy of victims, and all processes should be politically neutral. Any future panel must be international and independent. With that in mind, any panel set up by the British Government cannot fulfil the necessary criterion of being politically neutral and independent.

Indeed, it creates the notion and the fallacy that the British Government were not participants in the conflict. That is not only wrong, but it leaves the people who were killed or injured as a direct result of

state violence wondering whether, yet again, they are being pushed to the margins of the process.

2.00 pm

**Dr Farry:** I respect the Member's comments at the beginning of his speech that everyone needs to consider the report with an open mind. However, his latter statement that the group is tainted because it was set up by the British Government contradicts his earlier comments.

**Mr McCartney:** It does not. Sinn Féin met the panel on several occasions before and during the process, and we cautioned it. The recent inquiries that have been set up under British legislation have met with obstruction and destruction of evidence. The Bloody Sunday Inquiry is a good example of that. We cautioned the panel that if it were not politically neutral, the outcome would not be what the victims needed.

It is wrong that the British Government set up the panel, because it creates the fallacy that the British Government were not participants in the conflict. In addition, the report talks about "alleged" collusion, which leaves people wondering whether they have to make the case that collusion took place, rather than stating clearly that the British Government were involved in the killing of Irish citizens. The report should have said that.

In our ongoing discussions, we will continue to argue that one of the purposes of any future panel or commission should be to examine the causes, nature and extent of the conflict. An objective of any process should be healing, both of the victims and of society in general. We also have a common aim to enable society to build the peace and, therefore, reconciliation should be the core aim of any truth process. Respect and generosity should inform the parties that are seeking to reach agreement.

We also must be mindful that, if we are serious about building a united society, that demands that all those difficult issues are dealt with in an inclusive way as a necessary part of putting the past behind us. Looking after victims, victims' families and survivors is significant and important to all of us. The Sinn Féin amendment states clearly that a constructive debate should take place on the way forward that puts victims at the centre and recognises the grief of all families and their pursuit of the truth. I urge all to support our amendment. Go raibh maith agat

**Mr McFarland:** I pay tribute to the efforts of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past. I know some of its members well, and they are people of honour and integrity. They have also had access to sensitive material and have had discussions with victims that the rest of us have not had. I have no doubt that they believe that they have done their best with the issue. The report's flaws have been identified

already, and my colleague Tom Elliott will mention those later. However, I have concerns about other aspects of the report.

Before commenting on that, I wish to stress the importance of the innocent victims of the conflict. We must look after their medical and psychological needs and ensure support for their families, who must not be forgotten. They must be allowed to tell their stories about what they have gone through, because that is a key aspect of the healing process. Perhaps that area could be left to the Victims' Commissioners; that is what that office was set up to do. It is sad that some aspects of the report were leaked to the press before it was announced, because it has resurrected painful memories that many of the victims had put behind them.

I wish to speak about the issue of dealing with the past, particularly the establishment of the legacy commission. Back in 1998, the deal was that, however difficult, we would draw a line under the past and move on. That was the understanding of all who took part in the process.

However, in the meantime, the SDLP managed to persuade the Government to involve the Police Ombudsman in dealing with the past, and we ended up with a one-sided truth commission. After that, Sinn Féin dealt with the Government and there then arrived an attempt to ignore criminal records — the on-the-runs issue, which was eventually stopped in Parliament — amnesties, and the equating of terrorists with members of the security forces. I recall that in 1999, the NIO planned to have an IRA volunteer and a British Army soldier symbolically lay down their weapons on the lawn at Hillsborough Castle — just amazing stuff.

I want to examine the report from the Consultative Group on the Past in a bit more detail. In particular, on page 18, for example, lo and behold we have the return of the issue of setting aside of criminal records by way of statute. What about ordinary decent crime? Somebody who has served six months for tax evasion will not have his or her record expunged, yet someone who committed mass murder has that record wiped clean. That is amazing.

There are other examples of confusion in the report. Page 17 contains a strange recommendation that would allow the legacy commission to interfere with how we hand out money. The report states that the legacy commission should oversee the "even spread of economic benefits". That is a bit strange, because that is what the Assembly does; that is why we have TSN and the Equality Commission. Therefore, the Consultative Group on the Past's report interferes in the Assembly's political areas.

Other confusing proposals that relate to historic cases and thematic proposals may cause most concern.

More detail is provided on pages 128-29 of the report. There, it is stated that the legacy commission should have the power to call for people and papers. However, who has those documents? The answer is that the Government have them. I cannot for a minute imagine that the Provisional IRA has a great swathe of documents, and I cannot see the loyalists having documents. Therefore, we are back to the one-sided truth commission. The IRA's green book forbids its volunteers from giving evidence. Hence, we end up, again, with a very strange, one-sided truth commission. Society may pick over those issues if it wishes. However, the Ulster Unionist view is that we should draw a line under the past and move on.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join my colleague Raymond McCartney in opposing the motion and supporting the amendment.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on this extensive report, which, I suspect, none of us has had time to read in any great detail. I am a little disappointed by a number of points.

The report does not go far enough. The legacy commission that it proposes would be established by the British Government and, therefore, cannot be truly independent. The British state was a protagonist in the conflict here, not a mere observer.

Another issue, and the essence of the debate, is that our priority and focus must be on treating with respect, and supporting as much as possible, all relatives of those who died. There must never be a hierarchy of victims. Previous debates have shown the hurt and pain that is caused by the demonisation of some families, and there have already been references today to families being re-traumatised.

I was at the launch of the report last week, and I witnessed at first hand the trauma experienced by relatives who attended the event. I spoke afterwards at a meeting with families of people from Ballymurphy who were killed by the British Army, and relatives of Damien Walsh — a 17-year-old gunned down by loyalists while the SAS watched.

All relatives are traumatised. People must not single out particular families; that is wrong.

If we are to move towards a society that is based on equality and justice, in which human rights are respected, no one should fear the truth. I do not believe that truth will be achieved under the current arrangements; any process must be international, independent and victim-centred. The lead should be taken from some of the victims' families and the generosity that they have shown throughout deliberations.

Much can be said about the report; however, it must be examined in detail. The families of all victims of the conflict, who are the essence of the debate, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. None should be demonised, and there must not be a hierarchy of victims. When any initiative is taken in respect of victims, survivors and families, they must be spoken of in a measured way, and their points of view must be heard. Society must be built on the foundations of equality and human rights, and victims and survivors are central to that aim. That will help in the long-term development of good relations and reconciliation, which are in the interests of all people.

I reiterate that there must be no hierarchy of victims. All victims' families feel the same pain and anguish, and they have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Attwood:** As Alan McFarland suggested, the members of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past are good people. I know some of them well and value them greatly. During the past 18 months, they have represented the last and best hope for our generation to deal with the past and to make progress on an ethical basis. For that reason, as Mr Ford suggested, the report should not be casually dismissed.

The Eames/Bradley report makes some good proposals. It is correct that it puts victims and survivors front and centre of what must be done; it is correct that all of its proposals are human-rights compliant; it is correct that it supports the telling of personal stories, and its proposals for remembering are timely; it is correct to establish units to integrate the work of the Historical Enquiries Team and that of the Police Ombudsman on historic cases, as long as powers and resources meet necessary requirements; it is correct to affirm that no one will be deprived of the right to prosecution where evidence and opportunity exist.

However, the Eames/Bradley report has also got some matters wrong. It is wrong to not have stated that the British Government have reneged on their commitment to a Finucane inquiry; it is wrong to hint that there may be an amnesty for past crimes in five years' time.

In its statement last week, the Eames/Bradley group challenged the many people who, like it, had not used violence, saying:

“Our attitude, our prejudice, our defence and justification of our own community to the detriment of the other community has played its part.”

If they are suggesting that the harsh words, dangerous attitudes and reckless leadership of some people may have contributed to bringing others into violence, they are right to say so.

However, last week in the Europa Hotel, the Eames/Bradley group was wrong not to be more specific and

upfront in telling the people who know most about the violence of the past 40 years, and who committed the worst deeds during those years, that they have primary responsibility in the pursuit of justice. Such an explicit requirement would have created the ethical context and fundamental bedrock on which the Eames/Bradley group's truth and justice mechanisms might settle. The failure to make that explicit statement must be rectified.

Some people said that that approach was an effort to encourage the commanders of illegal terror groups — not least the leaderships of the IRA and the UVF who have been in control for decades — and also the elements of the police, army, security services and the state, who know the most information and did the worst deeds, along the path to admit the truth. Members are aware how such groups and individuals behave. Look at the continued suppression of truth by the British Army and the Force Research Unit on Pat Finucane's murder. Look at the suppression of truth by the IRA on the murders of Jean McConville and the rest of the disappeared. Look at the UVF and its certain knowledge of a north Belfast serial killer in its ranks.

2.15 pm

Ultimately, truth, justice and healing will be prejudiced and stalled if the people who know the most and did the worst fail to step forward at leadership level. As we all know, they have failed to step forward in a complete or credible fashion thus far; that is their respect for truth and justice. Those individuals and elements should have heard fully and explicitly about their primary responsibility for truth and justice from the Eames/Bradley group. However, some of those same people will now attempt to unpick the Eames/Bradley report or to reconfigure it in their own interest.

The Eames/Bradley information recovery and thematic proposals — on loyalist collusion, republican cleansing of Protestant farms in border areas, MI5's setting malign strategic intelligence objectives in Northern Ireland, and the general infiltration of the IRA, UDA and UVF that was influenced by the security services — is such a fundamental threat to those most concerned by disclosure that they will resist the Eames/Bradley proposals, which they present as an alternative to prosecution and inquiries.

In recent days, there has been heightened concern about payments being made to victims. The SDLP believes that victims and survivors have requirements, including financial requirements, that should be measured and addressed against need and individual circumstances; that will be the real challenge for decades to come. A one-off payment creates a fog at the very least; as we have heard, it creates new trauma at the very worst.

Such is the concern about the recognition payment that the matter should be revisited at the very least.

There should be no question that addressing the needs of victims and survivors is shorthand for suggesting that there should be equality between those who caused that grief and those who suffered it; that must not and cannot be the case.

**Mr Bresland:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as a victim; it is only by God's grace that I am here today at all. It is important that the needs of victims are met, but that must be done in a sensible and productive way. The idea of innocent victims, whether they were members of the security forces or simply civilians who happened to be caught up in one of the many bomb attacks in Northern Ireland, being treated the same as the terrorists who carried out those attacks is nothing short of ludicrous.

The terrorists set out to kill; bombs were planted and guns were fired with the sole intention of killing as many as people as possible. How can men with a complete disregard for human life be classed the same as men, women and children who were brutally slain in acts of terrorism? If a man plants a bomb intending to kill and is accidentally caught up in the blast and kills himself, why should his family be classed the same as those families who lost innocent people? It is due to that terrorist's actions and desires that anyone was killed at all. It is irrelevant that the son of a terrorist may feel the same grief as the son of a civilian. The terrorist made his choice, knew the risks and probably took many lives before his own was taken.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member agree that the suggested £12,000 payment is abhorrent? Lord Mountbatten's family said in the newspaper yesterday that it would not accept that payment, and Airey Neave's family said that it will not accept it. For the record, we, as a family, would not accept the £12,000 either.

My colleague Allan Bresland served along with my cousin who was murdered by the IRA. The families of people who served Queen and country will be offered £12,000, but does Mr Bresland agree that it is wrong that people who carried out terrorist acts will also qualify for that £12,000? Indeed, the people who killed my cousin were shot by the Army, and their families would, therefore, qualify for the payment. Is there not something totally wrong when there are such extremes?

**Mr Speaker:** A minute will be added to Mr Bresland's speaking time.

**Mr Bresland:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with him 100%. Men who had no intention other than to kill should not and cannot be treated the same as the families of innocent victims.

It is a key point of law that no man should profit from crime, and we all know that murder is a crime. By rewarding the families of murderers, Eames and

Bradley are spitting in the face of the law of a civilised society. It is ridiculous that Eames and Bradley believe that £12,000 is the value of a life, which is supposed to be sacred and protected.

Moreover, the suggestion of offering money to the families of those who killed is offensive. What happened to the need for truth and justice? That concept appears to have been eradicated except for inquiries into collusion by the security forces. Many deaths caused by terrorists are still unresolved or have secured no prosecution. That is what the families want — not a pay-off that aims to make them forget the past.

The money that has been offered will never replace the need for truth and justice. The Consultative Group on the Past should focus on that matter rather than on finding a quick and easy solution that attempts to please everyone. Members know that, historically, attempting to please everyone pleases no one, and that will be the case again. Few people — if any — have expressed a positive viewpoint on the proposed payment, which will solve nothing.

Although the use of weapons to achieve political goals is no longer commonplace, we must use willpower and courage. The victims and politicians of Northern Ireland must stand up and speak out against the report. The proposal to attribute each victim an equal status is wrong, and the people of Northern Ireland must make a clear statement. The Eames/Bradley report cannot be accepted as a realistic way of dealing with the past and looking to the future. Furthermore, Eames/Bradley seems to have forgotten those who were injured over the past 40 years. Why are terrorists and civilians treated equally while those who have suffered mentally and physically are forgotten?

Lord Eames has repeatedly stated that the proposal is about recognition rather than compensation. Where is the recognition for those victims who survived? Moreover, he has stated that he intends to abolish the hierarchy of victims; however, he has simply created another one. He proposes to create a hierarchy between those who were killed and those who survived. Victims' needs must be addressed. An equal classing for murderers and innocent victims in the hope that they will sell the desire for truth and justice is not the way to progress. Rewarding murderers will not cease the suffering caused by years of terrorism in this country. I support the motion.

**Mrs D Kelly:** As we all know, the Eames/Bradley report contains 31 recommendations, each of which merits detailed consideration and reflection. Today's debate is, therefore, somewhat premature. We owe it to those who lost their lives, to those who continue to suffer and to our children to make the effort to consider the findings of the distinguished panel, which has outlined a way to deal with our troubled past.

Although the report seeks to challenge all of us about our personal contribution to the conflict and asks how we will build a better and reconciled future, it fails to challenge robustly those who committed the worst acts and knew the most information. By the end of 1998, 3,703 people had been murdered: 562 paramilitaries, 1,036 members of the security forces and 2,105 civilians. Statistics show that republicans were responsible for 58.3% of deaths, loyalists for 29.7% and security forces for 9.9%. The greatest single taker of life was the Provisional IRA. However, we have yet to discover how many deaths were a direct result of security force collusion and the running of agents.

The Glenanne gang is believed to have been responsible for up to 77 murders. The truth behind many murders could be quickly established by opening the British security services' filing cabinets. The Stevens Report is still under lock and key. The IRA, the UDA and other groups needed to step up to the mark, but neither co-operated with the Eames/Bradley panel. The report should have stated more clearly where responsibility lies for the recovery of truth and the gathering of information. Justice demands that, where possible, prosecutions must be pursued. The recommendations on that topic merit more detailed scrutiny. Truth and justice are not either/or options, and it is wrong to ask families to choose. The needs of victims and survivors must be central to how we deal with the legacy of our past.

Although many organised victims groups do great work, the vast majority of victims do not belong to one. I had the privilege of meeting one such family last week. Their great-uncle, Bernard Devlin, was murdered in the Belfast pogroms in 1920. Their cousin, Damien, was murdered by the UVF in 1988; their brother Raymond in 1982 by the IRA; and their brother Gerard by the LVF in December 1997. The Devlin family are therefore more qualified than most to speak on dealing with the past and on the future. In their submission to the Eames/Bradley group, they said:

“We hear a lot about ‘getting over it’, ‘moving on’ and ‘stop harping about the past’. This is hurtful to the families. Learning from the past will not cause past mistakes to be repeated. Forgetting to look at the past and why mistakes were made ensures they will be repeated.

The Troubles are not just of this era. They are beached in base sectarianism and rabid nationalism and loyalism which has spawned killers who hate because they have been taught to hate.”

That family, who have suffered so much but never took up guns, say that the true commemoration of the Troubles will be an end to sectarianism. That is the real challenge for all of us, but especially those two parties who currently hold the positions of First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Having examined the report, listened to the voiceless victims, and recognised that there were many in our community who fought injustice by solely

peaceful means, while also accepting that all mother's tears are the same to all, the SDLP shares reservations across the community about the suggestion of a £12,000 recognition payment, but we are prepared to listen to the debate today and to hear what people across the community are saying. However, there is simply no moral equivalence between those who had no choice and those who took up arms. We all know that there are those who want to rewrite history. That recommendation will be abused by those who seek to block out their murderous past.

At the funeral of Gerard Devlin, Bishop Patrick Walsh said:

“Those who engage in acts of violence, those who encourage acts of violence by bitter, hateful words, those who disparage the builders of peace — they carry enormous responsibility before God and their fellow men at the present time.”

Those words are clear and unambiguous, even 12 years on. They have a simple truth about them, which it would be best not to ignore, if we really are to learn the lessons of the past so as not to repeat them.

**Mr Speaker:** As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be William Irwin.

2.30 pm

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

#### Respite Provision for Carers

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an assessment of respite provision for carers. (AQO 1926/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** My Department is currently undertaking work to provide a clearer and fuller picture of current and future respite provision and need. Under the comprehensive spending review, the learning disability programme of care has been allocated £33 million over the three-year period, while physical and sensory disability has been allocated £10 million. Part of the investment in each of those programmes of care is to provide new or enhanced respite services.

Over the same period, targets and priorities for action will ensure the provision of an additional 200 packages of respite care for children and adults with a learning disability, which will benefit over 800 people. By 2011, a further 200 packages will be provided to carers of people with physical and/or sensory disabilities. Over the next three years, an additional £1 million has also been earmarked for investment in mental-health dementia-respite services, which, from 2010-11, will provide an extra 2,000 weeks of respite for people affected by dementia.

**Mr Neeson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Like many Members, I work very closely with carers groups, so I recognise the importance of respite care. Does the Minister agree that if the Northern Health and Social Care Trust goes ahead with its proposals to close residential homes, even greater pressure will be put on carers, particularly in my own constituency of East Antrim?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Member will be aware that a consultation process about those proposals is underway. As Minister, I cannot comment on that issue for fear of prejudicing that consultation process. However, I recognise the strong need for support for carers. Thanks to Mr Basil McCrea, one of the first



things that I did as Minister was to meet the Down Lisburn Carers Forum. From talking to that forum and to other groups subsequently, it was clear that our support for carers was falling short. That is why I announced the additional investments.

We are also following the Caring for Carers strategy, studying the carers' strategy and implementation group, and reviewing the respite position. In addition, we carried out an assessment of the care provision and concluded that more respite care is needed. As far as residential care is concerned, care in the community and independent living is a key departmental strategy that was endorsed by this House. How that strategy works on the ground is a matter for consultation.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for his response. He mentioned that some help would be provided for carers. I recently received correspondence from people who suffer from what is known as Angelman syndrome. Will the Minister confirm whether those who care for people who suffer from that syndrome will receive some of the carers' assistance that he outlined in his reply?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Respite is available for anyone who is assessed as needing it. Particular conditions are primarily a matter for the carers' strategy and implementation group, although I see no reason why respite cannot be provided to support the folk on whose behalf the Member spoke.

Respite takes many forms. A range of support must be provided because there are an estimated 185,000 informal carers in Northern Ireland at any one time, many of whom require support.

**Mrs Hanna:** Will the Minister clarify whether there are any additional, specific measures for people who care for others on their own, such as lone parents?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am sure that the Member is aware that respite care takes the form of flexible short-term provision, day activities, residential respite care and domiciliary support, so a good range of respite services are available. There is also a range of other types of domiciliary care support.

We are reviewing the entire situation. However, although a substantial amount of respite care is available, it is not enough. I have announced a series of measures, including: 200 learning-disability packages, which will benefit 800 people; 200 sensory- and physical-disability packages, which will benefit a further 800 people; and 2,000 support weeks for people affected by dementia.

Although those measures are being implemented, I need to know definitively how much support is required,

which is why I have commissioned the review. That will be important when deciding the future direction that we should take, because, fortunately, our elderly population is living much longer. As Members will be aware, the over-65 population will double in the next 50 years, so we must plan not just for today but for the medium and long term.

## Epilepsy

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is in discussions with Chicago-based experts on specialist treatment for epilepsy. (AQO 1927/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Officials from my Department have held discussions with clinicians at the Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago about the treatment of a particular child who suffers from epilepsy. In addition, officials have had discussions with a recognised expert in the management of intractable epilepsy at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, as well as regular discussions with clinicians in paediatric neurology at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and for the extra funding that was announced last week and today for all children with complex needs. Members are aware of several high-profile cases, and I am particularly conscious of one in my constituency of West Tyrone. Will the additional funding from the Minister's Department help those high-profile cases, particularly, for example, the Caldwell case? I mention that case because I met that child's mother here at the launch. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As the Member will understand, I am not at liberty to discuss individual patients. As far as I am concerned, all children with that condition have needs, and they all have the right to be treated equally.

The measures that I have put in place will strengthen existing services. The improvements to services are significant not only for intractable epilepsy but for several complex conditions; we are devoting some of the extra money that I secured from the Budget to help children with complex needs. Northern Ireland has skilled, highly trained practitioners covering a range of disciplines, and I am confident that we can continue to improve services so that all children get the support that they need.

I am aware of high-profile people who felt the need to go to Chicago. In my opinion — which I am sure that Members will understand — the Health Service is for all people, and we have a special arrangement with Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London

— one of the world's leading children's hospitals — to provide whatever treatment the regional service in Belfast cannot provide.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I must disagree with the Minister on one point. He said that Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children indicated that it could cope with children with intractable epilepsy; however, we have a letter from a consultant, Helen Cross, which states that she can in no way give the service that Chicago has provided for the high-profile children to whom my colleague referred.

Now that the Minister has found sufficient funding to improve services, will he reimburse the families who — through no fault of their own, because the provision did not exist in Northern Ireland — had to go to Chicago in order to save their children's lives? Will the Minister compensate those families for the money that they have spent?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I welcome the return to the House of Iris Robinson; I am glad to see her in good health.

One of the world's leading experts on the condition is Professor Helen Cross from Great Ormond Street Hospital. I have not seen her letter, but I understand that she stated that she accepts referrals but does not take long-term personal management of the patient. That would be carried out by the paediatric neurologist in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

I remind Members that I made an important announcement about improving services for children with complex needs. That does not relate solely to children with intractable epilepsy, but to children with cerebral palsy and brain injuries, for instance.

The Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago does not provide any service that is not available at Great Ormond Street. The service is comparable; in fact, one of the world's pioneers in the ketogenic diet — a tool for treating the condition — is Professor Helen Cross.

Members should be careful about running down our service. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** It is important to remember that we provide physiotherapy, occupational health therapy and speech therapy. Furthermore, we have highly trained and highly skilled dietitians to monitor the ketogenic diet and specialised medical care. In fact, the Belfast Trust is taking steps to appoint an additional consultant paediatric neurologist as soon as possible.

The Royal Victoria Hospital staff have assured us that they will do whatever they can to facilitate a smooth transition for children returning home. I regret that children or parents felt that they had to go to

Chicago. The services that they are receiving in Chicago are no better than those that they would receive in Great Ormond Street Hospital. However, there is one major difference: on admission to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children or Great Ormond Street Hospital staff will ask the patient what they can do to help him or her; staff at the Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago ask for the patient's credit card. That is the difference.

I cannot devote taxpayers' money to private healthcare in America, unless all avenues and channels — first, in Northern Ireland, secondly, in the UK, and thirdly, in Europe under the E112 referral — are exhausted. Those protocols have to be followed.

In at least two of the cases that we have talked about, referrals to Great Ormond Street Hospital were refused. In one case, it was refused twice.

*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker, do I have to respond to remarks that are being made from a sedentary position? Welcome back, Mrs Robinson.

Last week, I met Anne Monaghan, who is employed by the Caldwell family. She told me that it cost £100,000 to keep Billy Caldwell in Chicago and that that amount was easy to raise. She said that there was no problem raising that amount of money. That is their approach.

We are reinforcing that. We have a good service, and we have a link with Great Ormond Street Hospital. That is about as good as it gets.

I do not make the decisions; clinicians make the decisions and I take advice from them, starting with the paediatric neurologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital, which is a good hospital.

**Mr Gardiner:** I welcome the announcement that the Minister made last week in relation to investment into special cases of epilepsy. Does the Minister agree that there is no better place in Northern Ireland than the Royal Victoria Hospital — right on our doorstep — to carry out further investigations and in which investment should be made?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The announcement that I made in respect of children with complex needs will ensure that every child will have an individual care plan and will avail of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and so on. Those provisions will be overseen by the first point of care — the GP. The services will be provided locally with reference to the regional hospital at Belfast, and beyond to Great Ormond Street as necessary. Therefore those children will receive that support. Furthermore, a number of youngsters require, and will receive, visits from community children's nurses.

2.45 pm

I have also announced recurrent spending of £200,000 to reinforce paediatric epileptic services, which include additional dietetic support, paediatric nurses, scan sessions and links with Great Ormond Street Hospital. In addition, I plan to develop satellite services in the west of the Province. I have assessed the service that we provide and, very good as it is, it is clear that there is a need to reinforce it, because of the demand and the need. We are working closely with Great Ormond Street Hospital to provide that service.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

### Community Care Services: Larne

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many elderly people receive community care services in Larne.

(AQO 1929/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that 933 elderly people receive community care services in the Larne area. Those services include social work support, domiciliary care, residential care and day care. In addition, the trust provides community nursing, acute care at home, case management, dementia services and allied health profession services to older people.

**Mr Ross:** The Minister will be aware that, in recent years, many elderly people have found it difficult to get community care packages and, when they do, it amounts to, perhaps, 15 or 20 minutes' care a day. Therefore, does the Minister agree that it would be a backward step to close any residential care homes in east Antrim unless they are being replaced by new facilities?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I do not recognise the Member's claim of 15 to 20 minutes' care a day. Care is delivered in a number of ways — for example, through home help, domiciliary care and residential care. There are extensive budgets and provision with regard to care for the elderly. In fact, after acute services, care for the elderly accounts for the largest part of the health budget, amounting to more than £600 million per annum.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust provides many thousands of care packages, including a number in the Larne area. The proposals are simply that: proposals that are out for consultation. Mr Ross must remember that efficiency savings of £700 million over three years are being forced on me, voted for by Mr Ross and his party. The entire DUP voted for it —

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In fact, the entire DUP fought for that. I see that I am hitting a soft spot. It is important to remember that, when I refused to accept the draft Budget, some people on those Benches stood up and said that it would be a scandal if health got another penny piece and argued that health should have got no more money. I was not prepared to accept that advice, and, with the support of a number of people in society, we substantially increased the budget.

Therefore, the proposals are nothing like as bad as they could have been. The Minister of Finance and Personnel at that time said that those were efficiencies, not cuts, although I know that Mr Easton has personally disagreed with that.

**Mr McKay:** A LeasCheann Comhairle, does the Minister agree that the elected representatives for the areas affected and the families of those involved by the recent announcement with regard to residential care homes should have been informed prior to its public announcement? We had a meeting with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust just before Christmas and there was no mention whatsoever of possible closures.

Furthermore, does the Minister agree that public consultation meetings on that issue should be held in local areas? I am going to a public meeting in Coleraine tonight about the possible closure of a centre in Ballycastle. Does the Minister agree that a further meeting on that issue should be held in Ballycastle?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Member asked a number of questions, and I will try to respond to them. The trust manages the consultation process. If the Member has a complaint, no doubt that will be part of the responses at which I will get a chance to look. The situation is quite simple: I have to find savings of £700 million over the next three years. That was not my idea and I do not want to have to do that, but I have to do that as that has been enforced on me.

If I do not find that money, I am going to have to start to cancel a number of services. They will include, for example, those to which I just referred, services for children with complex needs, cancer services, stroke services and screening services for bowel cancer. All of the new service developments that I have been able to announce have to be funded, and they are funded by efficiency savings because I did not get enough money to run health — everyone is aware of that. A funding gap of £600 million exists in my Department, and, if the DUP had got its way at the time, the situation would have been much worse.

I will study the proposals extremely carefully — they will all come to me eventually. I have no decision to make on non-contentious proposals; however, I must make a decision on those that are contentious. I

am a long way from reaching that point. Before making a final decision, I must wait for the consultation process to finish, read the recommendations and scrutinise the proposals. If the Member considers that a consultation process is required in Ballycastle, he should take that up with the Northern Trust.

**Mr Beggs:** The three residential care homes in my constituency affected are Lisgarel, Greenisland Residential Home and Clonmore House. Is the Minister aware that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's proposals to close those care homes have created a huge level of concern? Will he assure the House that, when the trust reaches its conclusions, he will fully acquaint himself with the entire consultation process? That will highlight the vagueness and weakness of the proposals, and, if those elements are addressed, the most vulnerable people in society will not be abandoned.

Will he ensure that the joined-up working, particularly supported housing and respite care, as well as the residential care provided at Lisgarel, will be fully recognised? That is not the case according to the criteria used by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Supplementary questions should be brief.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I give Mr Beggs the assurances that he seeks. I am aware of the grave concern in the area, and I have taken some steps to address it; for example, to try to provide some reassurance and comfort, I spoke to local newspapers, and they published some of my statements. However, no decision has been made; the closures are not a done deal.

The proposals do not contain a single done deal, and any contentious proposals must come back to me for ratification. I will scrutinise each of those, and I will base my decision, as always, on the simple criterion that patients come first. No cuts will be made to front-line services. I will consider the views of patients carefully, and I will listen closely to the views of Lisgarel residents too.

The trust put forward the proposals. Efficiency savings of £700 million must be achieved, of which the trusts' share is £467 million, and the Northern Trust must find £82 million of that. That money must be found; otherwise I am cutting other services. That is the situation in which I find myself, and it is not one in which I want to be.

Some DUP Members have been particularly vocal on the issue, but they could sort out the shortfall in funding. That party holds the purse strings and, in light of the proposals, if it wants to give me more money, that would be hugely helpful.

## Primary Care Provision: Rural County Tyrone

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what strategy his Department is pursuing to improve and develop primary care provision in rural parts of County Tyrone that are a significant distance away from an acute hospital. (AQO 1930/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In order to reduce dependency on hospitals for treatment and care, I am committed to enhancing primary and community care services across Northern Ireland. Over the period of the comprehensive spending review (CSR), £44 million has been made available to boards and trusts to provide additional primary care services, including: developing patient education and case management programmes for people with chronic diseases; improving community-based palliative care services; employing specialist community nurses to deliver services to people in their homes, and promoting the use of technology to help to reduce the number of unnecessary hospital referrals and admissions.

The primary and community care infrastructure programme aims to put in place a physical infrastructure that is fit for purpose and provides integrated, modern health and care services to local communities. The new, enhanced local hospital complex planned for Omagh will include a health and care centre and allow access to a wide range of secondary and primary services.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of the serious concerns in Carrickmore and Fintona. The health and care centres there were recently in line for development through capital investment, but the money, I understand, was withdrawn. Will the Minister agree to meet me and representative GPs from both centres?

Carrickmore is furthest away from all the acute hospitals. The Minister said that primary care has a key role to play in the health solution for west Tyrone. In the absence of an acute hospital, we need our primary care provision built up. Will the Minister agree to meet with me and relevant GPs to discuss those matters?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Primary care is a central plank in the strategy, as, through primary care, we can keep people out of hospitals. Therefore Mr McElduff's points are well made.

He referred to rural areas. About half of the GP practices in west Tyrone are in rural areas, and those practices provide a wide and important range of services, which will be able to be centralised when the new buildings are built. That does not necessarily

mean that there will be a massive increase in the number of services. However, the proposal is for a one-stop shop, as opposed to many stops. Mr McElduff tackled me about the matter last week during a meeting about the hospital in Omagh. I said that I would be happy to look at primary care provision, and I still have to do that.

Health and care centres are planned for Carrickmore and Fintona. However, the Member is aware that I needed £7.8 billion to renew Health Service infrastructure over the next 10 years, and I received £3.3 billion. I have less than half of what I need; therefore, I must prioritise. The Western Health and Social Care Trust will make those decisions. The spend on new hospitals in Enniskillen and Omagh, provisions at Altnagelvin, and new healthcare provisions at Omagh and Lisnaskee are major parts of that budget over the three-year CSR period and beyond. Getting more money into the Western Health and Social Care Trust will depend on my increasing the entire budget.

**Mr Buchanan:** Given that County Tyrone has to depend solely on primary care since the recent announcement that the last strand of acute services is to be removed from the Tyrone County Hospital by the end of this month, would it not have been good practice to have had all those primary care facilities in place prior to the removal of acute services, since that is what the people in County Tyrone will have to depend on? I would welcome the opportunity to have a meeting with GPs and the Minister on those issues.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Tyrone County Hospital is an old administrative unit. Health services are delivered regionally, and subregionally, through the trusts. The Western Health and Social Care Trust area includes Omagh and most of County Tyrone and has two acute hospitals, Altnagelvin Hospital and the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. Around £260 million is about to be spent on rebuilding the hospital in Enniskillen. The enhanced local hospital in Omagh will be rebuilt at a projected cost of £190 million. In addition, there will be other primary care investments, such as those in Omagh and in Lisnaskee. Considerable amounts of money are being spent in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area to address concerns.

It is my desire to build health and care centres at Carrickmore and Fintona, and it is my desire to build centres in many other places. I will need to see the capital budget envelope increased, and I am looking at ways to do that. However, Members will appreciate that that is very difficult in the current circumstances. At the same time, I am trying to handle the 3% CSR efficiency savings, which will take £700 million out of the Health Service over three years. I assure Members that that is not easy. As I have said over and over again

in House, if Members have better ideas about the way things should be done, please let me know; I am listening.

**Mr Gallagher:** Does the Minister understand that the concerns that the people in rural parts of County Tyrone have about primary care provision have been heightened by the emergence of plans for private provision? Does he agree that there is a real danger that public provision of that important level of primary healthcare could well be weakened by private provision? Does he have any plans to address that issue?

3.00 pm

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have no knowledge of that private company — Primacure. I think that it got planning permission and made an announcement. It has had no discussions with me or the Department, nor, as I understand it, with the relevant trust — the Western Health and Social Care Trust. My position on healthcare is absolutely clear; there should be cradle-to-the-grave healthcare, and it should be free for all. From time to time, we have to opt for private purchase and provision, but that is always to reinforce the principle rather than to breach it.

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Loading Bay Waiting Times

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to change the waiting times at loading bays from the current limit of five minutes. (AQO 1946/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Loading bays are provided to facilitate the loading and unloading of goods that, by reason of their size or weight, cannot be reasonably conveyed by any other means than a vehicle. Loading bays may be used for as long as is necessary to convey goods to or from premises. Vehicles are not permitted to wait in loading bays for any purpose other than loading and unloading. Traffic attendants enforce those restrictions and observe vehicles in loading bays to ensure that they are properly using the facility. A traffic attendant will issue a vehicle with a parking ticket if it is observed parked in loading bay without loading or unloading.

Since the commencement of the decentralised parking enforcement contract in October 2006, the policy of Roads Service in my Department has been to allow a five-minute observation period for all vehicles before a parking ticket is issued. However, following a recent enforcement policy review, Roads Service officials decided to adjust that period to 10

minutes for commercial vehicles only. All other vehicles will retain a five-minute observation period. That policy change has been effective from 19 January 2009.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere with the recording system.

**Mr I McCrea:** I welcome the extension of the waiting time for commercial businesses, albeit that it is only an extension of five minutes. I am sure that the Minister is aware from his experience in his own constituency, and in other constituencies, that the five-minute waiting period has caused problems. The Minister referred to issues that involve the National Car Parks Limited (NCP) attendants. It is important that businesses are given a bit of latitude. The traffic attendants should not be waiting about for vehicles to exceed the five minutes or not. I am sure that there are other cars that are breaking the law. Can the Minister ensure that NCP will not be as rigorous in its approach to businesses and will not issue tickets if a vehicle has been parked for one second over the 10 minutes? That is what is happening in some parts with the five-minute waiting period.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** A balance must be struck, and I think that NCP employs some degree of common sense when dealing with all those issues. However, spaces in town and city centres are very contested as far as parking and traffic movement is concerned. If a vehicle is parked for longer than the allowed waiting period, it prevents another vehicle from loading or offloading to other premises. A balance must be struck between keeping loading bays ticking over — keeping the space available as often as is possible — and allowing people to reasonably do their business. The Member has welcomed the extension of the waiting period for commercial vehicles from five to 10 minutes. As I said, NCP adopts a common-sense approach, but there is also an onus on its attendants to keep traffic flowing in town centres, where there are obviously congestion issues. They must ensure that people do not delay unduly, and, in doing so, prevent other traders from getting goods in and out of their premises.

**Mr Brady:** Is loading and unloading permitted in streets with yellow line restrictions?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The answer is yes, unless it is otherwise stated. Loading and unloading is permitted on yellow line restrictions and the change of observation time for commercial vehicles from five to 10 minutes also applies to areas with yellow lines.

## Roadworks in Belfast and Ards

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment on the economic impact of roadworks in the Belfast and Ards area.  
(AQO 1947/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I understand that the Member's question relates to street works that are carried out by utilities. Unfortunately, it is simply not possible to ascertain the economic impact of such street works by utilities in the North. Any such economic impact would be based largely on the cost of related traffic delays, and the magnitude and severity of those effects is difficult to quantify. I understand that that is similar to the position in England, where two recent studies that were carried out to determine the cost of traffic delays due to street works came up with significantly different answers.

I fully appreciate the Member's concerns about the number of roadworks being carried out by utilities. However, modern society cannot function without essential services such as water supply, waste-water disposal, electricity, gas and telecommunications. That is why utility companies were given the right by Westminster to locate their equipment under public roads. Such services cannot be installed and maintained without some damage to the infrastructure of the road and disruption to traffic. However, we recognise the frustration of road users at the disruption that is caused when roads and footways are opened by the utility companies and, in particular, when there is poor co-ordination between them.

Roads Service has a duty to minimise disruption to the public and to protect the road network, so it has implemented effective arrangements for utilities to share information on planned work, to minimise traffic disruption and ensure that roads are properly reinstated.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will not be surprised that I am returning to the subject of the roads on the Ards Peninsula, a place that he visited not that long ago. Economic development is talked about; however, there has been no economic development on the Ards Peninsula for many years because of lack of investment in local roads. Will the Minister provide assurance that there will be further investment in roads, particularly those on the Ards Peninsula, which will give us some semblance of economic progress?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member is correct: I visited the roads on the Ards Peninsula and, like many roads across the North, they could do with being repaired and upgraded. It is no secret that the structural maintenance budget is not what Roads Service and others estimate is required to keep roads here at a necessary standard. Thus, we

continue to argue every year, as part of the Budget and in-year monitoring processes, for additional funds to be made available to Roads Service. Those funds should be spread equally and evenly across all Roads Service divisions so that all areas get an opportunity to receive improvements.

The Member knows that we are playing catch-up on roads infrastructure, not just on the main routes, but on all roads across the North. Although we do not have a sufficient budget to treat all roads as we would wish to; when money becomes available, we must ensure that it goes to areas where there is the most pressing need and ensure that it is spread equally across all divisions.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Minister agree that allocation of the roads budget should follow the work of the service facilities? The Minister has been in our neck of the woods at least twice, so he will be well aware of the substandard state of the roads due to service facilities and reinstatements. Is the Minister aware of the damage being done to vehicles because of service facility roadworks? The claims from drivers on those roads are substantial. Does the Minister agree that more money should be spent on roads in the Ards and in Belfast?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I said, many areas have pressing needs, including the Ards. Since I took up my ministerial post, I have had the good fortune to visit many constituencies across the North.

As I said in my original answer, utilities are very important and are part of the service infrastructure. If people want to develop economic opportunities in the Ards, then infrastructure for water, waste-water removal, electricity and telecommunications is required. Such infrastructure is necessary for economic development. Roads Service cannot prevent utilities from laying infrastructure under roads or from repairing, or amending, such infrastructure. However, we try to organise the works so that they do not cause huge disruption and we require utility companies to reinstate roads to a satisfactory condition. From experience, I know that people across the North often complain that that does not happen. Therefore, Roads Service must keep checking with utilities so that any damage done to roads is repaired and that roads are reinstated properly.

**Mr McGlone:** In light of the significant increase in compensation claims that have been made for damage to vehicles due to potholes on our rural roads and the cost of that to the Department, why is so little money being put into roads maintenance in areas such as mid-Ulster where the roads are as bad as they have ever been during my time as a councillor?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I can supply the Member with figures to show that, over the

past number of years, there has been a significant increase in the amount of money that has been spent on roads maintenance, but it is still not enough. When the Member and his colleagues from that corner of the House argue for more money for social housing, I hope that they will argue equally for more money for the provision of rural roads. When those Members are looking to raid other budgets to augment the social housing budget, I will gladly take money from them for the roads budget.

It is all very well for Members to argue that certain issues should be key priorities for the Executive, but the roads maintenance budget for rural roads and roads infrastructure is not at the required level. We argued that as part of the budgetary process, but I did not hear many other voices supporting us. We can normally top that up with in-year monitoring funds, but this year has been particularly difficult because the budget is stretched, and there are many loud demands being made from other areas of the public spend about what money should be applied there. Therefore, I am glad to hear the Member arguing for an upgrade of the budget for rural roads, and I am sure that the next time that he mentions social housing, he will mention rural roads in the same breath.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that supplementary questions should relate to the original question.

**Mr McCartney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí.

The Minister intimated that Roads Service has a role in relation to traffic delays and street works. Will he outline that role? How does Roads Service monitor it?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Roads Service's role is to minimise disruption to the public and to protect the road network. It puts in place arrangements for utilities to share information, to plan work in order to minimise traffic disruption and to ensure that roads are properly reinstated. Roads Service, in partnership with the utilities companies, has a computerised register, which is known as the Northern Ireland street register and notification system (NISRANS), where planned street works are notified before the start of works.

The advanced notification system allows Roads Service and utilities to co-ordinate works that are likely to occur around the same time or on the same road. It also allows utilities to stagger works in order to minimise disruptions. Emergency and urgent works are notified retrospectively.

In addition, Roads Service has introduced the Street Works (Amendment) Order 2007, which is based on the Traffic Management Act 2004, and it includes provision to reduce traffic delays related to street works. The legislation also includes direction-making

powers aimed at minimising congestion through the reduction of delays related to street works.

### Street Lighting

3. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps have been taken to reduce the energy used by street lighting. (AQO 1948/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The energy efficiency of street lighting is a major consideration for my Department's Roads Service. It is committed to maintaining the standards of street lighting, while, at the same time, reducing its energy costs. It has already undertaken a number of energy conservation measures, including the increased use of energy-efficient lanterns for new and replacement street lighting installations, replacing the highest wattage street lights, where possible, with more efficient energy-efficient lanterns while still maintaining street lighting standards and trialling the use of energy conservation measures, such as reduced burning hours and the use of white lamps, which allow for lower lighting levels.

**Mr Ross:** Is the Minister aware that some councils in England and Wales recently took the decision to turn off street lights, much to the disappointment of the Automobile Association — which states that it will cause road safety issues — and the police, who are worried about increased crime? Does the Minister agree that a more common-sense approach would be to investigate new technology, such as LED lighting for street lamps? Such lighting has been used in China and in the United States, where it has been reported that there could be up to 50% energy savings on this new technology.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member is correct in saying that the feasibility of turning off all, or some, street lights between certain periods has been considered and assessed, but it has been rejected on safety grounds. However, it is incumbent on Roads Service to continue to monitor developments and to reconsider all options when next reviewing energy conservation plans.

As I said in my original answer, Roads Service has already begun to assess new technology and its effectiveness, because the issue is about the cost of street lighting, not just the lighting pollution issues in the countryside. The cost of street lighting energy has risen, and it has placed a burden on Roads Service's budget, which impacts on the last question, which related to structural maintenance. The cost of street lighting is continuing to rise, and, wherever possible, Roads Service has been examining new technology to try to introduce new elements to street lighting, which will reduce the cost, and the effects, of pollution.

3.15 pm

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish the Minister every success in getting more money from the Executive for roads. When will the next review of the energy conservation plan — with particular reference to street lighting — take place? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Roads Service will next review the street lighting energy conservation plan in the 2009-2010 financial year.

**Mr K Robinson:** Will the Minister tell the House what his Department is doing to explore and implement alternative sources of energy technology, such as solar power? That would surely reduce costs and, perhaps, the Department's carbon footprint.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Someone still has a mobile telephone on. I ask that it be switched off, because it is interfering with the recording system.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** It could not be a solar-powered telephone that is interfering with the recording system. *[Laughter.]*

Solar-powered lighting for street-lighting purposes is not currently considered as viable. However, rapid developments in the efficiency of photovoltaic cells and lamp technologies will likely make solar power a realistic solution for street lighting in the near future. Roads Service will continue to monitor advances in such technology, and will conduct trials at the earliest opportunity when the technology can meet the needs of street-lighting operations.

### Road Safety

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many meetings have been held between his Department and the Department of the Environment in relation to road safety issues; and if the future of the NI Road Safety Council was discussed. (AQO 1949/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I assure Members that I give a high priority to road safety generally, and that I am fully committed to making a significant contribution towards achieving a reduction in the number of casualties on our roads. To that end, I met the previous Minister of the Environment on 10 July 2007 and again on 10 March 2008 in order to discuss a range of safety issues associated with the road safety strategy for the North. Furthermore, road safety is an important item for discussion at the North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meetings, at which the Minister for the Environment and I discuss road safety issues with my counterpart in the South.

Roads Service has also developed excellent working relationships with the National Roads Authority, and



officials meet regularly to discuss road safety issues and to share best practice. More recently, I met Minister Wilson and Minister Ritchie to discuss plans for the development of Belfast city centre, and we agreed that our Departments would conduct a high-level review of the emerging plans in order to ensure that any resulting proposals recognise the importance of traffic safety, while meeting the needs of the essential user groups, including pedestrians, traders and public transport users and providers.

Roads Service officials regularly meet the Department of the Environment (DOE) officials in order to review the current road safety strategy and exchange ideas for improving road safety. As a result, DOE is preparing a new road safety strategy, which is due for publication in 2010. I have agreed that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) officials should participate in developing that strategy.

The future of the Road Safety Council is a matter for Minister Wilson and his Department. My Department is not represented on that body, which is funded by the DOE to promote voluntary road safety activity. I am aware of the report on the Road Safety Council, and of Minister Wilson's decision. That body's future is not a matter for my Department.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for giving such a detailed answer. I know that he is dedicated to road safety, as we all are. Will he acknowledge the contribution that the Road Safety Council has made in giving leadership and a strategic role to so many small voluntary committees across Northern Ireland? In addition, would it not make better sense, given that a new strategy is about to be introduced, that roads and road safety be met under the remit of a single Department and a single Minister?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** When the original six Departments were divided into 10, elements of the original DOE were moved to different Departments, but responsibility for road safety stayed with the DOE. Roads engineering and its contribution to road safety went to DRD and Roads Service. There is a crossover in some of those arrangements, and I acknowledge the work of the Road Safety Council. As I said, my Department is not represented on that body, and its future is a matter for the Minister of the Environment. Road safety issues are dealt with by a range of bodies, North and South and cross-border, all of which are making a very important contribution. We were all heartened to see that the number of fatalities and serious injuries on our roads are reducing steadily North and South of the border. However, there is much more work to be done.

The Department of the Environment is responsible for road safety, and Minister Wilson has to make a decision about the Road Safety Council. As my

Department is not represented on that body, it is not a matter for me. However, those organisations or agencies that contribute to road safety are doing valuable work, and I encourage them to continue to do so.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What are the Minister's plans for excluding all traffic from Belfast city centre?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I said in my answer to the lead question, I met Ministers Wilson and Ritchie to discuss the development of Belfast city centre. As the Member knows, three Departments have interests in the city centre. Roads Service is responsible for road engineering and the enforcement of waiting restrictions on the streets; the Department of the Environment has interests in road safety education; and the Department for Social Development is responsible for the Streets Ahead programme, which administers the streetscape work. Furthermore, the PSNI is responsible for enforcing traffic regulations and waiting restrictions.

The Ministers met recently, and some of the discussion was prompted, in part, by the tragic fatality in Belfast city centre. Devolved Government provides an opportunity for Ministers to meet regularly to ensure that individual plans that might impact on the streetscape of Belfast city centre or on public transport and the way in which it moves around the city — which is my Department's responsibility — co-ordinate and make sense and to ensure that road safety and the safety of pedestrians are at the forefront of any plans that are considered.

Ministers met, and we asked senior officials of our Departments to examine existing plans and bring back some options and recommendations. We expect to meet again in May to consider those options, and we will then be in a position to outline a way forward.

**Mr Beggs:** Do Roads Service officials regularly engage with local road-safety committees? I declare an interest as a member of such a voluntary committee. In view of DRD and DOE's overlapping responsibilities, will the Minister tell us whether he was consulted about the proposals to end funding to the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland? Will he assure us that Road Service staff will continue to engage with local voluntary committees to improve everyone's safety?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I said in my answer to the lead question, the DRD is not represented on that committee, and it is understandable that it was not involved in the Environment Minister's decision: we had no part in that. I assure the Member that Roads Service is keen to co-operate, not only at senior, but at local level with all who have an interest in road safety to ensure that the numbers of deaths, serious injuries and accidents are reduced. That is in

everyone's interest. Roads Service will want to continue with that work.

### Journey Times

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what strategies his Department has in place to meet its public service agreement and business plan target of reducing journey times on the key transport corridors by 2.5% by 2015, compared with the figure in 2001. (AQO 1950/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I wish to clarify that public service agreement (PSA) 13 states that, by 2015, we will reduce journey times on key transport corridors by 2.5% compared with 2003 — not 2001, as the question states.

When that challenging target is achieved, it will bring significant benefits to our economy. The 'Investment Delivery Plan for Roads', published in April 2008, sets out the priorities and plans of my Department's Roads Service for the 10-year period, 2008-2018. It aims to address bottlenecks on the strategic road network and gives priority to the key transport corridors.

The investment delivery plan contains a programme of major road improvements based on the funding levels indicated in the investment strategy. That strategic road improvement programme identifies improvements not only to the key transport corridors, but to the link corridors and the remainder of the trunk-road network. The network connects our main provincial towns and cities to the Belfast metropolitan area, the regional gateways and the roads network in the South.

In order to achieve PSA 13, Roads Service has significant schemes for key transport corridors in the planning and under construction. Those under construction include the M1/Westlink/M2 works; the 12-kilometre dualling of the A1 around Newry; the 20-kilometre dualling of the A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley. Roads Service is on target to have completed, approximately, a further 160 kilometres of dual carriageway in the key transport corridors by 2015.

The promotion of public transport is another objective of PSA 13. The Department has plans in place for the increasing the usage of public transport, including improvements to the rail and Goldline services which have the most impact in decreasing car journeys on the strategic road network. I am confident that the strategic road-improvement schemes, combined with the promotion of public transport, will result in the achievement of that challenging target and reduce journey times on the key transport corridors.

**Mr B McCrea:** Is it just my opinion, or have the journey times on the Westlink deteriorated to the point where we are back to where we started? As I understand it, the business case for the improvements was that much of the traffic coming into Belfast was through-traffic, and we would see a great improvement as a result of them. I see a real problem with that. Will the Minister explain why that should happen, and whether he has any plans to deal with it in the foreseeable future?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** It is just the Member.

As a regular user of the Westlink, I must tell him that everyone that I have spoken to about it has remarked on how the journey from the south into Belfast, and leaving Belfast in the evening, has improved dramatically since the work began. That may not have been so this morning, as two lanes that were opened in advance of when they should have been, to facilitate Christmas traffic, are having work completed on them. The works on the Westlink are almost at completion stage. There has been substantial improvement there.

Plans are being developed by the Roads Service to remove the junction at York Street, which has caused a bottleneck. They are in the early stages of design, but there are plans. Following that, there will be a continuous flow of traffic — to take the full extent of it — from Arklow towards Rosslare, right up as far as Larne. There will be a dual carriageway along the entire eastern seaboard of the island. I think that that is good news.

The Member will be aware that it is very difficult to build our way out of traffic congestion. That is why another key part of the public service agreement target is to improve public transport and improve usage of public transport. Although we have been spending significant money on the Westlink and, I would contend, improving the journey times and experience on the Westlink, we have also been investing significantly in park-and-ride facilities, in improving the rail network, and in trying to encourage people out of their cars and onto public transport. The growth in passenger numbers on public transport shows that the investment that we are making there is bearing fruit.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain what progress has been made in the provision of a dual carriageway on the A5, A6 and A8 routes? Is the Minister aware of the Stand up for Derry campaign?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Unfortunately, the answer to the second part of the Member's question is yes.

I was pleased to announce the preferred corridor for the A5 Derry to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast to Larne dual carriageway schemes last November. The

design of those schemes, which will receive a £400 million contribution in funding from the Irish Government, is proceeding at pace. I expect to be in a position to announce the preferred route for both projects in summer 2009. I also hope to announce the preferred route for the dualling of the A6 Derry to Dungiven scheme in the spring, and will bring forward a departmental statement on the Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway scheme in response to the inspector's report later this year.

Work on the A5 and A8 schemes could possibly commence in 2012 or 2013, subject to the normal statutory processes. I anticipate commencement of the A6 Derry to Dungiven scheme in a roughly similar time frame, with similar provisos. Work on the Randalstown to Castledawson scheme could commence in 2011, with completion expected in 2014.

**Mr Dallat:** I am pleased that the Minister has already referred to the A6. Does he agree with me that the travel times could not be realistically reduced without a bypass at Dungiven? Will he give us an assurance that that will happen long before 2015?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have had this discussion with the Member, the Regional Development Committee and with people I have met in Dungiven and here many times before. I think that they, and many other people, are convinced by the assurances that we have given that we will take forward that scheme as quickly as possible. We do not anticipate any undue delay in that. Work on the design of that scheme, and in bringing forward the options around it, is well under way, and we look forward to further announcements later in the year. The Member can be assured that I see the road as a priority, and I intend to make sure that there is no delay.

### Public Transport

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to increase resources for public transport. (AQO 1951/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The regional transportation strategy assumed a total investment of £3.5 billion over the 10-year period 2002-2012, which comprised the pre-2002 baseline level of £2.1 billion being maintained, and included £1.4 billion additional funding, but with the caveat that the final outcome would be subject to the normal budgetary processes.

The result has been that transportation has been successful in attracting finance, and the Budget for the period 2008-2011 provides significant levels of capital funding for public transport of £51 million this year, rising to £54 million next year, and £90 million in 2010-11. My Department is committed to undertaking

a review of the current regional transportation strategy and is carrying out a stocktaking exercise in implementing the strategy to date, including budgets secured, and the rate of implementation of the projects.

3.30 pm

The review will determine key outcomes for local transport, including emissions from traffic, the safety of travel, and the accessibility of transport services. It will seek to address a number of developments that have occurred since 2002, including the focus on climate change and sustainable development. The findings from the review will inform my Department's bids for future budget and investment strategy exercises.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Winter Fuel Payment: Upper Bann

1. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Social Development what is the estimated number of homes in Upper Bann that will benefit from the additional proposed payment of £150 to assist with winter fuel costs. (AQO 1966/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I expect the Financial Assistance Bill to be given Royal Assent on Friday 6 February. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will then designate a Department to deliver a fuel credit or fuel payment. I am unable to confirm precisely when that fuel credit or fuel payment will be made, as there are still a number of key decisions to be made around how it will be processed. Those decisions will not be made final until the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has designated a Department to deliver that credit or payment. It is likely, of course, that the designated Department will be the Department for Social Development (DSD).

Approximately 8,000 households in Upper Bann — and I stress that that is only a rough estimate — will benefit from the payment. Although it will not be immediate, the aim will be to get the payment out as quickly as possible to those who need it.

**Mr Simpson:** The Minister has answered my supplementary question, which concerned the timescale for the payment; I am sure that all Members agree that it is essential that that payment be made as quickly as possible to those who need it.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I could not agree more with Mr Simpson, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development and Member for Upper Bann. The most important thing is to ensure that

we address need, and that means getting a payment or a credit out as quickly as possible.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Can the Minister confirm whether she has been in communication with OFMDFM to discuss the practical details of the proposed fuel payment?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Yes, I have. In anticipation of the passing of the Financial Assistance Bill, my officials have been working alongside officials from OFMDFM to map out the practical details of the proposed scheme — assuming that DSD is the designated Department.

Members will be aware that the proposal for a fuel payment originated with my Department. However, the funding was announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, with further details to be outlined by OFMDFM. On Thursday 29 January, I met the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and agreed that the payment will cover all households in receipt of pension credit as well as households in receipt of income support. That is approximately 45,000 households over and above the number announced by the Minister of Finance on 15 December. Clearly, that has financial implications, as the cost will be £7 million more than the £15 million that was secured in the December monitoring round.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give any indication as to how the payment will be administered and delivered? Will it be a cash payment or a fuel credit? She has already answered the second part of my question, which concerned when that payment will happen.

**The Minister for Social Development:** Obviously, those are the details that are being discussed by me, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and by my officials and officials from OFMDFM. The Executive and the Assembly have to wait for Royal Assent before the First Minister and the deputy First Minister can designate a Department. The formal process must be completed.

## Warm Homes Scheme

2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps her Department has taken to protect those currently on the waiting list of the warm homes scheme when the two successful tenderers are appointed. (AQO 1967/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The budget available for the very popular warm homes scheme has been fully committed for the financial year 2008-09.

My Department is on track to meet its public service agreement target to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy-efficiency measures. I submitted a bid in the June and December

monitoring rounds for additional resources to clear the waiting list. Unfortunately, neither bid was successful. However, some outstanding referrals for assistance will be carried forward and assessed under the new criteria, and I expect that the majority of those outstanding warm-home referrals will receive assistance under the new scheme. Inevitably, some applicants who are on the waiting list will not be eligible for assistance under the new scheme.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It is unfortunate that some people who are in the current scheme will not qualify for the new scheme. Will the Minister further clarify whether the splitting-up of the delivery of the warm homes scheme from one contract to two contracts will speed up the process? Will that result in the numbers on the waiting list falling? Will it mean that new schemes can be introduced in the 2009-2010 financial year?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Buchanan raises an apt question. The whole purpose of the review of the scheme was to focus on the issue of need, particularly of those who need it most. I hope that that very popular scheme will continue to be popular and successful. Most importantly, we must ensure that those who are in need, particularly people in rural communities, benefit from the warm homes scheme. If the Member wishes to raise individual cases, he can bring those details to my attention.

**Mr Burns:** Why has the eligibility criteria for the warm homes scheme been changed?

**The Minister for Social Development:** In June 2008, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published a value-for-money study on the warm homes scheme. The Audit Office highlighted several areas for change, including the eligibility criteria. I mentioned that issue in my reply to Mr Buchanan. The Audit Office criticised the fact that families with children, and householders aged under 60 years of age, were eligible only for the warm-homes element of the scheme, which provides insulation and basic energy-efficiency measures.

Before a subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing in October 2008, my Department accepted all the Audit Office's recommendations, and we proposed several changes to the current scheme. My Department recently finished a consultation exercise on the proposed changes, and more than 90% of respondents supported changing the eligibility criteria. In changing the criteria, lone parents and low-income families will qualify not only for insulation measures but for heating measures. Those will improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

I am sure that all Members will agree that, particularly at this time of economic hardship, it is right to refocus the scheme, in order to maximise the

energy-efficiency gains that are achieved for every pound that is spent.

**Ms Lo:** I have been approached by several constituents who have been on the waiting list for a couple of years and are fearful that they may be written off because of a shortage of funding in the Housing Executive. Can the Minister clarify the position on that?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Ms Lo has highlighted the popular nature of the scheme. If she provides me with details of those constituents, I am more than happy to have their cases investigated and explored, in order to provide her with the necessary answers, which will, hopefully, help to alleviate the situation.

### Child Maintenance

3. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Development how many non-resident parents pay child maintenance to a parent who cares for a child or children. (AQO 1968/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am pleased to inform the Member that there is a very positive story here. At the end of December 2008, 14,500 non-resident parents were paying child maintenance. That was an increase of 25% on the number of non-resident parents who were paying child maintenance when I took office in May 2007. At around 21,000, the number of children who benefit from the payments is the highest ever.

This year, we are on target to collect £20.5 million through the statutory maintenance scheme — another record figure. Those gains are a result of hard work and determination on the part of DSD staff. I pay tribute to them and their excellent work in often-difficult circumstances.

Members heard earlier about the importance of putting children first. That is exactly what is being done by my Department's child maintenance and enforcement division.

**Mr Doherty:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for answering the question and for providing the detail. Will the Minister provide an estimated percentage of how many absentee parents her Department is unable to pursue? Furthermore, does she plan to raise the issue at the North/South Ministerial Council, given that some absentee parents live in, or purport to live in, the Twenty-six Counties?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have met the current Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Hanafin, and her predecessor, Martin Cullen, to discuss the latter point and a range of other social

security matters. I raised certain social security matters at the most recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. If Mr Doherty has particular issues relating to his constituency that involve both Ministers and both jurisdictions, provide me with the details, and I will be happy to deal with them.

The Member raised the issue of non-resident parents. There is a duty and responsibility on all of us to encourage everybody to honour children and to put them first in society. Therefore, everyone must pay for the children for whom they are responsible.

**Mr Craig:** Will the Minister outline what her Department has done about the issue of non-resident parents, particularly in relation to the Republic of Ireland? Has the matter been raised at meetings of the North/South bodies? Is there any mechanism that allows our statutory bodies to pursue parents in the Republic of Ireland? It is an issue, because parents who do not want to pay maintenance for their children might quite easily skip across that land border — something that is unique in these islands.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I partly answered that question in my reply to Mr Doherty.

I have had, and continue to have, meetings with the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Ms Hanafin. I also met her predecessor, Mr Cullen. I have raised a range of social security issues, including child maintenance and the peripatetic nature of claimants, which also happens vice versa.

As with Mr Doherty, Mr Craig may want to bring specific issues to my attention, face-to-face, and I will be happy to discuss them with the Irish Minister. I raised such matters, and general social security issues, last week. I hope that the DUP will take the chance to fully support the North/South Ministerial Council.

3.45 pm

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she tell the House how many people are in arrears on child-maintenance payments? How much money is owed in total, and what steps are being taken to recover it?

**The Minister for Social Development:** At present, just over 5,000 — one in four — non-resident parents rob their children and pay no child maintenance; that leaves 6,500 children in Northern Ireland without any maintenance. That is unacceptable.

Throughout the years, staff in the old Child Support Agency and, currently, in the child maintenance and enforcement division, have seen too many examples of non-resident parents going to extreme lengths to evade their responsibilities and probably to misrepresent their circumstances in order to avoid paying maintenance.

When my Department launched enforcement measures in September 2008, part of that was a media-advertisement campaign, which is still rolling. It asks the probing question:

“Are you robbing your child?”

As a result, many people have come forward and paid significant amounts of money.

When the period between September 2008 and December 2008 was examined and a comparative analysis carried out for the same period in 2007 and 2006, the amount of money that has been collected has increased substantially. That proves that advertisement campaigns work — as they did in the anti-drink-driving exercise — to alleviate a situation or, as in that instance, to improve a situation and put children first.

### Housing Executive Budget: Shortfall

4. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the anticipated shortfall in the Housing Executive budget in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. (AQO 1969/09)

9. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues to fill shortfalls in her housing budget. (AQO 1974/09)

20. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues to fill shortfalls in her housing budget. (AQO 1985/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 9 and 20, which are similar, together.

Members will be aware that a substantial part of the housing budget is predicated on capital receipts from house and land sales. Members will also be aware that due to collapse in the land and property market, combined with the global credit squeeze, capital receipts have almost dried up.

During the current year, more than £95 million of capital receipts was projected; however, less than £10 million materialised. Some of that £80 million shortfall was made good through in-year monitoring rounds and diversions of DSD resources from other budget lines. In that way, the shortfall was reduced to £35 million. Despite that, living in hope of extra resources from quarterly monitoring rounds is completely unsatisfactory when delivering an important capital programme.

Unless there is dramatic improvement in the economic environment, my Department anticipates shortfalls of about £100 million per annum in each of the next two years. That is equivalent to the loss of 1,000 newbuild houses per annum. If the Assembly is

serious about achieving Programme for Government targets for housing, that must have a secure financial footing. I am trying to persuade my Executive colleagues on the matter.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Minister for confirming the stark situation that her Department faces in the next three years. The Finance Minister has now accepted that her inability to build and renovate houses has a materially disproportionate effect on the construction industry. Independent of that factor, can the Minister indicate how the Executive can help to make good the housing shortfall that has arisen from the collapse in the Housing Executive's house and land sales?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Attwood for his question because it goes to the very nub of the problem. Neither the Executive nor anyone else is to blame for the shortfall in the housing budget. I acknowledge that the Executive face pressures in addition to housing.

However, investment in the social housing newbuild programme is the best way to boost the economy and the construction industry, quite apart from helping the homeless and people in housing stress. On 27 November 2008, I presented my Executive colleagues with a paper that made that case strongly. It stated specifically that we need to sustain social housing investment for economic reasons alone; we also have the social asset.

Although it has not been accepted so far, I have also made the case that we need to revisit the priorities of our three-year Programme for Government and Budget so that we can refocus resources on the areas that bring the most immediate economic benefit. The assumptions on which the current Budget and Programme for Government are based are no longer valid. We are now in an economic downturn, the depth of which we could never have envisaged. Furthermore, unemployment levels have risen, which could not have been earmarked or highlighted in January 2008, when the Budget was declared and voted on in the Assembly.

It is not only me who is of this view. Six or seven weeks ago, Professor Mike Smyth of the University of Ulster said:

“There is a strong case for revising the priorities set out in the NI Executive January 2008 Budget. For instance if capital expenditure could be redirected towards social housing, it would help to offset the collapse in private sector housebuilding.”

In a ‘Belfast Telegraph’ article last week, another leading economist, John Simpson, called for a review of priorities.

So far, my ministerial colleagues have been content with a stocktake rather than a complete review, but I assure my colleague Mr Attwood that I will continue to try to bring them round to my way of thinking. The only way to find a solution to this problem is to have a

review of the Budget priorities. We must ensure that housing is put on a sure financial footing. We must move away from the hand-to-mouth feeding of social housing, because that is no longer a tenable way of financing housing.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Poots:** Does the Minister recognise that her Department has surrendered tens of millions of pounds in the monitoring rounds? Her Department is seeking additional funding even though it cannot spend the funding for which it budgeted; does that not put a question mark over that Department's competence?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am very surprised that a former Minister would make such a suggestion. He is under a total misapprehension and is trying to ditch the issue. The DUP and Sinn Féin have tried to flog a dead horse. It would suit the DUP to encourage the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a proper review of the Budget priorities takes place. It may have escaped the Member, but we are now in a severe economic downturn; that is why a review is needed.

We should want to put housing on a sure financial footing rather than try to score political points at the expense of the people. It is wrong to prevent people from having access to houses, and it is wrong to prevent the proper finance from being available to put social housing on a sure financial footing for the first time ever. That is the very least that the DUP, and those on the opposite Benches, could do.

**Mr K Robinson:** I note carefully the lecture that the Minister has given to the House and to my colleagues in the DUP. However, given the shortfall in her budget, how does she propose to deal with the likely increase in demand for Housing Executive accommodation due to the economic downturn? In particular, I have an interest in social housing schemes in the Monkstown area.

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Robinson's question is apt. That is the reason why, for the first time, a social housing development programme must be put on a sure financial footing. That did not happen throughout decades of direct rule Administration, and I hope that my ministerial colleagues have a complete change of heart and take on board my points about the need for social housing and how investment in social housing could act as a necessary stimulus to the economy. Such investment could put people back into work, sustain existing jobs, create new jobs in the construction industry, provide a valuable asset and address housing waiting lists.

I agree that many people will, sadly and regrettably, find themselves in difficult economic circumstances through no fault of their own. That is why it is even more important that the Executive act collectively to

ensure that housing is put on a sure financial footing, that significant resources are invested in it, and that there is a complete review of the Budget priorities to enable that to happen.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Ford:** Will the Minister confirm — in case there is any lack of clarification — that the stocktaking exercise has, to date, produced absolutely nothing for social housing?

Secondly, she mentioned the potential loss of 1,000 newbuilds over the next couple of years. Will she outline what will happen to the Housing Executive's repairs and maintenance budget, which is, in some senses, equally important to those who live in houses that require such repairs?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Ford for his question.

On foot of the December monitoring round, I sought an immediate meeting with the Housing Executive, which outlined clearly the details and implications that could arise. As I had requested at the Executive meeting, I sought an immediate meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. On reflection, he allowed me, subject to Executive approval, to redirect £10.5 million to enable much-needed heating and kitchen replacements and other maintenance schemes to take place. I agree; that is one way to help the construction industry. However, it is also one way to assuage the fears of tenants whose housing requires urgent repairs.

The classic point in all of this is that we need to review Budget priorities and — and I make a plea to everyone — to ensure that the social housing development programme is put on a sure financial footing in order to enable a proper programme of house building to cater for housing need throughout Northern Ireland.

### Meeting with Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

5. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on her recent meeting with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

(AQO 1970/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I met the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell, in November 2008, and we discussed a wide range of issues that are relevant to our responsibilities for social security, child support and pensions. Those included welfare reform, where I highlighted my concerns about potentially insensitive implementation, and the reform of the social fund. Furthermore, we discussed the disability living allowance and extending

its availability to people with severe sight impairment and other specific conditions. Moreover, I pressed Mr Purnell to broaden the eligibility criteria for winter fuel payments and to provide greater assistance to carers.

I intend to meet Mr Purnell — at my insistence — on a regular basis.

**Mrs M Bradley:** To what extent do decisions on social security that are taken at Westminster have an impact on social security policy in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 makes provision for the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Minister for Social Development to seek to secure a single system of social security for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That reflects the long-standing policy of parity in that area, where we have the same rules of entitlement, the same rates of benefits and share common computer systems.

Social security in Northern Ireland is not self-financing, and we rely heavily on subsidy from Britain to maintain the same level of benefits. On average, we receive about £185 million per year from the Great Britain national insurance fund to fund contributory benefits, and we receive £2.3 billion per year to fund non-contributory benefits. That funding is predicated on the maintenance of parity, yet there is one party in the Chamber that regularly flirts with the danger of undermining the principle of parity. Inevitably, therefore, decisions taken at Westminster are of huge importance for social security in Northern Ireland; we have little option but to implement them. We can, however, influence social-security policy as it develops at Westminster, and no one has been more involved in that work than my colleague Mark Durkan MP.

I call on those who criticise parity legislation in social security to address the draft legislation when it is processed in Westminster. In particular, those who refuse to take their seats in Westminster but who take remuneration there should reconsider their position.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That concludes Question Time. I propose that Members take their ease until we resume the debate.

4.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Consultative Group on the Past

*Debate resumed on amendments to motion:*

That this Assembly recognises the importance of meeting the needs of victims; and condemns proposals from the Consultative Group on the Past which equate perpetrators of violence with innocent victims — [Mr Simpson.]

*Which amendments were:*

(1) Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“takes note of the proposals of the Consultative Group on the Past, shares the grave reservations across the community at the suggestion for £12,000 ‘recognition payments’, but recognises the potential for the other recommendations to provide an effective way to assist victims and to address the past and its legacy, consistent with the objectives of reconciliation and the creation of a shared future.” — [Mr Ford.]

(2) Leave out all after “and” and insert

“recognises the grief felt by the families of all victims who lost their lives as a result of the conflict; and, following publication of the report from the Consultative Group on the Past, urges everyone to enter a constructive debate on the way forward.” — [Mr McCartney.]

**Mr Irwin:** Representing a constituency that suffered heavily at the hands of republican terrorists, I was shocked to learn of the first reports that the Consultative Group on the Past had tabled a proposal to award £12,000 to such individuals. The scenes at the launch of the report were not surprising, given the depth of feeling and immense hurt that such a proposal caused, and people from both sides of the community have contacted me to tell me of their dismay at the proposal. On Friday a Roman Catholic businessman rang me to convey how disgusted he was, and he wanted me to convey that disgust to the House today.

It is totally unacceptable to the innocent victims of the IRA's bloody campaign in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, and it is an insult to the dear memory of those who were murdered at the hands of that organisation.

**Mr Poots:** Does the Member recall that a bomb exploded in Banbridge town, and a 12-year-old boy by the name of McCrum — whose brother is a DUP councillor — was killed in that explosion? The Member may also recall the attempted murder of my father in 1976. Subsequently, the individual who carried out that attempted murder was himself killed in an IRA feud. Does the Member agree that there can never be any comparison between a 12-year-old boy



who was murdered by an IRA bomb and the republican who was pulling the trigger on other people and who ended up getting shot himself in a feud? There never can be any comparison between the innocent boy and the terrorist who pulled the trigger.

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

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I fully agree with what he said.

The families of those who were murdered by republican terrorists do not want the focus to be on some form of buyout or pay-off — what they want is justice. They want convictions and sentences to be passed on those who were responsible for the many crimes that were committed against them. A payment of whatever amount can never replace their loved ones.

In keeping with the motion, I wholeheartedly accept the importance of meeting the needs of victims. However, the pain and suffering of the families in question must not be increased by treating the victim and the perpetrator as equals. The callous individual who decided to brutally take a life cannot be compared with the innocent victim whose life was taken. Those are two opposites — they cannot be equated.

I accept that Lord Eames and Denis Bradley have been set a most difficult task. However, such a horrendous suggestion makes the objective study of the report extremely difficult for innocent victims. They cannot see past that awful proposal, and no wonder. From a victim's perspective, the proposal has created a massive obstacle in taking the report any further as regards studying any possible benefits that it may have brought to them. In effect, the report has been poisoned by the payment proposal.

The report has been dealt a very damaging blow. One must question how the Consultative Group on the Past could arrive at such a position if, as it states, it held many meetings with victims to hear their views. I must ask whether the group was actually listening, because the reaction of a large number of groups and campaigners has been one of dismay and shock.

Our troubled past will not be dealt with by awarding payments or by any form of truth forum. The needs of victims will be met only when justice is served on those who coldly murdered and maimed their loved ones. Equating the terrorist with the innocent victim is folly, and the Consultative Group on the Past must realise that. I support the motion.

**Mr Elliott:** At the outset, I thank the proposers of this motion, Mr Simpson and Lord Morrow, for securing the debate. Most importantly, I stress that my thoughts — throughout this past week — have been with the real victims of the terrible campaign that

occurred in Northern Ireland and further afield over the past 40 years.

It has been a very difficult journey for those people. I make it absolutely clear that there is no way that I will ever, ever accept that there is equality between those who were the perpetrators of the violence — from whatever side they came — and the real victims. Those who were murdered or had their lives destroyed cannot be equated to those who carried out heinous acts. We have heard about many atrocities today. I think about the Enniskillen and Omagh bombs. We also heard about Banbridge and many others. I cannot accept that the people who carried out those acts can be put on the same level as those who were the victims.

I talked to many victims over the past week. We must appreciate that every victim deals with their experiences in a different way. Earlier, Arlene Foster talked about some people's re-traumatisation — it is almost a re-victimisation. We can sense that every time that we talk to them. We feel that they are reliving those experiences, whether they were 10, 20, 30, or — in some cases — 40 years ago. People were trying to get on with their lives, but — all of a sudden — they have been turned upside down by the heinous proposal that emerged last week. It is not morally right, and the Ulster Unionist Party does not accept that it is right.

I heard Lord Eames and Denis Bradley suggest that victims sought recognition. The victims that I talk to want recognition, but not on the same level as those who were minded to murder their colleagues, family members and friends, and who blew up and destroyed parts of the Province. They want recognition that their family members who were murdered were different to the perpetrators.

The report is so contaminated by the proposal for recognition payments that the rest of its recommendations are in jeopardy. The proposal is like a rotten apple in a bag of apples; if it is not removed, the rest of the apples will rot as well. In other words, that part of the report will contaminate the perception of the rest of it.

**Mr McFarland:** Does the Member agree that equating victims with perpetrators, security forces with terrorists, and continuing a one-sided truth commission is no way for this country to go forward?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will be allowed an additional minute in which to speak.

**Mr Elliott:** I agree with my colleague. In the past week, we have heard many such comments. The Member raised the additional point about the possibility of a truth commission. The people who murdered and bombed in this society will hardly stand up now and tell us the truth. If they did, I would not believe them for a minute. It is deplorable that we should be considering equating those two types of people.

Furthermore, society is hugely concerned that the victims' process will have further ramifications. I welcome the £36 million that OFMDFM will put in over the next three years; however, I want to be convinced that none of that money will go to the people who perpetrated the violence. The House must ensure that those who directed, and carried out, the violence in the Province do not get any of that £36 million, and that is why Members must have a proper definition of the word "victim". It is unfortunate that we did not take the opportunity when we had it last year to change the definition, and until it is clear that perpetrators and those who were murdered are not equal, we will never be able to deal properly and reasonably with victims' issues.

As far back as 2006, my colleague Derek Hussey, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, rejected the definition of a victim that the Westminster Government were adopting. My party stands by that rejection and will not allow perpetrators and those they murdered to be treated as equals.

**Mr McCausland:** I support the motion, and I speak as someone whose constituency has seen more than its fair share of violence. Over 40% of the deaths in the Troubles occurred in Belfast, despite the fact that it has only one fifth of the region's population, and the overwhelming majority of those deaths occurred in north and west Belfast.

Many of the Eames/Bradley proposals are unacceptable because they draw a moral equivalence between terrorists and victims, and the general offer of £12,000 is simply an outworking of that fundamental flaw. When he was introducing the report, Denis Bradley, one of the co-chairpersons of the consultative group, said:

"We cannot wash our hands and say that we are not part of the problem."

If everyone is guilty for the Troubles, then the paramilitary, terrorist organisations, which were responsible for 90% of the deaths, will have their central, and active, role downgraded, and that is wrong. Is Denis Bradley saying that the woman whose husband was murdered by terrorists was as much a part of the problem as the terrorists who murdered her husband? Is there equivalence between the Shankill bomber Thomas Begley and the innocent folk he murdered?

Last week, I attended a meeting with several people who had lost relatives in the Troubles, which was organised by the Commission for Victims and Survivors. Anyone who listened to those stories could not have helped but be moved by them. Those folk, and many others, need help, but I am not convinced that the Eames/Bradley proposals will do much for them.

4.15 pm

There is also the issue of truth recovery, but not one sentence in the report is devoted to how information will be obtained from paramilitary organisations. The IRA refused to co-operate with the Eames/Bradley group, and Gerry Adams has declared already that republicans will not co-operate with the legacy commission, as its three members will be appointed by the British Government.

Speaking on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' on BBC Radio Ulster, Denis Bradley, the co-chairperson of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, admitted that, although the legacy commission would have a certain amount of power over state agencies and be able to compel the production of documents and the appearance of witnesses, it would have no such power over paramilitary organisations, including the IRA. Moreover, paramilitary organisations do not keep formal records of their army council meetings. Therefore, the focus of attention of such a process would be on the actions of the security forces, while paramilitary organisations would be able to get away with broad denials and escape relatively untouched.

Gerry Adams has stated that the IRA will not co-operate, and we have evidence of his approach to truth recovery. During a panel discussion at the West Belfast Festival —

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member to misquote a fellow Member, as has just happened?

**Mr Speaker:** Please clarify your comments, Mr McCausland.

**Mr McCausland:** It was clear that Gerry Adams said what I have attributed to him. During a panel discussion at the West Belfast Festival on 6 August 2008, I challenged Gerry Adams, who was standing at the back of the hall, to assist the process of truth recovery by telling us what he knows about the story of IRA terrorism and his involvement. In the Chamber on 3 November 2008, I referred to some aspects of Mr Adams's past, and he denied that he had ever been a member of the IRA. That charge has been made many times by journalists, academics, unionist politicians and some politicians in the Irish Republic, but Gerry Adams denies the charge each time that it is made.

I will read from a source that he cannot dismiss so readily; it is a booklet called 'Freedom Struggle', which was published by the Provisional IRA in 1973. It was banned in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and, subsequently, it was republished in the United States of America. In the booklet, the Provisional IRA refers to a meeting between the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, and five IRA leaders in London in July 1972. It is described on pages 68, 69 and 70 of the booklet.

The IRA booklet states:

“the following conditions were demanded of Whitelaw before any truce talks would begin”.

Those conditions are listed on pages 68 and 69 of the booklet.

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What relevance do the Member's comments have to the motion that is being debated?

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. Please allow the Member to carry on.

**Mr McCausland:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is clear that there are Members on the other side of the House who do not want the truth; that is the problem. They are not prepared to face up to the truth.

The second of those conditions was:

“The immediate release of a senior officer of the Belfast Brigade from internment”.

History — and official documents that have been released under the 30-year rule — reveals that on Sunday 18 June 1972, Whitelaw met John Hume and Paddy Devlin, who said that they believed that the IRA was willing to talk if the Government released Gerry Adams. Whitelaw agreed, and the meeting was held.

**Mr Poots:** What is the point in having a truth commission if some people will not tell the truth but expect the security forces to do so?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr McCausland:** I am indebted to the Speaker and the Member for the extra few seconds; they will help to make up for the seconds that were lost by the unwillingness of Sinn Féin to face up to the truth.

The person who was released and who then took part —

**Mr Molloy:** Will the Member agree that if someone is interned —

**Mr McCausland:** The person who was released and who then took part in the London talks —

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. I ask Mr McCausland to take his seat; he has given way.

**Mr Molloy:** The Member did give way, and I thank him for doing so. An internee is not convicted. Therefore, an individual who is released from internment to take part in a meeting is not a convicted member of any organisation.

**Mr McCausland:** If Mr Molloy did more listening and less talking he might be better informed, as a member of the IRA delegation was, indeed, Gerry Adams.

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order.

**Mr Moutray:** In the foreword to its report, the Consultative Group on the Past said that it was:

“overwhelmed with the level of engagement from across our society.”

I hope that it has now been overwhelmed by the level of revulsion that accompanied its report. Although the group may have engaged directly with a great number of people, it has not reflected in its findings the real mood of the community. Rarely have I witnessed such an enormous public backlash. The authors of the report and their defenders have no credibility whatsoever when they assert that their findings are reflective of the feelings that exist in our community.

Lord Eames and Denis Bradley boasted about the depth and breadth of their engagement with the public. They talked about public meetings, websites, individual interviews and the email responses that they received when compiling their report.

**Mr McCausland:** Would the Member agree that the evidence set out in the booklet from which I have quoted, which was published by the Provisional IRA, is that the person who was released — whom we know to be Mr Adams — was a senior officer of the Belfast brigade? Perhaps that little reminder from a Provisional IRA publication will help Mr Adams's failing memory of the time that he was a senior officer of the Belfast brigade, as is stated in this publication, and assist him in his own personal truth recovery about events such as Bloody Friday, which was organised by the Belfast brigade of the IRA just two weeks after the talks in London.

Does the Member agree also that what is proposed by the Eames/Bradley report will not in any way assist victims and will, rather, do a disservice to them, particularly the victims of terrorist organisations, who will receive neither justice nor truth?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the Member for his intervention — I find it most helpful and illuminating, as, I am sure, do many other Members.

Assuming that we accept that such widespread engagement was a feature of the work of the Consultative Group on the Past, I am at a loss to understand how it could have produced a set of findings that are so repulsive to such a wide spectrum of people throughout this community. The group has failed spectacularly to achieve consensus, and, in so doing, has probably damaged the cause of reconciliation and addressing the legacy of the past.

**Mr A Maginness:** Is the Member not aware that the Consultative Group on the Past was established, very firmly, on a cross-community representative basis and that the consensus that it reached could, therefore, be fairly described as a cross-community consensus?

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Based on what we see before us, I certainly would not believe that the report was open and balanced.

**Mr T Clarke:** Does the Member acknowledge the number of contributions today in which Members spoke about members of their own families? Indeed, I lost my brother at the hands of the Provisional IRA, when the scum blew them up on their way home from doing a day's work.

I do not know why the Member opposite believes that the report is representative of both sides of the community. However, will the Member acknowledge all the contributions that have been made today, in which Members have spoken poignantly about members of their own families who were victims? No one wants their hands on this dirty money, which is offered in order to try to bail out the Provisional IRA.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I am well aware that he — like many others in this House — speaks, unfortunately, from all-too-personal experience. I have spoken to many people in my Upper Bann constituency since the report was published, including victims and ordinary members of society. Not one person indicated that, in their opinion, there is a moral equivalence between terrorist criminals and those who they sought to murder and injure through illegal criminal activity.

Comparing the views that my colleagues and I encountered with the report's findings, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Consultative Group on the Past was working to a predetermined agenda which was shaped by the bias and prejudice of its members. Why did the group hold meetings in public and take the mood of the population if its intention was always to ignore and insult them in its final report, and to force its own views through, regardless of what it heard? The people who I represent will be appalled by any move to create moral parity between terrorist murderers and the innocent people who they murdered.

If the Assembly accepts that recommendation, why does it not also tell burglars that they are as much victims as the householders, the muggers that they are as much victims as the bloodied and terrorised pensioners, and the rapists that they are as much victims as the wounded, violated and traumatised women who have been scarred for life at their hands? That is unthinkable.

Although the Assembly will not decide which, if any, elements of the report will be implemented, I assure Members that my party will fight tooth and nail to ensure that the proposal for a morally obnoxious £12,000 pay-off never sees the light of day. I support the motion.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McNarry:** At the weekend in Castlewellan, thanks to brave people who risked their lives, a dangerous 300-lb bomb was safely dismantled. Had the bomb exploded, killing innocent passers-by and the bomber, would the precedent set by the Eames/Bradley group be tested through an award of £12,000 to the bomber's family in years to come? Is that not good enough reason to conclude that the report is contaminated? Is that not good enough reason to determine that the report had its day in the Europa Hotel, and that there it should stay?

The apology about the timing of the presentation of the report is irrelevant. To equate the dastardly deeds of killers — willing members of a killing machine — with those whom they murdered, says much about those who compiled the report, and it makes them apologists for terrorists. To spurn the call, and, with it, the opportunity to withdraw the offending recommendation only confirms to me that the panel was determined to promote, rather than avoid, a controversy. It was spurious to say that the £12,000 was a recognition payment. Aside from glorifying acts of murder, what does that payment recognise or acknowledge?

I do not know the context in which Jarlath Burns relayed the following comment, nor who made it originally, because he will not divulge that person's name, but he said that the tears of an IRA widow are no different from the tears of an RUC widow. Did anyone pause to think, as they listened to those words, that the tears may be real? However, I never heard an IRA widow call for the terrorism to stop. Did Jarlath Burns?

I retain my respect for Lord Eames. Sadly, he is associated with a momentous error of judgment, but he has given so much in the past that, although I am appalled by the report and his participation in it, I will not turn my back on him. Mark my words: the report can make no worthwhile journey, least of all into this place, where the strains are constant and the differences are exposed for all too see — not only today, but probably tomorrow, and certainly in the past.

However, the Assembly can, and should, produce its own recognition award by ensuring that the offence and hurt that the report has caused are quickly removed and the proper dignity of real victims restored. A terrorist is a terrorist by choice; the victims were given no choice. Murder is murder is murder — it ends there.

The report is contaminated, and I support the motion.

**Mr Durkan:** I support either of the two tabled amendments. If the Assembly were to support the motion as it stands, it would be in danger of giving a falsely condensed conclusion on a report that has much more worth than some Members have reflected.

4.30 pm

We need to recognise that neither the Assembly, nor any of its Committees, would have been in a position to deliberate on the sort of issues that the consultative group deliberated on. We would not have enjoyed the range of contact and confidence that the group developed. We must recognise that the group has tried to make a significant contribution on the sensitive and vexed issue of how we leave the past behind us morally, and how we try to meet the diverse needs of all victims for truth, remembrance and recognition. Did the consultative group measure everything as well as it meant to? Obviously not, given the reaction to, and consternation about, a particular proposal. The way in which those details emerged — not in the context of the full and proper publication of the report, but by press briefings in advance — led to a weekend media scramble in and around issues.

**Mr Elliott:** Does the Member accept that there can be no equivocation and no equality between the perpetrators of violence and those poor people who were murdered in the Province?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute.

**Mr Durkan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I accept that fully. I have never suggested, implied or argued in any way that there was moral equivalence between those who perpetrated violence and made victims and those absolutely innocent victims who did not choose to be part of any combat or any act of violence whatsoever. I have never offered any moral equivalence.

During its meetings with the Eames/Bradley group, the SDLP made the point that it was concerned about some of the language being used about there being fault on all sides and everybody being guilty. That, in many ways, was hurtful to the many innocent victims who had no guilt and who did not contribute to the conflict.

At the funeral of a judge in 1974, many people listened to Bishop Edward Daly call on people to stand up to the nihilism of the paramilitaries. He said that there would be challenges in standing up to them, but that they could not shoot us all. Many people made that choice. The SDLP is clear: it does not want the treatment of the past to blur the responsibility for the violence and suffering. Nor does it want the treatment of the past to suggest to future generations that the Troubles were, somehow, a necessary and inevitable prelude to the peace process — they were not.

The SDLP has made it clear that people must take responsibility for what they perpetrated, and those who were responsible for violence and creating victims must stand the cause of truth some assistance now by bringing forward as much truth as they can. The wider

proposals in the report about a legacy commission to deal with the past should not be lost sight of in all the brouhaha surrounding the recognition payment. We must look at the wider issues of how we leave the past behind morally, and how we learn the lessons of the past and keep the truth of the past — not just for victims, but for wider society and future generations.

We cannot simply pass over the past, but nor can we pore over it endlessly. The consultative group has given us some useful proposals for dealing with issues of information recovery and truth. As regards the issue of recognition, I think that the group was responding to the pressures and concerns reflected by victims' groups that they have not had due recognition. Many people pointed to the scheme that operated in the South and said that there was nothing like that here. Many victims' groups have pointed out those who are doing well out of the peace process — various people in various positions, and money going to this organisation and that organisation. That compared badly to what they were getting as victims, either as part of a victims' group or as individuals. As part of an attempt to respond to that need, the group may have strayed into a recommendation that could have been considered more carefully and presented better.

Nevertheless, I hope that the Assembly will not stand in the way of good coming out of the work that has been done already in the report. We should not stand in the way of the victims and survivors forum and the Victims' Commission deliberating appropriately on the report's recommendations. If we are all sincere about wanting a victim-centred approach, and if we are all sincere about trying to meet the needs of survivors, let victims and survivors work through some of those issues themselves without the rest of us savaging a report that contains a lot more merit than some Members have reflected.

**Ms Purvis:** The motion, in its original form, has a number of critical flaws. This is the first plenary sitting since the release of the report from the Consultative Group on the Past. Rather than take this opportunity to examine all the major issues that are presented in the report, which are critical to the well-being, recovery and reconciliation of this society, the motion focuses on only one aspect of the report's recommendations: the acknowledgement payments.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the motion is inadequate, as it was written and tabled before the report was even publicly released. The authors of the motion put pen to paper to condemn one aspect of the report at a time when most people had not seen it, let alone read carefully through all 190 pages. That is cynical or clairvoyant, perhaps best summed up by my predecessor who said that unionism is clairvoyant, and it is never good news.

People in Northern Ireland are crying out for help. The findings of the report made that very clear. The help that they seek is in the form of justice, truth, mental and physical assistance and aid, and even financial assistance in some cases. Those are very raw needs that are not being met currently or satisfactorily.

Therefore, rather than begin to dismiss out of hand the various elements of the report, I encourage Members to engage with it fully. It is time to be honest about what has gone on here and about how we will deal with our past. Now that the report is publicly available and we have had a chance to read through it, let us look at it in its entirety, including the context that is given for acknowledgement payments. There is no doubt that the issues with which the report deals are complex. It is intended to offer a means by which we can begin to take the final step out of conflict. There is nothing simple in those terms of reference.

Eames and Bradley are attempting to create a strategy and structure that will allow our society to progress. What we need to judge in the report is how well the recommendations meet the needs for recognition, rehabilitation and even reparations. The key elements of the report are, therefore, the structures that are created. The legacy commission is part of that, as are information and story-telling. Likewise, trauma and counselling services are part of that, and, yes, acknowledgement payments are part of that, too. Those payments must be seen in that context.

The primary argument of those opposed to the payments is that the report fails to recognise and honour the hierarchy of victims. Some of those touched by the tragedy of the Troubles want nothing to do with that money, and that wish must be respected. However, there are many unheard voices, too — of people who want and need those acknowledgement payments. It is a means to recognise all that they have been through, and to offer some form of reparation for what they have suffered.

It is, perhaps, bad luck that the report has been launched in an election year, when we are already seeing all sorts of bad habits and the old rhetoric of “us and them” coming back. Perhaps using their powers of clairvoyance, the authors of the motion, and their party, could, perhaps, outline for us the vision for the future that this report and the people of Northern Ireland call on politicians to create. It is time for a better and shared future, and elements of the report, if implemented faithfully, will help us to get there.

I would support both amendments, which vastly improve the motion, but I cannot support the motion in its original form.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion, but I support the

amendment that is tabled in my name and in the names of Raymond McCartney and Jennifer McCann.

Rather like Dawn Purvis, I believe that because the motion was tabled before the report was published, it does not really deal with the content of the report, nor does it give a true reflection of the entire report. It picks up on the issues that were leaked. One might be given to think that the issue of £12,000 that has been talked about was created as a distraction rather than a reality, and that it was highlighted in order to take people's focus away from dealing with the real issue — the real issue being the truth, because the truth cannot be bought that cheaply.

Although the report is very detailed, we have severe reservations about it, particularly on how it was established. The report was commissioned by the British Government to clear them and to give them a smokescreen so that they could deny people the right to tribunals and inquiries. That is exactly what the report has recommended — to bury tribunals and inquiries, so that any chance of the British Government facing a court or a judicial review is ended.

Although the issue of victims, and the definition of a victim, is very sensitive, the debate has been levelled and even, which is important. The report has evoked memories and received a sensitive response from the families of victims — as Alan McFarland said, the debate has brought back memories for many families. That is the same for republican families who often accepted their lot and did not expect any British soldiers or RUC men to be brought to trial.

State killings and harassment have been part and parcel of British rule in Ireland. I took part in early civil rights marches and know that the leader of the DUP often blocked such marches and brought people onto the streets to ensure that those who demanded basic civil rights were put off the streets. The first killing that I remember was that of John Gallagher by the B-Specials at Cathedral Road in Armagh, for which no one was ever brought to book. Was that killing due to terrorism or was it aided by the state? We never got an answer.

The campaign to drive off the streets those who demanded basic civil rights was co-ordinated by the B-Specials, the DUP at that time, and those involved in the structures that brought about loyalism. Those people were involved in the bombing at the Silent Valley reservoir and other bombings at locations around the country to distract attention. The Free State Government have already paid out to the families of victims involved in such campaigns, such as the one at Ballyshannon, which I did not hear anyone complain about.

The £12,000 payment was a deliberately created distraction. We wanted an international and independent truth commission that would be centred

on victims and ensure that victims have input. That has not happened, which is how we measure the report. Did it deliver? Can it deliver? The families see that the report cannot deliver the truth for them.

Many accusations were made about Gerry Adams, and he was misquoted. Mr Adams never made a statement with regard to the IRA — on several occasions, he has said that he could not speak for the IRA.

Payments were made to members of the B-Specials, the RUC, the UDR and the reservists, who were all paid to carry out state killings.

**Dr Farry:** Northern Ireland must deal with its past; drawing a line under the past or sweeping it under the carpet, as some people inside and outside the Chamber have suggested, is not a viable option. One only has to look at the example of post-Franco Spain, where the truth was swept under the carpet for many years and there is now a demand to address it.

4.45 pm

Most societies coming out of a period of conflict or serious violence go through a process of transitional justice — from war crimes trials in Bosnia or Rwanda, through to truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa. We, too, have to come up with our own process. However, in very few, if any, of those international experiences is it ever suggested that there should be moral equivalence between the people who are involved in the situations and those who are the victims. Indeed, in that case, Northern Ireland may be going out on a limb.

The issue of timing has raised its head, and perhaps we are looking at these issues too soon, as some people have suggested. Perhaps we are not quite ready or not quite mature enough, or perhaps we are a bit late in coming to terms with these issues. Perhaps we should have tried to address them at the same time as the Good Friday Agreement. At that time, there may have been better incentives on the table for some people to comply with a process of justice or truth. However, we are where we are today, and we have to move forward on that basis.

There is much good in the recommendations of the Eames/Bradley report. They have navigated through the competing demands for truth, justice and understanding. In the current circumstances, the legacy commission framework may be the best option to address the needs of victims for truth and justice, because, realistically, there will not be a large number of criminal prosecutions, and if people are convicted, they will not do any serious time in jail. Equally, we only have to look at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry to see that as a society, we cannot afford to go through a public inquiry one case at a time.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** I am sorry, but I have a lot to get through.

There will be major difficulties in all of this for the British state. No one is under any illusions in that regard, but they operate to a system of rule of law, and they may well comply with whatever is down on paper. However, there are requirements on paramilitaries and others with information to come forward, and it is not entirely clear how that will be addressed, but perhaps that is an issue for another day.

The issue of the £12,000 recognition payment is, quite rightly, causing massive outrage across society, and I understand what people are going through in that respect. However, there is a risk that that recommendation will undermine the rest of the report. Some people have said that it has fatally contaminated the report, but I would not go that far, and I beg people to step back from the brink in reaching that conclusion.

Money should not be the issue. Indeed, whenever issues of money are being considered, we must recognise that victims have different financial needs, and a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. The issue of compensation and financial support should be addressed by the Commission for Victims and Survivors, rather than by Eames/Bradley. The reason for the commission not addressing the issue is beyond me, and an explanation must be given for that.

The biggest issue to come out of the debate is the risk of some type of moral equivalence being given. There may not be a hierarchy of suffering; every mother's tears may be the same when it comes to a lost life, but we must recognise that there is a hierarchy of circumstance, responsibility, culpability — call it what you will — and there is no way that we can get away from that. The people of Northern Ireland will not accept that, irrespective of what any report says should be the case.

There is a concern that efforts are being made to rewrite history, to pretend that things that were done in the past are acceptable from today's prospective, but, again, no one will wear that. The whole concept of amnesty, which was discussed previously, carried a lot of those implications.

Our amendment is the best way forward, as it recognises the major flaw of the £12,000 payments which is so exercising public opinion at the moment. It also recognises that there is a lot of good in the report that we must take into account. We are not asking Members to endorse the recommendations of Eames/Bradley today, but rather to recognise that the potential exists to address building a shared future and dealing with the past.

On paper, Sinn Féin's amendment is not bad. It recognises that we all suffer, but there is a degree of hypocrisy in saying that the report has been contaminated by the British Government.

In isolation, the DUP's motion may well be acceptable on one issue alone.

**Lord Morrow:** It has been said that this is the era when right is made to look wrong and wrong is made to look right.

A cursory glance at the report of the Consultative Group on the Past comes close to confirming that view. It has opened up many wounds again, in particular for those victims and survivors who had stoically tried to carry on with life as best they could, and whose dignity and forbearance has been shattered.

The publication of this highly insensitive and offensive document has turned back time for many families. To be a victim once is virtually unbearable; to be tormented twice is grossly unjust. The report brings no comfort whatsoever to the innocent victims of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Let me be very clear: I do not underestimate the enormity of the task; however, it is now apparent that the Consultative Group on the Past has missed an opportunity to address the legacy of the past properly. The manner in which it referred to the "blame game" trivialises the fundamentals of right and wrong, truth and justice.

The Consultative Group on the Past had a moral duty to place the blame where it lay — with those who took up arms. However, instead, it has blatantly dodged the issue, pathetically attempting to justify and condone violent activity by the few. To blame the whole of society for what has happened and to excuse the perpetrators is highly offensive. The report challenges the very moral fabric of society, but offers no such challenge to the terrorists; it is a crude attempt to rewrite history and to airbrush many crucial facets out of a troubled past. A report that equates the guilty with the innocent cannot expect to be treated with any degree of respect. The idea that ruthless paramilitary organisations that carried out a relentless sectarian murder campaign should be equated with our innocent victims is nothing short of shameful.

The question has been asked: are the tears of the mother of a paramilitary killer any different from the tears of the mother of a victim who had no involvement whatsoever in violence? I happen to think that there is a difference, particularly when the mother of a terrorist declares her support for her offspring's murderous activities. In this report, those who were charged with preserving law and order are placed on the same level as the anarchists whose objective was to destroy the state. Likewise, the young woman who was blown to pieces by a terrorist bomb as she stood at a bus stop is no more thought of than the wretch who planted the bomb.

Moreover, the authors of the report propose a shared memorial. What illogical, irrational thinking was applied in that instance? On reading the report, one

could easily assume that its authors have not lived in Northern Ireland but have been drafted in from another planet. Indeed, one could be forgiven for concluding that the report has little or nothing to do with truth and reconciliation but has, rather, a revisionist agenda. Such a sinister attempt to sidestep the facts of history for political expediency is a tragedy.

Understandably, much mention of the report has focused on the reprehensible proposal that the taxpayer should pay £12,000 to the relatives of terrorists. To say that that is outrageous is an understatement. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme existed to allow people who had been injured or bereaved to make claims; quite rightly, that compensation scheme excluded those who had been convicted of terrorist offences. The proposal in this report primarily benefits the non-innocents who received nothing under that scheme. It is incredible that such a recommendation should be proffered, but, alas, that is not the only appalling proposal in the report.

Duplication with the Victims' Commission and the sum of £300 million to right all wrongs aside, if I were a member of a paramilitary cabal, I would feel that I could not have done better had I written the report myself. It is fair to suggest that the perpetrators, as ever, gain much and give little. I refer, of course, to the repugnant recommendations to incorporate into statute the guidance that was produced by the Quigley/Hamilton working group that employers should not discriminate against those with conflict-related convictions. Likewise, the semi-obscure suggestion that although there is no amnesty, a line should be drawn — presumably under potential prosecutions — is an amnesty by another name.

Furthermore, there is the nonsense of the recovery of information process. I may be wrong, but I venture to suggest that the paramilitaries have little by way of records. Such absurd thinking permeates the whole report. Time after time, the onus lands on the state and the taxpayer to make amends to those who entered into violence of their own choice and free will. It is time that the tables were turned; the Consultative Group on the Past should have grasped that nettle.

I listened to the BBC's 'Hearts and Minds' programme. When it was put to them that the information-recovery process would be somewhat one-sided, Lord Eames and Denis Bradley said that undoubtedly the IRA would feel under pressure from the community to offer whatever information it had. Such naivety is, at best, misplaced and foolish. It is time to get real. The Robert McCartney murder is a prime example of how the IRA deals with pressure. Despite the weight of the entire international community demanding information — and even after calls from the White House — the IRA, then as now, remained silent and keeps its depraved secrets.



There is a matter that should be of grave concern to us all. It is expressed ever so subtly in the report, but it has ominous undertones and far-reaching implications: the proposed merger of the Historical Enquiries Team with the office of the Police Ombudsman. When one considers the remit of both bodies, there can only be one reason for the proposal: it is another iniquitous attempt to equate violent criminals with the forces of law and order who were the first line of defence in combating terrorism. Make no mistake: it is another back-door attempt to destroy the sterling reputation of the RUC GC.

Those who were fighting for a united Ireland tell us that it is the British who are the problem. No doubt that includes those of us who sit on these Benches. However, since the President of the Irish Republic has already branded us Nazis, why should republicans have any compunction about carrying on where she left off? It is ironic that the IRA supported Hitler during the Second World War.

This unfortunate report has fallen far short of the expectations of the innocent victims of Northern Ireland. The keynote address delivered by the co-chairmen addresses the politicians, stating that many of them are “still novice parliamentarians”, who:

“too often failed to address and resolve”

political problems. It is interesting to note that the group has no problem in identifying the shortcomings of the politicians — and neither do I — but they are unable to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent. If this report is implemented, the most ruthless of the killers will be turned into folk-heroes; they were anything but.

The best way forward with this highly insensitive report is to apologise to the innocent victims for its offensive nature, withdraw it, and give an assurance that it will never be repeated.

Those who still seek justice will find no comfort in the report. Relatives of the security forces and civilians, whether murdered at their place of work or blown to pieces in the relentless bombing campaign, relatives of the disappeared, the McCartney family, and the Quinn family can take no comfort whatsoever from this report. The copious sum of £300 million to implement all this suggests that throwing money at the problem will make it go away.

The blood of the innocent still cries for justice. The overwhelming truth of this report is that the sums may be plentiful, but the justice is scarce.

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

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

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 71.*

*AYES*

*Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr A Maginness, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Mr Lunn.*

*NOES*

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr I McCrea.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 48.*

*AYES*

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms J McCann and Ms S Ramsey.*

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr I McCrea.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Main question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly recognises the importance of meeting the needs of victims; and condemns proposals from the Consultative Group on the Past which equate perpetrators of violence with innocent victims.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Programme for Government and Budget

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

**Mr O'Loan:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to revise the priorities set out in the Executive Programme for Government and budget in light of the current economic crisis; and to direct further expenditure into social housing, retraining and upskilling.

At the outset, I want to point out that I am content with the Alliance Party's amendment, which is a useful addition to the SDLP's motion. However, I wonder what the Ulster Unionist amendment adds to the motion. Perhaps, that party will reconsider its amendment during the course of the debate.

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

Of course, the motion involves reconsideration of the current Programme for Government and Budget, particularly in light of the economic downturn. Primary responsibility for those issues rests with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister.

From speaking to people whom I meet, I get the feeling that the Executive are not regarded as doing well. If people were to mark them out of 10, they would, perhaps, score five. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. This is not the time for Members to have conversations at their places; there is a debate going on.

**Mr O'Loan:** People do not see vision, strategy, drive or imagination. They are glad to see the Executive, particularly OFMDFM and the Finance Minister, doing business; however, they do not see that business being done very well, and they do not see the leadership for which they are crying out.

**Mr S Wilson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Loan:** I ask the Member to make only a brief intervention because I have much to say.

**Mr S Wilson:** I will be brief. The Member calls for imagination; will he share his vision of where the Programme for Government should be cut so that more

money can be spent on housing and the other goodies that are listed in the motion? Perhaps he has no imagination.

**Mr O'Loan:** Perhaps the Member should have listened to my speech first; he would not have needed to ask that question if he had.

Recent conversations that I have had — particularly with people in construction and development, although I am not focusing solely on that sector — illustrate a general lesson. People are asking what Housing Executive contracts there will be in April, but they cannot find an answer. I recently spoke to a developer who wants to develop a plot of land. He has done all the right things, such as speaking to health officials, housing associations, and the Housing Executive. He has even gone as far as amending his planning application on the basis of what those people have told him.

However, he came to me because he is not sure whether he is going in the right direction, as he cannot get clarity from the Government on whether his plans are sensible in light of Executive strategy. The Executive strategy is not coming across clearly, and the attached Budget is not known. That problem can be extrapolated across the entire range of policy issues and right across Northern Ireland.

Last week, I quoted a senior DFP official who 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.”—[*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p87, col 2*].

That is the exact sentiment that our motion expresses.

I ask Members to consider the strategic stocktake, in which there was £1 billion of bids over two years. The Minister's response was that half of that was not real and that the rest would be dealt with when something else dropped out. That is the Mr Micawber answer: “something will turn up”. Is that really the OFMDFM and DFP answer to the economic downturn? Indeed, if some of the bids are not real, is the £35 million DFP bid not real?

In the DRD bids on the revenue side I see pension contributions to Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee; concessionary bus and rail fares; rail fuel and safety costs; roads maintenance; the oil-price increase; street-lighting; increased energy costs; and last, but certainly not least, the lost income from the deferral of water charges, which alone is a mere £200 million. Which of those pressures or issues will disappear over the next two years?

Countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Canada are investing in training for the unemployed. Those countries are ensuring that their workers are better trained for the upturn and keeping workers in employment in order to do that. Last week, I quoted

John Simpson who supports that approach. I repeat the call for certainty for the housing budget. The Executive still back the target for social housing but in respect of finance, can the Minister not do better than “something will turn up”?

Small building firms and small building suppliers deserve better. Indeed, can we not go even further? The Scottish Government view building more houses as a key way of countering the downturn and are implementing substantial spend to do that. Why do we not copy that good idea?

I stated my support for the Alliance Party amendment. That party is correct when it says that investment in renewables is a win-win issue that will help the environment and provide economic growth.

5.30 pm

I want to discuss a few other issues. The word “competitiveness” has fallen low down in our vocabulary. Our future is to compete in a global economy, but we need a strategy to make that happen. I refer to Minister Sammy Wilson's comments about employing local workers. If we ignore the possible racial overtones, an element of protectionism was implicit in those remarks. There is no future in that protectionist attitude here.

**Mr S Wilson:** Is your policy to put local people on the dole?

**Mr O'Loan:** Mr Wilson's comments are on record. That is not what I said. Our future is to compete successfully in a global economy. There is no future in protectionism in labour or any other area. His statement indicated a lack of coherence in his own party and in the Departments for which it has portfolios.

I refer to the Bain Report on the location of public-sector jobs. Many agencies will experience huge changes under the review of public administration. Will that process be conducted piecemeal, or is the Minister of Finance and Personnel serious about that issue? Will there be huge unregulated job losses in rural towns? What budget is required in order to conduct the process properly? We have heard no answers to those questions, and the relevant Ministers are all over the place because they are not receiving a strategic lead from Departments.

The delivery of departmental plans is a major issue that was discussed at considerable length by the senior departmental official who spoke to the Committee for Finance and Personnel recently. The more one looks, the less it appears that the Programme for Government is being delivered coherently. The situation looks tidy — we have a Programme for Government, and public service agreements that support it. However, it is not functioning, and those who should be leading it do not

know what is happening under their eyes. We are not getting efficient joined-up government. The Programme for Government and the departmental plans need to be revisited.

There has been no strategic way to deliver public-service efficiencies. Members will remember that the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) was launched with a fanfare. What has PEDU achieved? Not a lot. The DUP has proposed a series of silly, trivial motions on the number of Departments. Although we need a serious debate on how to achieve efficiency in Government, we end up with a debate on a trivial sub-issue.

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

**Mr O'Loan:** No; I will not give way.

When we need a serious debate about how to engage with civic society, we end up with a trivial, infantile motion on the Civic Forum. When we need good delivery of government, we get electoral point-scoring. Moreover, I can name many other issues such as the Department of Finance and Personnel's dismissal of Varney — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr O'Loan:** The Civil Service estate needs to be reformed after the collapse of Workplace 2010. Other issues include the Financial Assistance Bill — the curious dog that has yet to bark in the night — and the further efficiencies that may be demanded from the pre-Budget report.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr O'Loan:** For all those reasons, we need to revise the Programme for Government and the Budget thoroughly.

**Mr McNarry:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"calls on the Executive to rewrite the Programme for Government and to bring forward an appropriate budget proposal in light of the current economic crisis."

The Ulster Unionist Party acknowledges and welcomes the SDLP and Alliance Party positions on the issue. However, many more fault lines emanate from yesterday's blueprint for a Programme for Government and its linked Budget. Therefore, our amendment is not specific or prescriptive but is all-embracing and clear about what it requests from the Executive — a rewritten Programme for Government, with a Budget that is commensurate with the current economic crisis.

We could have a problem if the joint First Ministers and the Minister of Finance and Personnel resist that proposal, unless they can convince the House that the

current Programme for Government and its rigidly linked Budget are fit for purpose.

Frankly, I do not believe that they can. I do not believe that those with money and those short of money; those with a job and those without a job; those with a business and those in dire straits; those needing to contract, and even those wanting to expand, believe it either. I say to the joint First Minister and the Finance Minister: if you know better, convince us.

The Ulster Unionist Party amendment is sending a serious signal, not only that the Programme for Government should be rewritten, but an equally strong message that the Executive should show an urgent willingness to revisit the Programme for Government and the Budget that was agreed for 2008-2011. It was said then that growing the economy was the top priority, that we needed to meet the challenges of global competition and that the Programme for Government was not set in stone, but would be reviewed annually, not only to respond to progress but to take account of changing circumstances. Thus, it was signed by Dr Paisley and Martin McGuinness. I contend that it is not being lived up to and that it is certainly not taking account of changing circumstances.

The first primary focus was to grow the economy. That was the main plank of the Programme for Government. The commitment was to create a minimum of 6,500 jobs. However, on 10 December 2008 at a meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, evidence given by DFP's strategic policy division on the regional economic strategy was clear. The senior official could not say where Departments are with regard to the delivery of targets. He did not say what was actually being done, except to seek cover by indicating the usual need to conduct a review of targets. In other words, he doubted that they would be met.

In respect of creating a minimum of 6,500 jobs the official said his feeling was:

"some PFG targets and milestones that relate to external events are under stress. Take, for example, the ability of Invest NI to attract 6,500 FDI jobs — that is an incredibly challenging target".

He added:

"I worry about whether some specific milestones can be reached because of the external factors involved."

Like that senior official, I, too, am worried about the delivery of targets. Not only is there a hole in the Budget, it seems that there is an emerging hole in the delivery of the Programme for Government, because the assessment of that senior official — who, after all, speaks for the policy division of the regional economic strategy team — is:

"It will be interesting to see the risk assessments that Departments have carried out on their targets."

It most certainly will be interesting. When will we know, or even be told, if there are targets in danger? It is clear that there is a hole in the delivery of the PFG targets, and the failure to provide the 6,500 new jobs will be only one of a number of casualties in the scheme of targets that will not be met.

The economy is now in recession, and unless the argument is convincing, there is no alternative to rewriting the Programme for Government that covers 2008-2011, which also includes some longer-term aspirations and intentions. I contend that targets are in danger and that the proper thing to do is to reassess delivery in light of, and in response to, changing circumstances.

Can we meet the commitments that are written into the current PFG? Can we provide 6,500 jobs by 2011, 5,500 of which will be above the private-sector median; secure £120 million of private-sector investment by 2010-2011; grow the creative-industry sector by 15% by 2011; support 45 new businesses to become first-time exporters by 2011; reduce child poverty by 50% by next year; increase to 125,000 the number of children participating in sport by 2011; and ensure a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games? Also, can we establish a library authority this year; generate £300 million of capital realisation by 2011, and deliver 5% efficiency savings each year for three years on departmental administration costs? I do not think that we can, which will make it harder to recover from any failure to implement immediate and necessary rectifying action.

I have warned of a black hole in public finances for months, and now the commentators agree with me. The Finance Minister said that he hoped to cover that hole through easement measures. That is a somewhat polite way of saying that he hoped that the Northern Ireland Departments would repeat their usual annual underperformance by underspending, as they have always managed to do in the past. That is a deliberate distraction from dealing with the impacts of the economic downturn on our own people.

Those impacts have been alarming. Last month, the number of people who claimed unemployment-related benefits increased by 1,800. The construction industry accounted for 44% of the rise in the number of claimants. The total number of people who are out of work could increase from 34,000 to 50,000. The point of reordering priorities has long since been reached.

Everybody in this House understands that only the actions of national Government can meet some of those challenges. However, that does not mean that the Executive can do nothing.

It is interesting to watch the main party in the Executive and note the growing similarities between the DUP and the Labour Party; similarities that have

not gone unnoticed here or in London. That is not surprising when one compares Mandelson-speak to Robinson-speak regarding the economy and the glaring likeness when one matches the dynamic duo of those double Ds in finance — the dodgy Darling and the dithering Mr Dodds. The count of control freakery and the reinvented prince of darkness are well suited in their meeting of minds on Labour policies during the recession. However, they transmit here as one who is failing to bring home the bacon, while the other is trying to save his bacon.

Members of the DUP want us to trust them — they think that they know better than the rest of us. However, that stance does not wash in this debate. Arrogance will not create jobs or ease unemployment, never mind reduce the problems in our economy.

I repeat that our amendment urges the Executive to rewrite the Programme for Government. They should consider the stated priorities, correct them where they cannot be met and move to adjust the disciplines that are required to see Northern Ireland through this recession.

If the deputy First Minister — or joint First Minister, or whatever his title may be — cannot do that, he should make a clear statement of intent to this House. He should tell us why the Programme for Government sits intact and untouchable. I challenge him to tell us today that the targets will be met on schedule. I do not think that he can, but the challenge is there; he has the opportunity to meet it today.

**Ms Lo:** I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

“, the promotion of energy efficiency, the development of renewable technologies, and maximising the potential of a green economy.”

During the consultation on the draft Programme for Government in 2007, the Alliance Party opposed it on three main counts: it failed to prioritise tackling segregation and sectarianism; it made no proposals to indicate true emphasis on the economy; and it did not pledge to deliver public services in a sustainable way. Only the United Community group voted against the final Programme for Government.

We support the SDLP motion because we have long called for the Programme for Government to be revised. It should not have taken such a deep economic crisis to encourage other parties to back us on that point. We commend the Members who urge the Executive to revisit the Programme for Government with regard to the key issues of housing and skills, but we remain concerned that the motion does not tackle the core social issue of segregation in our society. It also does not address the core financial problem of a dependent economy or the core challenge of sustainability.

Our amendment seeks to prioritise the green economy as a means of coming out of recession with a competitive advantage over neighbouring regions.

That means setting high standards for energy efficiency within the public sector, removing red tape from procedures for implementing renewable-energy schemes, and funding our universities, which would be able to attract more talent during a recession to carry out research on new, green technologies. In those ways, Northern Ireland could become a centre for green economic services.

5.45 pm

It is feared that the Northern Ireland economy may decline by up to 3% this year, with little chance of recovery until next year. Unemployment may reach 50,000, with approximately 16,000 job losses within the year. We are facing the worst economic crisis since the mid 1970s. Compared to other UK regions, we have a much larger public sector, and the Executive must do what they can to help the local economy to survive this economic tsunami.

I am a member of the Committee for Social Development and the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, so, social housing and skills are important matters to me. Approximately 40,000 people are on the Housing Executive's waiting list, and due to the shortfall in receipts from house and land sales as well as other reduced income, such as developers' contributions, it is doubtful whether it has the money to meet its target of beginning 1,500 newbuilds by the end of this financial year.

Approximately one third of the Housing Executive's spend is dependent on revenue from house and land sales, and that system, which is bound to be affected by economic fluctuations, is being badly hit by the current downturn. The housing allocation in the 2007 Budget was based on a buoyant economic climate, before the recent drop in property values and the credit crunch. Therefore, it is only fair that the Executive should review the housing budget so that DSD can meet its priority of addressing the chronic housing shortage in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the construction industry is crying out for work, and in order to keep the industry afloat, it is calling on Departments to speed up their capital spends.

This year, unemployment is set to rise, and many people will lose their jobs for the first time in their lives. Manufacturing is in decline, and the retail sector is being badly hit. However, it was reported that approximately 10,000 vacancies were unfilled in late 2008. The construction and engineering industries badly need more plumbers, electricians and other skilled workers. The Executive must prioritise retraining the workforce, so that skills can be matched to economic requirements.

More and better vocational training must be encouraged, rather than pushing all our young people through the academic route of university degrees, which do not necessarily equip them for a job. In addition, we need more apprenticeships, which must be flexible for people who wish to retrain in a new career.

In a briefing to the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Engineering Training Council said that 40% of the sector's core workforce could benefit from upskilling in order to keep up with new trends and technology. A recent independent report identified upskilling as central to making progress out of the recession, and it identified Belfast as being behind most UK cities in that regard.

Undoubtedly, we must also reform the type of economy that we have. The Executive said that they would make the economy their number one priority, but they failed to change their economic policy. Consequently, Northern Ireland's private sector has been overexposed to the economic crisis. Furthermore, there have been no attempts to move on from the low-technology, low-wage base, upon which the private sector is over-dependent, and there have been no attempts to encourage the development of a high-technology, high-wage economy.

Economic policy remains wedded in the past, based on support by Government rather than general encouragement of entrepreneurship.

Northern Ireland cannot hope to compete with other developing countries as a low-wage economy. Rather, we will have to provide upper-end value to be able to compete. That means a fundamental shift of policy. We cannot continue to do things the way that we have always done them. When we talk about achieving a more efficient Government, we must include energy efficiency; we must remove the bureaucracy that is faced by those who wish to use renewable energy sources, and assist the businesses that wish to research and invest in it.

A green road out of recovery is required. We need more funding for the warm homes scheme, which will improve house insulation and provide more efficient heating systems to help to cut the costs of people's energy bills. Furthermore, we need to encourage the construction sector to build energy-efficient homes.

Improving public transport would not only meet increased demand, as more people will be using buses and trains during the economic downturn, but help the environment by assisting us to reduce our carbon footprint. That is why the Alliance Party has added to the motion by tabling an amendment. We agree with the content of the motion, but the core theme of sustainability must be made central to any revision of priorities.

**Mr Hamilton:** It would be wrong to deny that we are in difficult economic times. Official statistics prove that we are, and also prove the prescience of the Programme for Government — backed up by the Budget — in making the economy and economic growth in Northern Ireland our number one priority. The Budget and the Programme for Government were supported by the Minister for Social Development, who, it seems, is the sole focus of the SDLP motion.

The motion calls on the Executive to revise the Budget and the Programme for Government, but what more can the Executive do in that regard? The Executive cannot say that they really, really, really prioritise economic growth or that their priority is the economy squared. We are going through an economic problem, and the economy, in all its multiple facets, has been prioritised.

I am at a loss as to the SDLP's preoccupation with social housing, but I understand it; it is within the remit of that party's sole Minister. The SDLP see social housing as the cure for all our economic ills. That is ridiculous. Social housing is not even the sole cure for problems in the construction industry. If one wanted an urgent capital spend in the marketplace or a rapid boost to the construction industry, it would be better done by investment in roads maintenance, for instance. The SDLP's preoccupation with a single issue is narrow-minded and foolish.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** Let me finish my point.

It is nonsensical to be preoccupied with a single issue. There are limited resources, as the SDLP knows well, and it is foolish to preoccupy oneself with one issue. Other Members, including myself, are concerned about various aspects of the economy which are suffering. We are concerned about fishermen, farmers and the fuel poor — for whom the Minister for Social Development has responsibility. There are many more areas in need of assistance.

**Mr A Maginness:** There is a DUP obsession with what they perceive to be an SDLP obsession with the construction industry. Last week, the Construction Employers Federation emphasised the need for investment in the construction industry. John Simpson said the same thing, as did Mike Smyth. Do not believe us; believe them.

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member —

**Mr F McCann:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** I want to make my point.

I hear the plea for the investment of more money in the construction industry, but that is what is happening. There are record levels of investment going into our construction industry through the investment strategy

for Northern Ireland. It is not as if social housing is getting a bad deal. Over the next three years, there are plans to spend over £600 million on roads; over £600 million on water infrastructure; over £500 million on healthcare; over £800 million on schools and colleges; and, in excess of all those, £925 million on social housing.

There are plans for an investment of £1.5 billion this year, which is a record level of investment in capital infrastructure in Northern Ireland. That will rise to £1.7 billion and will rise —

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

**Mr Hamilton:** No, I will not give way; my time is limited. My colleagues and I do not have as much time as the Member's party because of the curtailing of the debate.

Another £1.7 billion will be spent on capital infrastructure next year, and £2 billion will be spent in the following year. That will be spent on a wide range of projects across the board, which begs the question: if we were to revise the Budget and reconsider our investment strategy and the Programme for Government, where, precisely, will the money to re-prioritise come from? Money does not grow on trees; the avenue leading up to Parliament Buildings is not full of trees with money growing on them. Money and resources are limited; there is not an infinite amount of money, and no more money is available from the Treasury.

Are Members suggesting that, in any way, we increase rates in the middle of a recession? Do they want to get back onto the escalator and put industrial rates up to 100%; I do not believe that that is what they want to do. However, no new money is available, so we must consider making budget cuts — that is, making cuts to one budget so that money can be moved to another budget.

In such circumstances, it is the big-spending Departments that are likely to suffer. That includes the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which receives 50% of the Budget, or the Department of Education, which receives approximately 20% of the Budget. Given the furor kicked up by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Budget was set, it is highly unlikely that he will want to hand over money to the Minister for Social Development to ease her supposed pain.

There is silence from the Benches opposite about where money would be shifted from in order to put it into what they say are the priorities. Not only do I not hear them say that money should not be cut in some areas but some say that spending should be increased in certain areas. For example, I will single out John Dallat, who is a one-man Budget black hole. During his contributions over the past month, he has asked for

money for everything from rural signposting to the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry.

Far from wanting to take money away from budget areas in other Departments, the SDLP wants to increase the money being spent on those budget areas. If we were to rewrite the Programme for Government, as has been suggested in some Members' doom-laden remarks, we would have a less ambitious and less adventurous Programme for Government.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** The Programme for Government is prescient in its prioritising of the economy, and I ask Ministers to redouble their efforts to achieve the ambitious targets that are included in that document.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment. The Alliance Party amendment is a good suggestion but, unfortunately, it cannot make the SDLP motion into a viable option in these circumstances.

The SDLP Minister has surrendered — especially in relation to the Social Security Agency — vital capital and resource finance to the tune of £81.5 million in the past six months. Given that that service will become increasingly important as the consequences of the global economic downturn are reflected in our society in the form of rising unemployment and a major escalation in demand for social security support, it must be questioned whether those budgets should be given up at this time. However, doing so was the choice of the Minister for Social Development.

In the monitoring rounds in the six-month period between June and December 2008, the Minister for Social Development received an additional financial resource of £85.5 million for social housing.

**Mr Cobain:** The Programme for Government states that we will get 1,500 new homes. How many homes will we actually get in the next financial year?

**Mr McLaughlin:** That is an important point, and I thank the Member for raising it. It is a good question that the Minister may, perhaps, answer at some stage. I want to consider one aspect of that issue. During the Budget discussions, the Minister for Social Development said:

“give me the money and I will build the houses.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p134, col 2*].

Did the Minister mean to say that she will buy the houses from the developers who built houses that they could not sell on the open market? Will the Minister explain how buying houses off the shelf helps the local construction industry? Doing so might help to pay the interest charges on the land banks that some developers hold, but it does nothing for the construction industry.

6.00 pm

A key consideration in the Budget process of the Assembly is that it is genuinely difficult to identify or raise new money, other than by increasing rates, from outside the block grant. The Budget process is, therefore, a negotiation between the parties and Ministers on the equitable division of a financial cake that is of a predetermined size. Any proposal to throw that process into the air would provoke a bidding frenzy among Departments and their Ministers, and create paralysis in the Executive. Also, it would, inevitably, support the view that the SDLP motion is, in effect, an admission that it failed to negotiate its budget properly, and that it has since failed to manage its budget, including the massive increments that it received from the in-year monitoring rounds.

The monitoring rounds are the established mechanism for reviewing and, if necessary, revising, the priorities in the Programme for Government. The SDLP, with the support of all its Executive colleagues, has, in fact, been the main beneficiary of that process. I would have thought that the Minister for Social Development would have acknowledged that and recognised that she received that vital support.

However, the bottom line, which is missing from the motion and the amendments, is how to find the additional finance, other than by cutting other front-line services. Also missing from the motion is the detail that should have been provided in support of such a motion. Which front-line services and Departments does the SDLP intend to raid, and which budgets does it intend to slash? The SDLP has no proposals on how to find the extra money. In the current circumstances, there is, if anything, less available money. That is clear to anyone who is prepared to examine the facts.

If the SDLP considers that it failed in its budgetary negotiations, it must put its hands up. The party should fess up, and accept that it made a mess of that the first time round. If, in the SDLP's view, social housing is so important that it merits a review at the next monitoring round, it should appeal. I am sure that ministerial colleagues who share the SDLP's commitment to social housing will do what they can. From the allocations that have been made, it is evident —

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

**Mr McLaughlin:** If the Member does not mind, I will not give way because I am almost finished.

From studying the allocations that were made, it should be clear that the Minister for Social Development has the support, and she has received generous support, of ministerial colleagues who struggle with their budgetary deficits. Every Department struggles to meet the challenge of coping with an initial financial deficit and the consequences of



the economic downturn. Those issues affect all Ministers in the Executive.

The SDLP's primary motive for bringing the motion was its initial failure to negotiate properly. Secondly, it is failing to deliver its targets. Thirdly, by undermining and undercutting the social agencies' ability to respond to the emerging poverty crisis, it has created a further a crisis that is coming down the road.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business has been completed, whichever is the earlier.

**Mr Poots:** Mr O'Loan referred to people using their imagination; he certainly used his earlier. In the midst of a global credit crunch in which millions of people are losing their jobs and banks have lost hundreds of billions of pounds, Mr O'Loan imagines that the entire problem in Northern Ireland will be solved by building more social housing.

With such an immense and extremely vivid imagination, Mr O'Loan should not be sitting here today; he should have been in Davos to advise the world's economists on how to progress. Barack Obama could do with such a man in his advisory group to help him to improve the situation in the United States of America. Perhaps he could develop social housing in the United States; that would solve the problems in that economy too. The Assembly has been truly enlightened by Mr O'Loan's overactive imagination, which leads him to suggest that social housing is the cure for every ill in Northern Ireland.

**Mr F McCann:** Does the Member agree that another issue has escaped Members? During the December monitoring rounds, when community groups were under pressure, especially those involved in neighbourhood renewal, the Minister for Social Development handed back £1.6 million.

**Mr Poots:** That is the remarkable thing. Whenever I posed the question to the Minister earlier, I must have hit a boil because I got an angry reaction and a lot of verbiage came spouting out.

Thankfully, the Executive made the economy their number one priority when they were drawing together the Programme for Government. The fact is that others were arguing that the Executive should invest more in social development; others were arguing that the Executive should invest more in health, but the Executive, in their wisdom, recognised that the only way to drive this country forward was through driving the economy forward. The global crisis makes things considerably difficult. It is not of our making, but we are probably in a better position to respond to that crisis, given that the Executive identified the economy as a key priority in the first instance.

I would like to take an intervention from the SDLP. I really desire an intervention from the SDLP, and for it to tell me what particular parts of the Budget should be cut. The SDLP has not identified any savings anywhere — not a single saving.

I will certainly take an intervention from Mr O'Loan. I want to hear you —

**Mr O'Loan:** I return to Mr Poots's earlier point about my alleged failure of imagination. I did not refer to the Maze stadium — and I could have used that as a rather nice example: there was a place where there was a total failure of imagination by those who are walking away from that scheme — but that is one point on which Mr Poots would probably agree with me.

**Mr Poots:** I thank Mr O'Loan for his intervention. Again, however, the SDLP does have any answer about where the money will come from. Perhaps I will give a few suggestions, and the SDLP can tell me what it would cut. There is £265 million in the Health Service to go towards the building of important health facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital; the Ulster Hospital; Downe Hospital, which is, I believe, in Minister Ritchie's constituency; Altnagelvin Hospital, and perhaps Mr Durkan would like that budget to be cut; and Craigavon Area Hospital, and perhaps Mrs Kelly would be in favour of cuts in that proposal.

A total of £127 million is to be invested in the Belfast sewers project. Perhaps we will just have flooding in the lower Ormeau and Markets area for many years to come and cut that budget instead. I am sure that Dr McDonnell and Mrs Hanna would support that cut; £89 million is to be spent on waste-water treatment works; £83 million is to be spent on four major projects for the Department for Employment and Learning, and I am sure that the Ulster Unionist Party would be delighted to give that back. Ballynahinch and Downpatrick are in the South Down constituency of the Minister for Social Development, who wants to build more social housing. A total of £200 million is to be spent on 14 projects to be constructed by the education and library boards.

Perhaps Members of the SDLP will give me an answer this time. However, I do not see any of them wanting to intervene; they are strangely silent on this occasion. Will they not tell me which of those budgets that they would like to see cut so that they can have additional money for social housing?

**Mr Durkan:** The SDLP has not advocated any cuts on the capital expenditure side whatsoever. If anything, we have complained about the lack of delivery and performance on capital expenditure. In the last period of devolution, the SDLP created the platform for the investment strategy, and also said that there needed to be central drivers for managing that capital expenditure. Other parties opposed that, and we are still suffering

the cost of the lack of coherent driving of capital expenditure. The problem there is a lack of performance, rather than a lack of budgeting.

**Mr Poots:** Again, we have the call to use our imagination, but there is no imagination from the SDLP as to where the money will come from. In fact, it criticised my party for wanting to reduce the burden of administration; it criticised my party for wanting to reduce the number of Departments and MLAs. The savings may be small; nevertheless, those savings can be redistributed to other, more worthy, causes. We know that the SDLP loves red tape, it loves the burden of administration, and it loves applying more equality and human rights legislation at every opportunity, which burdens businesses and taxes the public. My party will deliver for the people.

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. In the Chamber last week, Sinn Féin said that everyone in the House has, in the past, supported the need for additional funding for social housing. Sinn Féin has also supported that call in the Committee for Social Development and is on record for saying in the Chamber that having a home, a settled place in which to live, is important — indeed, vital — for quality of life, health, mental well-being, security and educational attainment.

Let us look at the motion, why it was tabled today, and, more importantly, who tabled it. The SDLP is promoting motions such as this in many councils across the North, and many people will look on this one as an attempt by the SDLP to give its Minister a leg up, a Minister who blames everyone else for many of her own mistakes.

We have only to consider how she behaved in the aftermath of the December monitoring round and during the debate on the economy, when she and a number of her colleagues tried to give the impression that she was being picked on and bullied by her Executive colleagues. She suggested that somehow her budget was raided, even though she supported the package at the Executive meeting. Thus, although Sinn Féin would normally support the call for additional resources to be directed towards an effective social housing programme, I question the motives of those who have tabled the motion. All Ministers are open to criticism when they appear in the House, but the SDLP gets annoyed when someone dares to question its Minister. SDLP members call it harassment.

**Mr O'Loan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr F McCann:** No.

Let us deal with the real issues behind the motion and what can be done to increase the level of social housing in our communities. Sinn Féin believes that if there are additional resources available, they should be

directed towards the building new social houses. However, does that mean redrawing the Programme for Government? No, it does not. We want the Minister to explain what measures she intends to introduce to increase the number of social newbuilds.

**Mr Cobain:** Will the Member be asking the joint First Minister what programmes he will introduce under the Programme for Government to meet the expectations of the anti-poverty programme?

**Mr F McCann:** The Member knows my record on arguing for social housing.

**Mr Cobain:** Will you be asking the joint First Minister —

**Mr F McCann:** I would ask anybody to bring to bear —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr F McCann:** I would ask anybody to bring finance and resources to bear, if they are available, to ensure that social housing is being built across —

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

**Mr F McCann:** No, I am running out of time.

**Mr A Maginness:** I want to ask you about your record —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member has refused to give way.

**Mr F McCann:** Let us deal with the realities of the motion and what can be done to increase the level of social housing in our community. Sinn Féin is saying that if additional resources are available, they should be directed towards the building of new social housing. We require the Minister to explain what measures she intends to introduce to increase the number of newbuild social houses. Is she developing a strategy that will allow her to realise more newbuilds?

Several weeks ago, at a meeting of the Committee for Social Development, I raised with the Minister the issue of the land that is in her control, and how that land could be used in a strategic way to half the cost of social newbuilds. My understanding is that housing associations are crying out for land that is owned by her Department, and by the Housing Executive, to build social housing.

We also raised the possibility of entering into partnership with developers, offering land for houses in mixed-use developments. I have spoken to staff in housing associations, and they have told me that their grants have been cut by 20% in the past year, which has had an impact on their ability to build. They have informed me that the only way to recoup those cuts is to raise their rents, which are fast approaching the rates charged in the private sector. *[Interruption.]* When we

will start to see any social housing through the use of article 40 agreements? *[Interruption.]*

Major developments are ready or are about to go on site. How many social housing units will be realised? Will those be in addition to the social housing programme? How many social houses were built in the past two financial years? How many were used for family housing and how many were apartments that were bought from private developers who were unable to sell them?

The Minister must play her part and proactively develop new strategies to ensure a steady flow of social housing newbuilds. In this time of great economic uncertainty, what has the Minister done to initiate social inclusion clauses in the new procurement arrangements? Will she insist that all contracts issued include the training of apprentices? If possible, will she also have built in to those contracts the requirement that materials be sourced from local companies? Will she consider how the small construction contractor can be catered for in that new arrangement? Many contractors will find that the tenders are beyond their reach financially, so what can be done to ensure that they remain in business?

When the Programme for Government came before the House, the Minister for Social Development supported it, and she has said consistently that she will meet the targets included in it. Targets can be met in many ways, and not all the answers lie with the Executive.

6.15 pm

The SDLP and its Minister may find that there are available assets in the Department for Social Development. The Minister may find that a strategic approach can assist in the development of additional social housing; if the resources are available, I have no doubt that her Executive colleagues will allocate additional resources for social newbuilds, as they have done in many monitoring rounds.

We have long waited for a clear strategy to address long housing waiting lists and high levels of homelessness — it is time for the Minister to deliver such a strategy.

**Mr Shannon:** The priorities that were set out in the Budget were not pulled from a top hat at a moment's notice — they were agreed by each Minister in the Executive. The economic downturn means that we must uphold more firmly the issues that we had previously agreed to address, namely child poverty and fuel poverty, which were prioritised by the Executive and the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The targets for reducing child poverty are commendable, and the current state of the economy means that there is all the more need to focus on them. We must look for new ways to do the best that we can

to achieve those high targets — a 50% reduction in child poverty by 2010 and its eradication by 2020. In Northern Ireland, 100,000 children live in some degree of poverty and 44,000 live in severe poverty, which underlines the problem. That situation will get worse with daily job losses.

Aa' hae tae sae, that aa' caun unnerstaun tha raisin fer this motshun. As yin whau woarks oan tha grun aa' caun unnerstaun tha social hoosin is needit — hooaniver aa' unnerstaun that this need is bein met oot o' tha Program fer Government an Budgit. Indeed it wus mi' guid fortyin laust week alang wi' tha Meinistar tae cut tha sod fer 40 new hoosin units in Newtownairds, aw o' thees er fer social hoosin needs wi' a lukin fort tae iver 300 muckle mare bein bigg'd.

I can comprehend the reason for the motion, because, as someone who works on the ground, I understand the need for social housing. However, the Programme for Government and Budget are addressing that need. It was my privilege last week, along with Minister Ritchie, to cut the sod for 40 units dedicated to social housing in Newtownards, with a further 300 units proposed for Ards Borough Council area. The area served by Ards Borough Council has approximately 3,000 people on the waiting list for social housing, and I have a desire to see that need met, the same as all other Members do in their areas. The Programme for Government set a target of 5,000 new homes for social housing.

If there was an option to increase funding for social housing without taking from any other Department, I would be all for it, but that is not the case. As my colleagues across the Chamber said, funding would have to be taken from other sources. I cannot see any Department that would give away funding and still meet its projected needs and aims.

At Question Time, Minister Conor Murphy was here. Do we take money from roads maintenance and have even more accidents and serious injuries due to the substandard roads that run through the Province? Roads in the Ards Peninsula were given as an example of that. Do we take money from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), and leave farmers to wait even longer for their payment or leave the fishermen even more alone than they already are? For the first time, the Assembly set aside £700,000 for the fishing industry, which demonstrates commitment to that sector. Do we turn the heating off in the renal unit of the Ulster Hospital when funding has already been cut?

Programmes such as Sure Start Lower Ards Peninsula and Lifestart Mid-Ards are living from month to month, because funding is no longer assured for long periods due to constraints on the Department of Health? Can our health system afford any more

cutbacks? Should we divert the money used by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to provide help for small businesses at a time when investment in businesses in the Province, big and small, is a necessity if we are ever to trade ourselves out of the current economic mire? Should we take the cap off the rates to give businesses even more bills that they cannot pay, which will mean more people on benefits? What areas do Members think that we could take funding from without having an adverse effect on other realms of life?

In previous debates on this issue, I have stated that the Programme for Government established aims, not a wish list. Those aims are methods of achieving a credible goal — a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland with respect for the rule of law.

The Programme for Government was approved by the Ministers in the Executive and agreed in the House, and the Minister for Social Development was part of that process. It seems to be easier to lay the blame at the feet of others rather than to put in the hard work that is needed to make an effective difference for everyone.

Times are hard for everyone, and we must try to make our resources stretch as far as possible, in the same way in which everyone else must do so. However, we cannot pull resources until they snap, as some Members here expect us to do, for that is what the motion suggests.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

**Mr Shannon:** The motion suggests putting other Departments under more strain, which would surely snap them. I urge Members to support neither the motion nor the amendments.

**Dr McDonnell:** We must revise the priorities that are set out in the Programme for Government, because everything — everything — has changed since it was first compiled. There is a global economic crisis, and there is a local economic crisis. People are being hit hard, and, every day, more and more hard-working, decent people are being forced to join the dole queues and worry about how they will provide for their families.

People are very worried. For a while, they looked to the Assembly and the Executive for help, but all they got was a political regime that is afraid of its own shadow and is unable to make a single major decision on anything of substance.

We must review the Programme for Government and the Budget, and adjust the priorities accordingly, because the Programme for Government was a Thatcherite programme — I make no apology for saying that. Sinn Féin and the DUP crafted it from day one. It was an unmitigated disaster then, and it is an unmitigated disaster now. That is why my party

opposed it at the time, and that is why we continue to question the wisdom of many aspects of the Programme for Government.

Today, we are living in very different economic times. The Programme for Government, which was wrong when it was produced, continues to do nothing to change or alleviate the circumstances in which we find ourselves. There is a pressing responsibility on the Executive to do all in their power to respond to the economic crisis and, wherever possible, to help people to remain in their jobs. If the Executive are at all serious —

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

**Dr McDonnell:** No; I will not give way. If the Executive are at all serious about doing all in their power to respond, they must fundamentally review and revise the priorities set out all those months ago.

My friend Alban Maginness adopted the same position that I am taking, but it is not just an SDLP position. In the past six weeks, distinguished economists have drawn our attention to the need for a review of the Programme for Government. In order to revise it, the Executive must take immediate action to help counter the worst effects of the economic crisis. Furthermore, long-term planning through an investment strategy is needed in order to help put us in a position of strength, so that we can take advantage of opportunities when the crisis is over.

The Executive must introduce capital projects to support local construction and related sectors. Investment in major capital and regeneration projects, such as housing, schools, hospitals and roads, has the potential to stimulate the economy and to keep people in secure employment.

There has been some discussion on the matter, and it is not simply a matter of allocating money — that alone does not make things happen. Somehow or other, our systems and Departments are clogged up, and projects are not even getting to their starting point. Therefore, we must get them to that point, and we must bring some of the spending forward by three to six months to start creating jobs and getting people into them, and, where possible, to prevent people from being laid off.

Work could begin on tackling the £217 million backlog in school maintenance, and work could begin on the 130 desperately needed new school buildings, 30 of which have been in the pipeline for around six years. Work could also begin on building social housing, which is also desperately needed. We have discussed that issue at length, so I will not go into it in any further detail. One Member mentioned the £265 million that is required for new hospitals, for which people are crying out. All that work could be brought forward, started and pushed on.

The money has been allocated. I know that money is scarce, but we are not using effectively the money that we have. There are infrastructure projects in the pipeline that are badly needed and long overdue and which have huge counter-recessionary potential. Although we are fast-tracking those projects in order to counter the recession, we must have the vision and the foresight to plan and prepare our economy for future needs.

We must be ambitious; we must invest in all those things that are necessary in order to position us properly. Belfast needs a light-rail system; we need vital road and rail improvements, an all-island alternative energy market, green infrastructure and digital infrastructure. Alongside all that, we must invest in our people.

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

**Dr McDonnell:** We must re-train and re-skill people so that they are in the right position when this crisis is over.

**The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Just over a year ago, the Assembly endorsed the Executive's first Programme for Government, which was agreed unanimously by all Executive Ministers, and which set out our collective determination to work together to build a shared, better and more sustainable future for all our people.

In that context, we made the economy our top priority, underpinned by our commitment to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest need. We made that commitment at a time of great confidence and optimism in the global and local economies. Our economy appeared to be performing well; employment was at a record high, unemployment was at an historic low and the contribution of the private sector to economic output was increasing. However, we recognised that, despite appearances, all was not well, and that there were significant structural weakness that had to be addressed if we were to provide the conditions for sustainable economic growth — growth that was essential if we were to provide the opportunities and means to enhance quality of life, reduce poverty and disadvantage, increase health and well-being, tackle the divisions in our society and build stronger, more sustainable and empowered communities.

We recognised the need to move away from an economy that competed on the basis of low cost to one that competed on the basis of the skills and flexibility of its workforce. To that end, we set out in the Programme for Government how we would focus on increasing productivity, supporting growth and well-paid, highly skilled jobs, and on addressing our high rates of economic inactivity.

Alongside the most ambitious programme of infrastructure investment in a generation, we

introduced measures to develop the skills and flexibility of our workforce; to promote innovation and increased investment in research and development by companies; and to encourage a culture of enterprise and business growth and the development of a more innovative and competitive agrifood sector in order to ensure that everyone, including the most vulnerable in society, had the opportunity to contribute to, and benefit from, increased prosperity. We also set out measures to address poverty and exclusion, and the persistent educational and health differentials. We were resolved that no one should have their lifetime opportunities limited, or, indeed, determined by an accident of birth. We sought real equality of opportunity; which is why the Executive agreed the largest ever allocation to health and education.

As several Members said today, much has changed in the intervening year since the Assembly endorsed the Programme for Government. As a result of developments in the global economy, we find ourselves in a more difficult and uncertain environment than any of us could have anticipated. Long-established giants of the financial world and the high street have fallen by the wayside, and locally, the impact of the global economic downturn and the credit crunch are already being felt.

Every announcement of redundancies further increases the uncertainty with which our businesses and hard-working families face the future. We know that behind each of those announcements there are real people, not figures on a spreadsheet. They are our families, our friends and our neighbours, and they face uncertainty that is compounded by the hope that sprung up during our recent period of growth. We must act, and do what we can to bring certainty and lay plans for future growth.

Those problems are not of our making; the crisis will require a co-ordinated international response; we cannot, on our own, solve the global credit crisis. However, we are far from powerless, and in these difficult times Government must act. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of the local private sector and the foundations of a dynamic innovative economy. That is why encouraging enterprise and business growth was a key theme in the Programme for Government. Many of the measures in the Programme for Government and Budget aimed to assist that sector by addressing the cost of doing business and encouraging people to set up businesses.

6.30 pm

In response to the economic downturn, we have taken further measures to aid that sector. The results of the independently conducted small-business finance barometer were reported today in the press. In the light of the measures that we have taken, it is encouraging

that this survey of the sector indicates that, at a time of recession, not one business surveyed considered that it would have to close, and a quarter of them expected to expand. The resilience of our small and medium-sized enterprises is to be applauded, and this Administration will continue to do all that it can to support them through this challenging time.

We are all agreed that the Executive and Assembly must take action to minimise the impact of the global crisis on the local economy. The old economic models and certainties have crashed: we must act to alleviate the hardship that many face. It is our duty to work together to chart a clear course through the economic difficulties; identify where we can have an effect; make the right choices; and act collectively. We must remain focused on protecting those most in need and restructure our economy so that we can take advantage when recovery begins. We need to build economic growth that is sustainable and shared.

The Alliance amendment fails to recognise the Executive's commitments to the principles of sustainability, particularly in relation to economic growth. Sustainability is one of the two cross-cutting themes that underpin the Programme for Government, and the principles of sustainability underpin our approach to all activities, including economic growth and social progress. That is why, as part of the package of measures that we announced on 15 December, we made an additional £21 million available to the warm homes scheme to make housing more energy-efficient. Our focus must be on ensuring a more sustainable future for all; recognising the principles of living within environmental limits; using procurement guidelines to ensure economic, social and environmental impacts; and promoting opportunity and innovation.

A focus on sustainability presents us with opportunities, in addition to the challenges that we all recognise. New economic opportunities are afforded by the rapid growth in eco-innovation and environmental technology markets and in targeting resources to build infrastructure and support local business. The global and local economic context has changed, but the imperative that lay behind our choice of priorities in the Programme for Government has not. Recent developments in the global economy have vindicated our decisions and demonstrate the importance of retaining the economy as our top priority in the Programme for Government, underpinned, as it is, by our commitment to targeting resources and efforts to help those in greatest objective need.

Having our eyes firmly fixed on the economy has aided us during the storm. Many of the programmes that we put in place are already addressing the underlying problems. However, no programme can be set in stone. Flexibility must exist if we are to take account of changes in circumstances and ensure that

we are focused on addressing the key challenges that we face. The Executive are committed to the ongoing review and necessary revision of the Programme for Government. We have already acted: the measures that we announced on 15 December to address the economic downturn are part of that ongoing review. They build on the strong base that we already have in place and aim to alleviate hardship for families and businesses and provide an added stimulus where it is needed.

Our focus has not changed — nor should it. The package of measures that we announced on 15 December was developed in the light of the discussions that we held with stakeholders across all sectors and followed discussions at the Executive table. From that we concluded — and all Ministers agreed — that the core problems could best be addressed by focusing action around five themes: energy and fuel poverty; debt arising from the increased cost of living and unemployment; support for the housing market and construction industry; support for household budgets; and support for businesses.

Although some of those are key elements of the Programme for Government, we have placed added emphasis on them at this time. We have also committed additional resources to new areas of work and programmes to reflect the current downturn. This is not a Government that have failed to act. We will do all that we can to promote our economy and to safeguard jobs. For those whose jobs have been lost, we will continue to provide support and training to make finding another job more achievable.

We have already enhanced the employment service with 130 new staff, who have been recruited to deal with the rise in unemployment, and to search for new work. There are 23 new careers advisers in place, who have also implemented the critical sector's initiative programme, delivering a suite of training programmes that will cost £15 million over three years.

The SDLP and its colleagues have suggested that the Programme for Government is no longer fit for purpose; that the priorities must be revised if we are to overcome the current difficulties by directing further expenditure into social housing. Those proposals are not unique or innovative. They will neither alleviate the immediate difficulties nor provide the conditions for long-term sustainable economic growth.

The SDLP motion misses the point that the Executive recognised the need that existed for social housing and made its provision a priority. Let no one be mistaken: the Executive will not accept the current levels of homelessness or of families living in unfit accommodation. That is why the Executive committed £420 million for new social housing over the three

years, which can be topped up with receipts from proceeds of house sales.

We have invested in the Department for Social Development so that it can deliver. That remains the case. The Minister for Social Development has been given additional resources over and above what was allocated at the time of the Budget. That clearly lays out our commitment to social housing.

We have invested in social housing, not for economic impact or short-term political gain, but to alleviate the problems faced by those who are homeless or living in unfit accommodation. We must ensure that money spent on any project maximises the benefit to the local economy in both the short and long term. This is not a motion on homelessness or about alleviating housing overcrowding. The Executive agree on targeting those issues.

The proposers of the motion suggest that future economic growth is predicated on investment in social housing. It is their great idea, but it fails to recognise that the housing market is depressed, housing receipts are falling, property prices are falling, and private developments remain empty. Do the proposers of the motion seriously believe that the long-term future of the construction sector in those conditions will be secured by their narrow approach? It is short-sighted, it is party political, and it demonstrates a lack of understanding and of political leadership.

Every Administration on these islands is faced with the same challenge. It is not unique to us. The response of each Administration has been to focus on investing in infrastructure while alleviating the short-term hardship. From London to Dublin, from Cardiff to Edinburgh, the imperative is to build an economy that is competitive in the global environment — an economy based on skills and innovation. It is an approach that has been replicated globally across the developed and developing economies.

We recognise that the housing programme is not unique in suffering the effects of a shortfall in capital receipts. It is an issue that cuts across all areas of the investment programme, and it is clearly impossible for the housing budget to be insulated from the consequences. It is unrealistic to expect substantial transfers of capital from other programmes into social housing.

Let us be clear: there is no new money. What is given to one Department must be taken from another. If we are to direct further expenditure into social housing, the question is: where does that money come from? Which hospital or school will not be built? Which roads should we set aside? Which constituencies should be told that their needs must be put aside? A number of my colleagues across the way posed the question to the SDLP. All that we received in answer was a deafening silence.

It was a bit rich of Alasdair McDonnell to describe the Programme for Government and the Budget as an unmitigated disaster. I presume he believes that Margaret Ritchie — who voted for the Programme for Government and the Budget — is also an unmitigated disaster.

The investment strategy was designed to build the basis of our future prosperity, and it is vital that we continue with the major capital building programmes that have already been outlined. The most effective way in which we can help the construction sector is to ensure that the investment strategy continues to be delivered on time, avoiding unnecessary delays and the unacceptable levels of end-year capital shortfall that have occurred in earlier years.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the deputy First Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

**The deputy First Minister:** The construction sector is of significant importance to the economy, providing, as it does, a major source of employment, directly and indirectly. The Executive will continue to support the construction industry.

**Mr B Wilson:** I fully support the SDLP motion. The deputy First Minister said that circumstances have changed in the last year; we have moved from a very calm and expanding economy to a global crisis. However, he claims that we do not need to review the priorities that are set out in the Programme for Government.

The debate has had very little to do with review; rather, it seemed to be an attack on the Minister for Social Development and on the housing programme. That is totally wrong. Obviously, unemployment in the construction industry and homelessness are serious problems, and amendment No 2 offers the potential to do something about those problems.

I am also concerned about PFI projects. One of the problems is that capital programmes are running behind schedule, which is happening because money is not being spent. A number of PFI projects did not get the go-ahead because of the credit crunch. Therefore, the jobs, which those projects may have provided, are no longer being created. For example, Lagan College has been delayed because the private sector has not been able to sort out its finance. The project has been in the pipeline for seven years, and the credit crunch means that it is unlikely to go ahead in the immediate future. Projects that have been held up because of PFIs should be expedited.

President Obama wants to find new ways to expand the economy and get people into work. He has identified two areas through which that can be achieved; social housing — which is exactly what we are saying — and the green economy, which is a very important potential growth area. Members may be aware that last week, the Green Party launched its

candidate for Europe at Harland and Wolff. We chose that venue in order to highlight the role that the company is playing at the forefront of renewable energy. Currently, Harland and Wolff is assembling 60 wind turbines and is involved in the construction of SeaGen in Strangford Lough. Wind and tidal energy are potential growth areas that must be looked at. The technologies rely on particular skills that exist in Northern Ireland, and we should be trying to put those skills to work to develop a new green revolution.

**Mr F McCann:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B Wilson:** I am sorry, I have very little time.

When I voted against the Budget, one of the major decisions to which I referred was the ending of the Reconnect grants, which were to provide micro-energy. At the end of the financial year when those grants were stopped, I said that that would lead to unemployment — and it has led to unemployment in the renewable-energy sector. At that stage, more than 3,000 applications that were in the pipeline could not be met because the budget ran out.

6.45 pm

People were also encouraged to train, and 800 people were trained in the Renewable Energy Installer Academy. They were gaining the skills to install the new renewable technologies, and they are now unemployed because the grant was stopped. Training of skilled workers and the use of new technology should be encouraged. If the grant were reintroduced tomorrow, dozens of people could be re-employed. Three thousand people wanted grants to install the systems, so that would be an immediate way to create jobs and to develop a green economy. The Action Renewables report said that 5,600 jobs in renewable energy could be created. Such measures should be considered, and I certainly support the motion.

**Mr B McCrea:** It appears that this is not a good time to be in Government. Things are bad and are likely to get worse. People will blame the Government; after all, who else is there to blame in, what is for many people, an unfortunate set of circumstances? We have to grapple as best we can with the challenges that face us.

The SDLP motion should have been broader in order to consider more issues than housing and retraining. I also have some difficulty with amendment No 2, which refers to the green economy. Green energy would probably be able to account for only 1% of our energy requirements. A competitiveness study has shown that green energy affects between 2% and 3% of the top line in manufacturing. That means that it would affect 1% of that 2% to 3% of energy. I am not sure whether we want 5,000 more jobs in an area in which we are already more productive. The big challenge is productivity. The acronym PIIGS —

Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain — refers to the economies that are bankrupt and unable to deal with the issue.

Many people have asked where the money will come from. I accept the argument that no more money is available, which means that money would have to be taken from one Department and given to another. I cannot see Departments volunteering to give up money. The argument that individual Ministers should be allowed to deal with the cuts is at least as good as the argument that they should be managed collectively.

**Mr Hamilton:** I welcome that dose of realism from the Member. There is a lack of additional money, so money must be reallocated from elsewhere. Does he have an insight into the mind of, for example, his colleague the Health Minister? Would the Health Minister appreciate 5% being sliced from his budget to be reallocated to some of the priorities that Mr Basil McCrea and some Members from other parties have talked about?

**Mr B McCrea:** It is obvious that we share the same position on that. It is difficult, and cuts will have to be made. In the December monitoring round, the Minister of Education put in bids for £33 million and received £6 million. The rest of the money was for inescapable expenditure. That means cuts must be made to other front-line services because the money was for, for instance, job evaluations. One might as well say that the Minister must manage as best she can within her budget. All Departments have to make efficiency savings of 3%. The Department of Education is supposed to find efficiencies by making teachers redundant, but it does not have the money to make that happen. It has to find £26 million, and last year it had to find £60 million.

What are we going to do now to rebalance the economy? I am sure that, like me, Members heard on the news this morning that some people want to call the bottom of the market and say that confidence is back.

I am afraid that I cannot do that; I believe that there is worse to come. There is an issue about trust and about our trying to build for the future. In regard to housing, I regret that I must also say that I do not see a return to the halcyon days of 20% growth. It is open to argument whether we should invest our limited resources in an area that gives no returns.

We must look for higher productivity; we must look for export opportunities; and we must look at manufacturing. However, those things take time to develop. Amendment No 1, as proposed by my colleague David McNarry, calls on the Executive to address our difficulties. I hope that the deputy First Minister takes note of what happens when my party makes reasonable suggestions.



**Mr O'Dowd:** Does the Member agree that the argument from his Benches would be more credible if his party brought an alternative, costed Programme for Government to the House to be debated and voted on?

**Mr B McCrea:** I do not know whether the Member heard me, but we are adopting a reasonable position that involves understanding the difficulties. I hope that the deputy First Minister is listening. We are offering to work with others because the situation requires all of us to deal with the matters in hand. I do not know whether I have stated that clearly enough, but it is what we are saying.

A year from now, there will be a fundamental change in our economy: we can no longer rely on construction and house building as engines of growth; we must find something to replace them. Another challenge is where to find the money that is needed. I do not believe that the private sector will accept the argument that the public sector can sail on regardless with its guaranteed spinal — inflationary — increases while the private sector must resort to three-day weeks.

That will not work. Social unrest is a real and serious problem. My plea is that we work together. Notwithstanding all our difficulties, it is only if we work together that people will trust us.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Mark Durkan to wind up on the debate on the substantive motion. The debate must finish at 7 pm, and I may have to interrupt to bring it to a close at that time.

**Mr Durkan:** The debate ranged over several issues, and not all Members ranged as far as others. Some concentrated on attacking the Minister for Social Development.

In proposing the motion, Declan O'Loan highlighted how Committees are being told by senior departmental officials that some of the targets and presumptions in the Programme for Government have been overtaken by events. Committees are constantly told not to take those provisions for granted. In such circumstances, it must be credible to have an honest, open and sensible overall revision of the Programme for Government.

In proposing amendment No 1, David McNarry asked whether the Programme for Government and what he called the rigidly linked Budget were fit for purpose. He said that a review was needed to take account of changed circumstances.

In proposing amendment No 2 on behalf of the Alliance Party, Anna Lo highlighted the green economy as an area of growth; she also reinforced her commitment to social housing.

Simon Hamilton criticised what he said was an SDLP obsession with social housing, but ignored the fact that we have called for an overall revision of the

Programme for Government at the same time as discussing issues such as retraining and upskilling.

Mitchel McLaughlin concentrated on attacking and criticising Margaret Ritchie. However, he also pointed out that a key consideration of the Budget process is the limited ability of the Executive to raise money.

Edwin Poots challenged whether all problems would be solved by building social housing in the midst of a global credit crunch. He made the mistake of assuming that we who proposed the motion are saying that social housing alone will solve all our economic problems. Mr Poots also counterposed investing in health and social housing with having the economy as the number-one priority.

Many of us believe that strong economic benefits come with investing in health and social housing and through placing a key emphasis on high capital expenditure. In the past, many Members worked to improve the levels and form of capital expenditure. We are committed fully, not only to the infrastructure ends that that can achieve, but also to the benefits that it can release.

Fra McCann concentrated on social housing. Again, he confirmed that he has yet to take out membership of Margaret Ritchie's fan club. I do not believe that she is particularly expectant.

Jim Shannon stated that he understands the need for social housing. He referred to the high numbers — 3,000 people — who are on the housing waiting list in the Ards Borough Council area. He also referred to funding problems for Lifestart and Sure Start in Ards. Last year, many Members who raised problems with the Budget and the Programme for Government pointed out the damage that would be done by the absence of a ring-fenced children's fund and a funding package for children and young people.

At that time, we were told that it would be sorted out and that three Departments would receive the money. Some of those Departments — for example, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — now say that they did not receive any money from that supposedly ring-fenced fund. The reason why groups such as Lifestart face those difficulties is because they cannot busk around various Departments in order to get a bit of their budget here and a bit of it there. The children's fund needs to be recreated. That could emerge from a revision of the Programme for Government.

Alastair McDonnell pointed out that many of the Programme for Government's presumptions and projections have been completely overtaken by events. Clearly, many of its promises and targets have travelled south in the current economic circumstances. Dr McDonnell made a point not only about funding allocations, but about whether the money is even flowing, and about delivery delays.

Speaking for the Executive, the deputy First Minister stressed the context in which the Programme for Government was introduced. He said that they are keeping their eye firmly on the prize and that the economy is their number one priority. He pointed out that, obviously, the Executive did not create the wider economic conditions that now buffet us all; instead, he set those very much in the international context.

He failed, however, to take the point from Members who want to revise the Programme for Government that the case that we set out is very much that, in the light of what we know now about wider economic circumstances and the pressures that they create, priorities must be considered, not only between Departments, but within them, in order to revise the Budget and Programme for Government.

In fact, if the Assembly carried out the proper annual Budget exercise that it is supposed to, it would proof the Budget and the budget lines of each Department in order to determine whether Ministers and Departments are spending on priority areas; whether they must meet other pressures; and whether they must relax certain promises that they have made. That is what a proper and robust scrutiny of the Budget and the Programme for Government should achieve.

Brian Wilson highlighted the Reconnect grants that have been abandoned. Again, that contradicts commitments that were made in the Programme for Government to sustainable development and energy efficiency.

Similarly, the Assembly was told about the Programme for Government's great support for enterprise and for people who start small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the Administration removed the grant from the Start a Business programme. Therefore, the one basic funding element for people who start a business has been withdrawn.

Not all of the Government's decisions live up to the promise and language of the Programme for Government. Basil McCrea highlighted the lack of additional money and stated that Ministers will not volunteer to take funding cuts. Ministers must examine budget lines in their respective Departments, as do departmental Committees. The Assembly must play its role to scrutinise that expenditure in order to ensure that public money goes to where it most needed and where it can make the greatest difference to public services and long-term economic development.

That is why, contrary to Edwin Poots' comments, when the DUP put forward a motion to cut the number of Departments, the SDLP tabled an amendment that reached much further to try to ensure that there is due priority in public expenditure; that less money is spent on the system and more on front-line services. It is precisely for those reasons that the Programme for

Government must be reviewed and revised. Although the deputy First Minister said that the programme does not need to be revised, most of his speech was an argument in favour of its review and revision. Indeed, he said that the Executive review and revise the programme as they go along.

Therefore, the Assembly has heard contradictory arguments: on one hand, that no change is needed; and on the other hand, that those changes are being provided. More strategic focus is needed.

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

*Question, That Amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.*

*Question, That Amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.*

*Main Question put and negatived.*

*Adjourned at 7.01 pm.*