
Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 4 June 2010

The Assembly met at 2.00 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence

Private Members' Business

Gaza

Mr Speaker: Having been given notice by not less than 30 Members under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly today for the purpose of debating the motion that appears in the Order Paper. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

I wish to inform Members that a valid petition of concern was presented today in relation to the motion. Under Standing Order 28, the vote cannot be taken until at least one day has passed. Therefore, the vote will be taken as the first item of business on Monday 7 June. The motion can, however, be debated today. I remind Members that another effect of the petition is that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Mr McHugh: I beg to move

That this Assembly, conscious of the presence of Nobel laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire on board the MV Rachel Corrie, calls on Israel to conform with international human rights norms and joins with the British and Irish Governments in condemning the disproportionate actions by Israel earlier this week; recognises that every nation has the right to defend itself but that each nation also has a responsibility to respect and comply with international law; and further calls on Israel to ensure that humanitarian efforts in Gaza are facilitated, that an immediate end to the blockade is effected and that the MV Rachel Corrie is given safe passage to Gaza.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is a great honour for me, in partnership with my

Assembly colleague from West Tyrone Dr Kieran Deeny, to move the motion in the Assembly today. This is the first time that the House has met out of session since it debated the events of 11 September 2001.

My inspiration for introducing the motion is derived from an e-mail that was sent to me by fellow parliamentarian and Fianna Fáil colleague Mr Chris Andrews TD. His expression of outrage, which echoed the concerns of many ordinary members of Fianna Fáil the length and breadth of this island, motivated me to take direct action by introducing the motion to the Assembly today. Our joint motion calls on Israel to respect international human rights norms, facilitate humanitarian efforts in Gaza by immediately ending the blockade and ensure the safe passage of the MV Rachel Corrie on its humanitarian mission to Gaza.

The plight of the Gazans remains of serious concern to the international community, as the widespread condemnation of Israeli actions has shown. It is right and proper that the Assembly adds its voice to those of the British and Irish Governments and the entire international community. The past week's events are the most recent chapter in a never-ending cycle of violence and hatred in the region. The Assembly knows all too well that hatred and aggression reigns in the absence of dialogue that is based on mutual respect and equality. It is precisely because of the history of our own island and the often fractious relationship here that the Assembly is particularly well placed to be a source of inspiration for conflict-ridden societies. We should not fail to appreciate the powerful positive impact that our calls for restraint can have in the global community.

I know that some Members of the Assembly suggest that Israel conducted itself in a proper and correct fashion when dealing with the flotilla. However, I ask them to look around

and see the level of condemnation that exists. An example of such scathing criticism was delivered by the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, who stated that the Israeli Government need to:

“act with restraint and in line with international obligations”.

Using similar language, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, opined:

“Israel has a right ... to defend itself ... but that right does not override and supersede all other rights and the rights of all others.”

However, the condemnation does not end with the two Governments; it extends to the United Nations and its Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who urged Israel to lift the blockade.

I am surprised that the DUP has submitted a petition of concern on a matter that it seemed to indicate is of very little concern. That position is, surely, something of a contradiction.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McHugh: I will give way at the end. I have 10 minutes that I want to use. You can come in after that as a Member.

A further critical point to highlight is that many Israelis have signalled their disquiet with the actions of their own Government. That palpable anger is illustrated no more clearly than in the recent edition of 'The Jerusalem Post', which correctly noted that:

“Negotiation, not confrontation, is the answer”.

That is the crux of the issue. A great many Israelis want peace, but the inconsiderate actions of the present Government, who are seemingly determined to pursue a path of confrontation, are making that prospect more distant. The obvious friction between the White House and the Israeli Government over ongoing settlement activity in east Jerusalem, an occupied territory as a matter of international law, is a further demonstration of the recent inflammatory conduct of the present Israeli Government. Resolving conflict through brute force alone is not a considered strategy, and, all too often, terrorism has been used as a smokescreen to allow the Government to act outside the normally and morally accepted boundaries of the law.

We know from our history that dialogue and discussion lead to more sustainable and advantageous outcomes in the long run. If any part of the world can show how compromise can change hearts and minds, it is here in the North. It should be representatives of the people of these six counties who send the message, simply and clearly, that there is no substitute for dialogue.

A further important issue that must be addressed is the legality of Israel's actions. Contrary to the Israeli Government's protestations that they acted within maritime law, which allowed them to engage with the flotilla, they forget that the flotilla was, in fact, in international waters and had not entered or engaged with the blockade.

The recent Gladstone report, which, to his credit, Irishman Desmond Travers played a significant role in authoring, specifically condemned the blockade of Gaza as a contravention of international law. That is not to ignore the activities of Hamas and the suppression and brutality to which that faction has subjected Gazans, but it underscores the point that a respected group of international jurists reached its own critical conclusions on the matter. When such eminent legal scholars deem the blockade a breach of international law, its enforcement can hardly be justified.

It is necessary to highlight the reasons that people such as our own Mairead Corrigan Maguire have felt compelled to go on that humanitarian mission to distribute aid to the people of Gaza. In the past 24 hours, I have been contacted by many Fianna Fáil members across the North who have relatives or friends who have taken part in that huge humanitarian relief mission, either by land or sea convoy. Indeed, this morning, I spoke to Fianna Fáil parliamentary colleagues who remain concerned by the grave situation.

I have no doubt that that human concern crosses all party political boundaries. First and foremost, it is a tragic story of human suffering. The sad fact is that the activists travel to the Gaza Strip because Israel will not allow adequate resources through the blockade to allow the Palestinian people to rebuild their country, schools and homes. Do not simply take my word for that: groups such as Amnesty International and the United Nations have

criticised the inadequate admittance of needed materials into Gaza.

In common with other democratic forums around the world, the Assembly must take a stand. When it comes to human rights, everybody must stand up and be counted. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Weir: I rise on a sad and disappointing day for the Northern Ireland Assembly. Many people will look at the reconvening of the Assembly for today's proceedings and ask what on earth is going on in Members' minds. What on earth is happening? I will return to that point.

Apart from the soldiers of destiny whom Gerry McHugh spoke about, there are three reasons why the debate is sad and disappointing. First, yet again, a motion has been brought to the House that ignores the complexities of the Middle East. Its biased philosophy is simply, "Let's kick Israel." I have no desire to give greater credibility to the debate by going into details. My party stated its position in the House on Tuesday. The DUP will certainly not jump on the bandwagon and kick Israel. It is noticeable that when Israeli schools are shelled or suicide bombers attack Israeli citizens, not a word is said about it. The debate, therefore, demonstrates that bias further.

Secondly, I must say that if people genuinely care about the Middle East, there is a much better way to show it than through what is, effectively, a debating-society exercise. If the motion is passed, it will not benefit a single Israeli or Palestinian. The genuine suffering that is occurring in many homes throughout the Middle East will not be alleviated one jot. One must ask whether the real motivation behind the motion is column inches in 'The Irish News', a BBC sound bite or a few seconds' mention on Radio Ulster.

When I was in the sixth form, I looked forward to the debating society's meeting every Friday afternoon. I am sure that other Members who are present did the same. Our debates were great fun and great views were expressed. However, with the best will in the world, they were, at the end of the day, utterly meaningless. The Assembly has today descended into being a school debating society rather than —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will not give way. The proposer of the motion did not give way to me.

Given the problems in the Middle East, what we are doing is trite; it shows that the motion does not particularly care. It appears to be a publicity stunt.

2.15 pm

Finally, it is sad and disappointing for the credibility of the Assembly. Many wonder about the key issues facing Northern Ireland: the transfer test, the recession, imminent budget cuts. As highlighted by the proposer of the motion, it is almost nine years since we had a special meeting of the Assembly, but do we actually do anything that affects bread-and-butter issues? Today is not the only opportunity that Members had to put forward a motion: we had a Matters of the Day debate on Gaza a few days ago, and there was an opportunity to put a motion forward to the Business Committee.

Dr Farry: The Member said that this is the first special sitting of the Assembly in nine years. For the record, there were two other special sittings during this mandate, both on financial matters. I think that one was in December 2008 and one in July on a monitoring round. Both were items of Executive Business.

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

Mr Weir: I give way to the Member's superior memory. However, we are having a debate today on something over which, frankly, we have absolutely no control. There are many grave issues facing the world. Will we have a meeting next week on the problems facing North Korea? Will we send a special team out to cap the well in the Gulf? Perhaps we will look at the problems in Zimbabwe? All those motions could be brought forward. Are we going to have a special sitting? No, we are going to grandstand on an issue that we have no control of whatsoever. One of the unfortunate by-products of our peace process is that in the Assembly —

Mr Speaker: As far as possible, we must get back to the motion. I understand that Members might stray slightly from the motion; however, as far as possible, they should link what they say to the motion.

Mr Weir: Are we to debate all the issues of the world? Passing the motion is significant, because we have a slightly inflated opinion in

this country of the key role that we play in world affairs. I can picture the Israeli Cabinet sitting around the table and receiving a phone call. Is it a message from President Obama telling them what to do? No. Is it Hillary Clinton? No. Is it even David Cameron? No. The crucial call is from the Back Bench MLA Gerry McHugh —

Mr Kennedy: Willie Hay.

Mr Weir: — or even our esteemed Speaker. Passing or not passing the motion will be meaningless. It is the wrong motion, at the wrong time, on the wrong place and in the wrong way. For all those reasons, it is clear that the motion is simply a publicity stunt to highlight the issue. It is the wrong thing to do; therefore my party will vote against the motion on Monday.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will start by replying to the previous Member's lengthy contribution about what is debated in the Assembly: the Assembly is the ideal place to have this debate, because the Assembly came into being after a long and bloody conflict on this island. Indeed, it took centuries of conflict to find a peaceful way forward. The Assembly sprang from the Good Friday Agreement, which was a compromise by all sides on deeply held positions on the way forward to bring us all out of conflict. Surely, if a message comes from this Assembly to the warring factions in Israel, Palestine and Gaza that there is an alternative to armed conflict and death and destruction and that they can move forward politically, it is a worthwhile debate.

The Assembly has also been criticised, we must remember, for its numerous private Members' motions, which have no relevance to people's everyday lives, but the structure of the Assembly allows for such debates.

The debate is not about the relationship between the Israeli Government and the Government of the Gaza Strip or the Palestinian Authority. The debate has been brought about by the fact that a flotilla of ships was attacked while bringing humanitarian aid to a part of the world that is under an illegal blockade. The DUP and the other party opposite tell us that they are law and order parties. Do the law and order sections of their party manifestos not apply beyond Aghnacloy, Bessbrook or Larne harbour, or do they believe that citizens' international fundamental rights should be afforded the protection of the UN and other

such institutions? The Gaza Strip is under an illegal blockade.

The ships that were progressing towards Gaza —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way in a moment.

Members will be aware that the ships moving towards Gaza were under the flags of Turkey and several other countries. The ship on which the attack resulted in deaths was flying the Turkish flag on international waters. Those ships were boarded by armed men, and people died. It is against international law to interfere with the free progress of any ship on international waters, and it is certainly against international law to board ships and for people to be killed as a result.

If the parties opposite are the true law and order parties that they tell us they are, they, too, must be concerned about what happened on the high seas in the early hours of Monday morning. They can dismiss that and say that the Assembly has no power and no authority in international matters, but it does. This point relates to my earlier one. The Assembly came about as part of the resolution to a conflict that many people around the world said was insoluble. Those people said that there was no way through, that we were warring factions and that that was all that we did. However, we proved to the world that when people put imagination to the test, when they test their belief system and when they are prepared to make compromises, they can end conflict. It is important that the Assembly send a message to the Israeli Government, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority pleading with them to move forward in a peaceful direction.

We must also send a message to the international community, including the American Government, which were so helpful in our peace process. They, too, need to hear a message that they must redouble their efforts in the Middle East in order to ensure that there is peace in that part of the world. Indeed, we must also send a message to the European Community, which has a favourable relationship with Israel to the detriment of the Palestinian people. The EU tells member states that they must abide by its human rights accord, and yet it allows Israel to flagrantly abuse the human rights of people in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority.

Sinn Féin is on record as saying that there should be a complete end to hostilities and a ceasefire between Hamas and the Israeli armed forces, and that civilians in those regions, be they Israeli, Palestinian or others, should be allowed to go about their daily business without the fear of death. No one on this side of the Chamber is simply saying that the situation is entirely Israel's fault.

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

Mr O'Dowd: We are not here to tell the Israeli and Palestinian people how to resolve their conflict, but we are saying that the conflict can and should be resolved.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Kennedy: I convey my disappointment that today's debate is being held at all. Although I do not question the tragic nature and importance of this week's events, this House is not the correct place to discuss issues of international relations. Initiating the mechanism of an emergency debate on that issue, therefore, in my view, borders on an abuse of an important instrument at the House's disposal. We have a sovereign Parliament to debate the foreign policy of this country. There has just been an election to that Parliament, and that is where Members of this House, although I do not agree with the principle of double-jobbing, can make their opinions known on that important issue. The motion smacks of a publicity stunt more than a genuine attempt to make progress on the issue. I ask the Members who tabled and signed the motion what effective outcome they hope to deliver today.

Yesterday, Mr Sammy Wilson announced that public expenditure reductions will be the biggest since the 1970s. I am not convinced that the House has made the necessary preparations to make the right choices to deal with that. It appears that local government reform and, certainly, education are in complete disarray. One week ago today, a man was shot dead in broad daylight in our capital city. However, there was no motion to recall the House —

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind all Members to try to focus on the motion.

Mr Kennedy: The motion highlights the false position in which we find ourselves on this particular issue.

The problems facing the Middle East are complex and historical. Whether we like it or not, those problems will not be resolved by our local politicians making simplistic comments that are based on inconclusive information. Members of this House, more than that of any other, should recognise the negative impact of people's intervening in a region's affairs without full knowledge of the difficulties and circumstances that exist. In short, the motion has the potential to do more harm than good. I fear that it will serve only to reduce the complexities to mere platitudes, and, more than anything, it will illustrate and highlight the differences between Members of this House.

I will talk briefly about the motion. We all recognise that what happened this week was a tragedy. As I said on Tuesday, I support the calls for a UN independent investigation into the matter. Such an investigation can and will uncover the facts and the truth, a truth that may be very different from that which some people in this House and other places assume it to be. We must always remember that Israel has the right to defend itself and that there are those who are clearly intent on wiping the state of Israel and its people off the map.

Extremism and hatred from any quarter make relations extremely difficult.

Mr Weir: If I were to focus on the wording of the motion, I would ask whether there is not a degree of irony, verging on rank hypocrisy, in the party opposite showing genuine concern — rightly — for the fate of Nobel laureate Mairead Corrigan. Indeed, had that party shown proper concern for her views 30 years ago, a lot more people would be alive in the Province.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kennedy: The Member's point was well made.

However, all states have a duty to respect international law. All responsible people, including Nobel laureates, have a responsibility to take actions that will not exacerbate the situation in the Middle East or, indeed, put their own or other people's lives in danger. As we go forward, we must ensure that our comments do not fuel hatred or hinder efforts to find a lasting solution. The incident highlights the underlying need to find a lasting solution to the complex issues that exist in the Middle East among the sons and daughters of Abraham. The British Government, the American Administration and

the United Nations are keen to see progress on long-term security for the state of Israel and some sort of acceptable entity for the Palestinian people. We should support them in their efforts, but we should deal with our issues as a priority.

Mr McDevitt: I rise to speak as a humanist and an internationalist, who is standing, like all Members, in a city that is home to Gentiles, Jews and people from the Arab world, the great faiths that are at the heart of the conflict that we are debating today. It is appropriate that we stand, with the rest of the international community, united in concern for and condemnation of what is happening on the international waters off Gaza.

We are following in the footsteps of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1860, and we are standing in solidarity with people who call our region home and who are taking a stand for humanitarian values. It is simply not the case that the blockade of Gaza is justifiable in any way, and it is entirely appropriate that we should seek to show that solidarity.

2.30 pm

In showing solidarity, we must remember the complexities of the Middle East. I am privileged and honoured every year to join with members of the Jewish community in this city during Holocaust memorial day to remember that many millions of people of that faith lost their lives at the hands of evil people. Those who lost their lives include the grandmother of Gerald Kaufman, a great Member of Parliament and a former Minister of the Crown, who in 2009, speaking in the House of Commons, said that his grandmother:

“did not die to provide cover for Israeli soldiers murdering Palestinian grandmothers in Gaza.”

The current Israeli Government ruthlessly and cynically exploit the continuing guilt among Gentiles over the slaughter of Jews in the Holocaust as justification for their murder of Palestinians. The implication is that Jewish lives are precious, but the lives of Palestinians —

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that sometimes it is not easy, but once again, I remind Members to try, as far as possible, to focus on the motion that is before the House.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I believe that that point is very pertinent to the motion

because it goes to the heart of the crisis that is unfolding. The question is whether a security solution can bring about peace; whether a better future can be built for the people of Palestine and Israel through security mechanisms; and whether the Israeli defence forces are the appropriate vehicle through which to seek to counter what Israel perceives as the threat from Hamas. We know from our history and our experience that that is not so.

The blockade of Gaza is illegal, and this is the only way that we will be able to give hope to the people of the Middle East, who look to this Building as a place that has worked, as a place that has crossed the Rubicon between violence and peace. We must acknowledge that in coming here today, we are doing not just the right thing for those whom we represent and those who are very concerned about what is happening in their homelands; we are doing the right thing by ourselves. It is not just us who see the pointlessness of a security response to a political crisis. President Mandela saw it in his day. When he talked about the soldiers of peace he reminded us all that security does not substitute politics and it never will. I am glad that we are able to meet today and that we are able to show solidarity with those who are on a vessel under an Irish flag.

Mrs D Kelly: Following on from the member's comments about a security clampdown and human rights abuses, is it not the case that it was only when the plight of the people of the North of Ireland was brought to an international stage that we saw the suspension of this House, the ending of discrimination and some of the human rights abuses that people here suffered beginning to be put right?

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

Mr McDevitt: The power of politics is unmatched. There is simply no greater force on this globe than the force of politics, and we are the embodiment of that. Today, the question for us is simple: do we stand united in humanitarian concern, not for the regimes, not for the Israeli Government or the Hamas Government of Gaza, but for the voiceless, marginalised, poor people on both sides of that border who are the pawns in this conflict?

Do we show ourselves able to stand on the right side of the United Nations with our two great nations, the Irish and the British nations, both

of which stand against the blockade? Do we send a powerful signal — a signal that will ripple across the seas between us and the West Bank and Gaza — that it is through politics, the power of persuasion, the strength of argument and the opportunity to change societies for the better that institutions like this have been created for the people of this land? That will be the transformative change that the people of Gaza, the West Bank and Israel need.

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

Mr McDevitt: I have little else to add, except to ask those who submitted the petition of concern to think about the positive signal that we could send by uniting in our humanitarian interest.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party supports the wording of the motion, although we do not endorse everything that has been said so far in support of it or the balance of the debate.

Mr McHugh referred to the Gladstone report on the Middle East. That should be the Goldstone report, named after Richard Goldstone from South Africa. Interestingly, of course, William Gladstone pioneered the concept of humanitarian intervention.

The Alliance Party is somewhat sceptical about the merits of having a special sitting today to discuss this matter. We are not sure whether public opinion is behind it. Although we acknowledge that, as a devolved Assembly, we have no direct responsibility for international affairs, it is important that we look beyond our shores and understand what is happening elsewhere in the world. In particular, we must try to share Northern Ireland's lessons with other societies that are experiencing conflict. Of course, we must qualify that by saying that there are positive and negative lessons from Northern Ireland and that no two situations are the same. Nevertheless, a world of good practice is building up, and Northern Ireland can play a role in that. We should also acknowledge that, although we are discussing the situation in Gaza and the wider context of the Middle East, there are many other places in the world where conflicts are occurring and humanitarian situations unfolding, with serious loss of life. Our thoughts as world citizens should be with them as well.

I want to make a number of points about the motion. First, I acknowledge that the

interception of the flotilla by the Israeli Defense Forces was illegal. The concept of a maritime blockade is at best dubious in international law. It can be imposed by the UN Security Council as part of a resolution or a sanctions regime. However, when an individual state does it, it is acting on the basis of article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, which gives states the right to self-defence. However, article 51 is open to different interpretations that are hotly contested by international lawyers. In any event, we now have a UN Security Council statement on the issue that supersedes any individual interpretation by a member state. It is obvious that Israel needs to heed the collective view of international public opinion and the international community of states on that matter.

Leaving that aside, it is clear that the use of force to board the ships was disproportionate. We are happy to condemn that use of force accordingly and recognise that there have been similar incidents in which excessive force has been used by the state of Israel against the Palestinian people. Of course, we must qualify that by acknowledging that many attacks have been inflicted on the state of Israel. We are not putting forward a one-way analysis. We also recognise that there is a right for humanitarian assistance to go to Gaza, leaving aside the issue of the illegality of any blockade.

We cannot view the wider question of Israel and Palestine in black and white. It is not productive for parties in the Chamber to, in effect, adopt particular sides in what is a complicated and multifaceted dispute. Clearly, there is considerable support for the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination, particularly in the aftermath of the Six Day War of 1967 and the creation of the occupied territories. It is also important that we recognise Israel's right to exist as a state. It has had a siege mentality throughout its history. Sometimes its actions have been counterproductive, but, equally, Israel has often been vilified, isolated internationally and pushed into a corner. It is important that we support the resolution of a conflict that has major consequences throughout the Middle East and further afield, particularly in the Islamic world. We should offer whatever support we can, particularly to the moderate voices among the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

For many years, the contours of a settlement in Northern Ireland were clear; the real frustration was getting people from A to B. Similarly,

the solution to the situation with Israel and Palestine is a two-state one, with an Israeli and a Palestinian state having mutual recognition and returning refugees.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: We should give our support to a sustainable settlement in that region.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo.

Sinn Féin supports the motion. We are thankful that one Member has taken the time to ask others to debate the situation. I apologise for being late for the initial contributions. There was bad traffic on the Westlink, and I was travelling from the funeral of Barry McElduff's father. I send our sympathy to him and his family.

This week's events highlighted the need to end the blockade and siege of Gaza. Unfortunately, it took the incident on a flotilla, in which people were killed and injured by the Israeli Defense Forces, to highlight that. One and a half million people in Gaza are being denied access to proper medical aid, basic food and water and other amenities that they need to live their lives like any other citizen in the world.

The Israeli bombardment of Gaza destroyed hospitals, schools, homes, shops and other essential facilities. Since January 2009, not a single brick or bag of cement has been allowed into Gaza to begin the necessary reconstruction work. That is the context in which people took to the high seas; that is the context in which people lost their lives. It has been interesting to follow the events in the world media. People all over the world have noted Israel's total disregard for all United Nations resolutions and international law, although there are people here who seem to give Israel their blind support.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened carefully to all the Members who spoke. I wanted to be present to hear some positive comments. I was in Israeli company in Germany one year when a bomb in a discotheque killed many youngsters. I spent two years of my working life in Germany, travelling through the village of Belsen every morning and every afternoon, so I think that we have to set the problem in a wider context, Mr McCartney. Hopefully, we can find a solution.

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

Mr McCartney: There is a wider context. However, what happened in Belsen and what Mr Robinson experienced should not be used to underwrite Israel's total disregard for international law and basic human rights. People are being denied the right to import bricks and mortar to build hospitals; that is what the Israeli Government are doing. Using the holocaust to justify Israel's disregard of human rights is missing the point. That is what we heard from the Benches that are now empty: total disregard for basic human rights and total support for the Israeli Government, irrespective of what they do. It is what was said today and what was said by many Members during Matters of the Day on Tuesday.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member accept that I have not made any statement that would support what he has just said? I simply pointed out two facts that help to set the context in which this unfortunate situation is unfolding.

Mr McCartney: Absolutely; and I hope that I have not said anything that suggests that Mr Robinson supported that view. Unfortunately, in Tuesday's debate some Members more or less said that Israel had the right to do whatever it wanted, and they justified that by listing some of the points that Mr Robinson mentioned.

The context of the attack on the flotilla must be seen in that light. Israel's total disregard led people to do what they did. I welcome the return of the Irish citizens who were arrested illegally and are now on their way home. The symbolism of people trying to break the blockade by land and, recently, by sea has the same effect as seeing the people who stood against apartheid. The same arguments were made when sportsmen and sportswomen refused to go to South Africa and people refused to trade with South Africa. Some people told them that that was foolish and wrong. However, the South Africans, who now have a democracy, are the first to appreciate the actions of the people who stood up and broke the economic sanctions. Not yielding to another Government ensured the fall of apartheid, and that is what we have to do.

2.45 pm

What has happened in the state of Israel, particularly in Gaza and less so in the West Bank, is apartheid, at this time in particular.

Some 1.5 million people are held in a siege. Nothing is allowed in or out. It is recognised internationally that only a quarter of the minimum aid requirement is being allowed in under the control of the Israeli Government. That is why people on board the Rachel Corrie are trying to break the blockade, and it is why it is important that we give our support.

People may ask whether it is necessary that we give our support today or at another time. However, international issues have been debated in the Assembly before, and I did not hear any objections then. It is right that we debate it today. People who are involved in a struggle to end injustice, no matter where they are in the world, appreciate support from whatever source. I have absolutely no doubt that the people on board the flotilla and the people of Gaza will be very appreciative if the Assembly passes a motion that supports them and stands in solidarity with them.

Mr A Maginness: In 1976, I supported Mairead Corrigan, as she was then, in the campaign for peace and justice in Northern Ireland. She stood courageously against paramilitary violence, particularly the IRA violence that deprived her of relatives. She formed the Peace People subsequently. I agree with Mr Weir that, if people had listened to Mairead Corrigan in 1976, more people would be alive today and we would have had a more peaceful society. Alas, Mr Weir is not here now, although he should be. If people listen to Mairead Corrigan Maguire now, perhaps lives will be saved in the near future. It is a pity that people such as Mr Weir will not take that point on board.

The motion is very sensible and goes to the very centre of the problem: the blockade of Gaza. That blockade is illegal and contrary to resolution 1860 of the United Nations Security Council. It, therefore, behoves the Israeli state to end the blockade of humanitarian supplies to Gaza. I was invited to Gaza and spent three very disturbing days there in December 2005. I experienced the deprivation of the people of Gaza at first hand, so I feel very passionate about their suffering. That was before the official blockade of Gaza, but, in effect, there has been a blockade ever since the Israelis withdrew from Gaza.

It is important that the people of Gaza are given the opportunity to restore their lives to normality. When I visited Gaza, Fatah was the

governing party. Hamas won the elections legitimately shortly after that. However, Hamas subsequently expelled Fatah and its supporters illegitimately, and it effectively established one-party rule in that part of Palestine. Therefore, I have no time for those who support Hamas because it has established its own dictatorship in that part of Palestine. However, it is right and proper that the people of Gaza are put centre stage and are supported by all of us. We are right to debate the situation, because we have created a model for conflict resolution that the rest of the world looks at and admires. It is right for us to speak to the people of the Middle East and to render them some little support in their attempts to find some type of political solution.

I regard myself as a friend of the Palestinian people. I also regard myself as a friend of the Israeli people, and I have spent a considerable time in Israel. I do not come to this debate with some naked bias. I want to see a peaceful resolution along the lines of a two-state solution. If we support the motion, we will add significantly to the international discourse and debate, and the attempts by people such as Senator George Mitchell, who did so much for us here, to find a peaceful resolution to the historical problems that have bedevilled the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. I want to see the peoples of Israel and Palestine live together in peace. I hope that, by passing the motion, we can contribute to that process.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also support the motion and welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I am disappointed. I thought in my naivety that people could put their individual political viewpoints and party politics aside to look at this matter in a humanitarian way. However, I want to illustrate how the people of Gaza have been living and then talk about some of my experiences in Palestine last year.

The people of Gaza have been enduring the blockade for several years. Conditions worsened after the bombing that took place at the end of 2008, which lasted for 22 days. All Members became familiar with that. We all saw it flash across our television screens, and we saw the human devastation and the carnage. When that bombing raid ended, more than 1,000 people, including 300 children, lay dead. Even more were horrifically injured. We need to bear it in mind that the people of Gaza have been suffering for a long time.

I will describe some of the conditions that the people of Gaza are living in. Between 90% and 95% of the water in Gaza is unfit to drink. Israel's continuing blockade prevents the importation of urgently needed materials to repair the sewage treatment works. That has left the drinking water unclean, causing major problems, particularly for young children. Young children have died as a result of the lack of pure drinking water.

International aid and various other humanitarian workers have said for years that aid supplies are all that stand between the vast majority of the people of Gaza and destitution. That is worth remembering. It is essential that that aid gets through.

Gaza has an 80% unemployment rate, and it has a black market economy. The destruction of infrastructure due to the bombing has led to an even greater humanitarian plight. I have followed what the aid workers have been saying for several years. This will become a human crisis such as the world has not seen before if something is not done quickly.

Some Members have asked why the blockade exists. However, the punitive nature of that blockade needs to be exposed. For example, fresh meat, newspapers and canned food are banned, whereas frozen meat and fresh fruit are allowed in. Why are certain foodstuffs banned? That is certainly a punitive measure. Clothes are permitted, but not the fabric for making them. We need to look into those issues to understand the depth of moral depravity behind the attack on the ships this week.

It is crucial that the aid, which includes fuel, electricity and other basic necessities, gets to the people. Seriously ill Palestinian patients, including many children and some people with cancer, cannot go to hospitals outside Gaza to get the treatment they need, so they are dying. They cannot leave to get the treatment; they are not allowed out by the Israeli authorities.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No, I am not giving way. People have said enough, so I am saying my piece.

There are 80,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, 390 of whom are children as young as 13. The older ones who have been in a while have not seen their parents or other family members for four or five years, simply because the Israeli

authorities have an illegal blockade and will not let the people in and out.

I visited the West Bank and Jerusalem last year. I witnessed at first hand Jewish settlers putting Palestinian families, including young children, out on the streets to live in tents. I had conversations with different people, and one that really had an impact on me was with some Israeli soldiers. Some of them were quite young. We have to remember that those soldiers do not have a choice.

Mr Speaker: The Member should bring her remarks to a close.

Ms J McCann: They do not have a choice about whether they go to war. That has caused those people problems as well. We need to put aside our party politics, look at this in a humanitarian way and support today's motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It would probably take a lot longer than 10 minutes to respond to everything that has been said, but I ask people to support the motion. It was put forward genuinely by Dr Kieran Deeny and me. Anyone can go and ask him for his side — he has his surgery today, which is why he is not here with me to speak on the motion. I also give my respects to Barry McElduff's father, whom I knew. That is a sad situation for him. I just wanted to say that before I wind up the debate.

I am sorry to say that the debate was, as usual, divided. I gave the reasons why I did this: it is about saving lives. Almost every Member who spoke talked about the humanitarian side of the motion. Danny Kennedy and Peter Weir were outspoken from an opposite point of view about the fact that we have no control over the matter. They said that we do not have a say because it is international business, it is world politics and it is not ours. However, we were happy to take part in world politics from President Clinton back to the Irish Government on many occasions, some of them only a few months ago, to try to keep our place on the road. There was no difficulty with anyone going along with that.

Nevertheless, this issue is world politics. We are big enough in this place to wish to be involved in the conflicts of anyone around the world. We should not minimise ourselves, and there are few Members who feel that we are so small an Assembly that we cannot have our say about any issue that is outside or inside of our

doors. Many day-to-day, bread and butter issues could be dealt with on the basis on which I brought this motion forward if people believe that they are not being dealt with adequately in other parts of our day-to-day workings. Given some of the views out there this morning, it appears to be the case that we are not dealing fully with everything that they want to see resolved. Many people out there are not sure that we have resolved our conflicts let alone have the ability to deal with anything else. That issue must be dealt with by Members in their own localities.

3.00 pm

Some Members' comments were positive. John O'Dowd covered quite a few important issues: the conflict, the Good Friday Agreement and how our compromises are an example to others. That message gets to the door of every Government and anyone who aspires to be in government. The Israelis, Hamas and anyone else in conflict watch what goes on in places such as here. We may be one of the best examples of success in past years. People would have looked at this area a few years ago and said, "This is hopeless. Let us forget about it; we should not even bother going there". That is no longer the case. We have changed and are an example to others, but we should also be able and unafraid to use our learning and experience for the benefit of others.

As has been said in the debate, not everything is known about what happened during the boarding of the flotilla. It seemed at first to have been an air attack, but stun grenades and other means of attacking the ship were launched from the sea rather than the air to quell resistance before the ships were boarded. I believe that we will never know the full details of what took place.

My precise and most important reason for tabling the motion was the involvement of Irish and, indeed, British people in the aid convoy and on the MV Rachel Corrie, which is due to attempt to dock and offload its medical aid in Gaza imminently. The motion is my attempt to raise the issue here in an effort to, perhaps, save lives or make the Israeli Government consider adopting a different approach to the situation, even in the short term.

Conall McDevitt said that we must stand with the rest of the world and show that we support the United Nations in its stance. That is a vital point: speaking out, as we can, is the right

thing for us to do for ourselves and on behalf of others. We have been on the international stage. People have watched us there and continue to watch what we do. We should not underestimate our ability to deliver for other places.

Members, particularly Jennifer McCann, provided examples of what is happening in Gaza. The Israelis will not allow 2,000 items, including pencils, pens and various materials, into Gaza on a normal medical aid run, let alone allowing in cement for the rebuilding of a place that, as Jennifer McCann said, was bombed to bits. If all 2,000 items were removed from a ship, there would be precious little left. I wonder just how much would be left on those aid ships.

Anybody should be able to support, without difficulty, calls for action on other issues such as drinking water and the human crisis threatening the ability of hospitals to look after the sick. Alban Maginness and the SDLP have been very supportive of the motion. Stephen Farry and other Alliance Party Members have also supported it, albeit in a more cautious way. The problem caused by some Members' opposition to the motion is that it shows the international community and the community here that we are divided on an issue that is purely and simply about helping others.

Mr Kennedy: I hope that the Member has understood the point made, certainly by me, that the Gaza situation is complex and needs to be taken very seriously indeed. Diplomatic efforts are the best way to resolve the matter, because further actions might exacerbate an already delicate situation. That is why we question the wisdom of additional ships entering the zone, particularly as they are certain in the knowledge that the Israeli Government will not allow them to proceed.

Mr McHugh: I take the Member's points on board. However, I assure him that, in this instance, the Israelis probably did not expect that world opinion would be against them or that their actions would generate so much bad press. That reaction has had a great effect on them. There have been plenty of attempts to achieve a diplomatic resolution to the problems, but all have failed.

Rather than causing that community to consider a different way forward, as we are doing here today, the blockades harden support for Hamas's position. Although there are entrenched positions on both sides, the Israelis

are in the position of power. It would, therefore, be easier for them to show greater willingness to change their attitude than has been the case so far. The widespread coverage of the situation will bring home that point to them.

I thank all Members for their comments and for taking the time to come back to the Assembly on a Friday to discuss the matter. I assure Members that it was not a cynical exercise, and I welcome the views of those who want a proper resolution to the situation. Everyone must do their best, and I hope that today's debate will benefit everyone.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that a valid petition of concern has been presented in relation to the motion. Therefore, the vote will be the first item of business on Monday 7 June 2010.

Adjourned at 3.07 pm.