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Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 9 March 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that a valid petition of concern was presented on Tuesday 8 March in relation to the Final Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill. That means that the vote on the Bill will be on a cross-community basis, and it will take place today.

Executive Committee Business

Budget 2011-15: Programme for Expenditure

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to seven hours for the debate. The Minister will have up to 90 minutes to propose and to make a winding-up speech, which he can allocate at his own discretion. 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 are called to speak will have 10 minutes. Given the length of the debate, I propose to suspend the House at around 1.00 pm for one hour.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 7 March 2011.

I thank you for allowing one hour for lunch; I thought that I was going to be incarcerated here for seven hours, although I could probably afford to do that. I hope that I have the right speech today, as well.

We find ourselves at the final stage of the Budget process. The process has been long and arduous, but in many ways it is the most important single task that the House has discharged over the past four years. The contrast between the opening and closing days of this Assembly could hardly be greater when it comes to the fiscal environment. In 2007, there was a misplaced faith in the belief that economic growth was constant and that public expenditure would continue to flow from Westminster, growing in real terms from

year to year. Now we find ourselves having to construct a Budget for Northern Ireland that has been framed by the austerity plans of the UK Government.

Although the citizens of Northern Ireland had no role to play in the various excesses of the financial markets over recent years, we do now have to address the consequences of those excesses. Those consequences are imposed in real terms, through public expenditure cuts on devolved Administrations in the United Kingdom. The Executive have not imposed those cuts, despite what some Members have been suggesting recently. The cuts have come from the UK Conservatives and their associates. This is not the Budget that any Finance Minister would like to deliver. With constrained resources, I have, with my Executive colleagues, explored every conceivable option to bring additional revenue and to impose stringent efficiency programmes on the delivery of front line public services.

Some Members were quick to rush to the media last Friday after I presented the Budget outcome. There were claims that it was unimaginative and false. In my view, conveying such a message to the public does a disservice, in so far as it undermines confidence and undermines the attempts that we are making to kick-start the economy after the recession. Mind you, for all that people have criticised the Budget as being unimaginative and false and not allocating money in the right way, I am still waiting to hear some suggestions from them as to what alternatives they would bring forward to ensure that the extra money that they want for services is made available. Maybe I will hear those today.

I have said many times that I welcome all new ideas, but, sadly, nothing realistic has emerged from the loudest critics in the Assembly. Any ideas that have emerged are contradictory or display a profound degree of ignorance of the public expenditure regime that devolved Administrations have to operate within. Unlike my critics, I do not have the luxury of being able to construct a Budget that is not earthed in reality. Her Majesty's Treasury would have a word or two to say about that, and I do not think that people in Northern Ireland would be happy if we simply pushed through a Budget based on fantasy figures that unravels further down the line. We owe people a Budget that does not go in that direction.

The defining backdrop to setting the Budget was always going to be the block grant that was set through the Barnett formula. Therefore, the starting point for the Executive in constructing the Budget was the cumulative £4 billion real terms reduction over four years as announced in the UK spending review last October. Since then, I have, through bilateral meetings with Ministers and the ministerial review group, sought to maximise the spending power available to the Executive. Some decisions have not been easy, such as increasing the rate burden on domestic and non-domestic properties. Other decisions will take time to materialise, such as the £20 million per annum dividend from Belfast Harbour Commissioners. Other revenue proposals appear to have genuine merit, but Ministers will require some time to assess their feasibility and the possibility of bringing forward legislation. When those materialise, and only then, will those funds be factored into future monitoring round allocations.

After all of those issues were taken into consideration, it became a question of how to apportion resources across Executive Departments. Some Members have ridiculed the Executive for approving a Budget without a Programme for Government. Again, that is a rather uneducated and naive view, because the Executive are clear that growing the economy is the only policy route available to us to improve the wealth and well-being of all our people. A productive, educated and employed population alleviates so many other expenditure pressures in areas such as health, welfare and social housing.

There was, however, an acceptance that the public have high expectations when it comes to delivery of health services in Northern Ireland. The Health Minister has decided to make health provision a political football in the context of the Budget. He talks repeatedly about the decline in service provision but somehow fails to make a connection between that decline and his four-year tenure of office.

Over the last four years, the Executive have put more money into health than any other public service, and it will continue to do so. At present, health spending accounts for 41% of the total planned current expenditure in 2010-11 and by 2014-15, that figure will have risen to 44.3%. We have also given the health sector greater protection than it has in any other region of the United Kingdom over this spending review period. The final Budget allocation, of a further

£189 million of additional spending power confirms that health spending will definitely grow at a faster rate than in any other region of the United Kingdom.

In the light of that, it seems incredible that the Health Minister talks about insolvency and chapter 11, although what relevance the United States commercial bankruptcy code has I do not know. I am concerned only about the public service in Northern Ireland, and I still find it disgraceful that the Health Minister can seek to justify his action — or rather, his inaction — in the media when he has never approached his Executive colleagues with plans to make Health Service delivery more efficient in Northern Ireland. His own research, commissioned from McKinsey and Company at a cost of over £300,000 has highlighted a number of actions that could save hundreds of millions of pounds. What has he done with this work? Nothing.

The final Budget also sees notable additional funding allocated to the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development and, in total, the Executive have dispersed an additional £388 million. The two main sources of additional funding are the release of the uncommitted £100 million that has been held at the centre since the draft Budget for further possible invest-to-save projects; from the decision to create an overcommitment of £30 million per annum, both capital and current; and the balance of additional spending power comes from miscellaneous items, such as additional rate revenue generated by greater collection activity by Land and Property Services (LPS) and the higher GDP deflator assumptions.

Some of those additional funds have allowed the Executive to address many of the concerns expressed during the consultation period. However I am not trying to mask the fact that this final Budget signals a coming period of constraint in public service provision. The cards we are dealt by Westminster mean that the Northern Ireland Executive, just like Scotland and Wales, has no choice. Therefore, the strategic goal for the Executive is to try to insulate key public services from the worst ravages of the UK coalition cuts. We have done so in this final Budget.

There is much work for the incoming Executive and Assembly to do in continuing the work of

the Budget review group, bringing online the other deliverable revenue streams, rationalising a number of arm's-length bodies and driving forward the efficiency agenda — all issues that will improve the financial position of the Executive. The new Assembly and Executive can continue to improve the economic environment, making it fairer for our small and medium-sized enterprises. For example, Members will be aware that I want to rebalance the system of business rates. My Department will also bring forward proposals to significantly extend the small business rate relief scheme from April 2012. While the detail of this has yet to be finalised and will be subject to consultation, I hope to be able to more than double the total amount of overall relief that is provided, while increasing the numbers that are eligible by around a third.

I will be looking to cross-subsidise that by applying a levy to large high-value retail properties, the majority of which are out-of-town properties, but which will also include some very large stores in city centres. This will ensure that more small businesses get help while increased support is provided by a sector that has not fared too badly in comparison.

In conclusion, there is much work to progress over the coming months and years. However, this Budget for 2011-15 sets the framework for moving forward.

10.45 am

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

"calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15, as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 7 March 2011, by allocating 38 per cent of the additional £432 million resources identified for key public services (as indicated in the Minister's statement of 4 March 2011) to year 1 revenue for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and further calls for the spending requirements of DHSSPS to be reviewed annually thereafter over the Budget period and for the balance (62 per cent) of those additional resources to be allocated towards key public services by agreement of the new Executive."

These are Budget proposals tabled in a unique fiscal circumstance, not least because of Her Majesty's coalition Government's determination to reduce, over the next four years, the

unacceptable size of the national debt caused by Labour's reckless plundering of reserves, its cycle of poor fiscal management and the encouragement of casino-playing banks.
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: I have always said that for Northern Ireland to play its full role in contributing to reducing the national debt we are required to show our people that in asking them to take the pain from austerity measures we have a duty to demonstrate our plans to move from pain to gain. Regrettably, the DUP/Sinn Féin cut proposals introduced here last Friday fall well short of showing the public how today's pain can be turned into tomorrow's gain. Put bluntly, there is no plan here, and that is why I am proposing this amendment. The proposals, supported by a majority vote in the Executive, point clearly to the pre-negotiated joined-up intentions of DUP and Sinn Féin Ministers to cut and slash and are purely for narrow party electioneering. There is no plan in that either. Those are not proposals for a Budget in the real sense. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: Rather, they are based entirely on statements of intent that are in themselves based on wing and prayer assumptions that cannot be stood over, are not proven to be deliverable and have been effectively cut to ribbons by a growing list of notable economists and other bodies, such as Age NI, the Royal College of Nursing, UNISON, the Construction Employers Federation, the CBI and NIPSA.

If this debate were about a proper Budget, there would be a Programme for Government underpinning it, with a proper, collectively agreed, set of priorities for the next four years. However, we do not have a Programme for Government in front of us today copper-fastening agreed priorities. This is budgeting on the hoof, and it is very untidy. The outcome of the way that this dysfunctional Executive do their business proves to the Assembly that they are not working for the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, although very disappointing, it was not surprising to find a comprehensive live list detailing DUP/Sinn Féin cuts in last Friday's statement from the Finance Minister. Those cuts are not for us to support. We in the Ulster Unionist Party are concerned most of all with delivering the people's priorities, and chief among those priorities is spending on health services. Ownership of the cuts,

therefore, belongs only to the DUP and Sinn Féin. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: Given the thrust of the cuts impact, the Ulster Unionist amendment seeks to return some sanity to the House today. I urge the House to rethink this matter before the unthinkable happens and decisions are taken that fail to protect the delivery of health and social services to all our communities, resulting in public outrage and deep despair. Health and social services are the people's priority, and today, we can identify with the people by making that our priority, too.

It was inevitable that the Health Minister, regardless of party affiliation, would have to articulate the facts as presented to him. Our Minister should expect to do so without the invective and abuse that he has taken on this matter, which has been disgraceful to say the least.

The man in the hot seat, Minister McGimpsey, has put the issues on the record for the public. He asked people whether they would prefer an Omagh bypass or a new local hospital in Omagh. He asked whether they wanted a new radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin or a new road between Strabane and Dungannon. He questioned whether a sports facility should be refurbished or whether we should build instead a new maternity unit at the Royal Hospital. He warns that all those capital projects are still at risk and cannot be delivered under the current circumstances. He argues, and has argued well, that we need £200 million next year to balance the books but are getting £45 million. Quite simply, he says, the Health Service is broke. He concludes — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: He concludes that he cannot find that amount of money and will not be able to pay the bills.

He has warned that 4,000 jobs may have to go, and that still stands, given the Budget that we have. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: Put succinctly, those are the stark choices facing Northern Ireland people today. If those choices are not faced up to, the tide of public anger will be impossible to contain. The approach to the situation adopted

by those who have already voted three times against the health budget in this Assembly is a deep disappointment to the more than 78,000 people who work in the Health Service and their dependants, let alone the hundreds of thousands of patients. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber knows one of those patients, and we are letting them down. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: I contend that support for the Budget as it stands is a rejection of health as the people's priority. That support delivers on nothing, spins everything and is governing sloppily. In an own goal, self-interested, behind closed doors mentality, that is what we have stooped to.

What matters in this House are the people's priorities. At the head of those priorities is our National Health Service. Go out onto the streets and ask the people what public service really matters to them and they will answer clearly and unambiguously; the Health Service. That is the same Health Service that has been repeatedly criticised and is under attack from those proposing this Budget. The Ulster Unionist amendment reflects the people's priorities on health.

The Budget is challenging for everyone. Few will escape its painful impacts. Meeting the family budget, educating our children, protecting jobs and creating new employment across a host of areas will all be hit hard by this Budget. However, nowhere will the impact have more immediate effect than crunching as it does the delivery of our Health Service.

As Members would expect of me, I have, over the months, challenged the Health Minister on his figures and assertions that the National Health Service in Northern Ireland faces insolvency in a matter of weeks. That is what the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's (DHSSPS) accounting officer has told the Minister. That is what the public are aware of. The strength of the case he makes is compelling and of such consequence that the House simply cannot default on advising the Finance Minister to responsibly favour today the amendment in my name and that of Tom Elliott, and, moreover, to secure it in all our names.

The £432 million that has been mentioned has not been included in or formed part of any obligatory public consultation exercise. It was good to see that money unveiled last Friday in

the Minister's statement. However, that gives us only today as the first opportunity for the House to consider and debate the allocations. The amendment will assist the House to do exactly that, by putting forward the proposition to allocate 38% of that new money to the Health Department in year 1 revenue columns to avoid insolvency and to give the Department the cash that it needs to meet its obligations in 2011-12. The 38% figure, which is some £165 million, also places an onus on the Department to step up to the plate with extra savings of its own. Those savings would tighten the Department's belt.

By supporting the amendment, the Assembly would be saying and doing two things to help our Health Service. First, let the House recognise the urgent need for cash. Secondly, let us knuckle down together in the interests of the people and our Health Service. That approach is not incorporated in the Budget. We must do that, and we can do better. Let us do better. *[Interruption.]*

Lord Empey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is this debate going to be punctuated by P1 and P2 people behaving in the way that they are and sniping at every Member who speaks?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. Let me assure you and the whole House that that will not be the case.

Ms Ritchie: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the first "Assembly" and insert

"notes that the Budget 2011-15 is not based on any up-to-date Programme for Government; recognises the need to provide a more transparent and detailed breakdown of expenditure proposals over the four-year period as highlighted in the consultation process; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15 to include a strategy to raise additional revenue and capital resources, to abolish the social investment fund and to reallocate the £80 million from that fund and any additional resources raised to provide for:

significant interventions to grow the private sector;

public sector reform and new models of asset management to rebalance the economy;

increased investment in job creation, particularly in construction, renewables, ICT, tourism and the agrifood sector;

adequate funding to support front-line health services and to build more social houses;

an adequate four-year allocation for the social protection fund to protect vulnerable people from the impact of welfare cuts;

greater support for the school building and maintenance programmes;

a guarantee that any public sector redundancies will not be compulsory; and

support for universities so that student fee increases become unnecessary."

I am conscious that SDLP amendments to Budget legislation have had an interesting recent history in the House. Members will recall that the House debated an SDLP amendment to the draft Budget Vote on Account on 14 February. Among other things, the SDLP amendment called for more spending on health to protect front line services; more resources for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to avoid any suggestion of a hike in student fees; and more for education and job creation. Disappointingly, but, I regret to say, not surprisingly, the SDLP amendment was attacked by the DUP and Sinn Féin authors of the draft Budget. The SDLP was lambasted, not only for having the temerity to question the DUP/Sinn Féin Budget at all, but for believing that more money could possibly be made available for public services. Indeed, the First Minister had indicated earlier that the Health Minister's dissatisfaction was obscene.

Fast-forward 18 days, and the Finance Minister, in his statement on the final Budget, cheerfully announced more money for health, DEL and education. SDLP proposals that were dismissed and rejected out of hand by DUP/Sinn Féin only 18 days previously were announced triumphantly.

This Budget fails the people of Northern Ireland. It is a formula for thousands of job losses and will heap a mountain of misery on vulnerable households. It punishes low-paid workers, students, teachers, schoolchildren, the construction industry and those who depend on our health service. It crudely dismisses the advice of all independent commentators. It is a 1970s Tory cuts Budget from two parties still rooted in 1970s politics. The DUP/Sinn Féin authors of the Budget have taken a completely defeatist approach when it comes to cuts. They tell us that London has handed us a settlement complete with £4 billion of cuts and that there is nothing that we can do to mitigate it, even

over four whole years. I am sorry, but that is not good enough for the SDLP.

Our people deserve better. That is why I have called this Budget lazy and unimaginative. That is why we refer to DUP ostrich economics. They prefer to ignore the difficult realities of the environment rather than do something to try to improve it. We have had the false allegation that the SDLP would have opposed the Budget come what may: that is utter nonsense. All along, we have invited the Minister to improve the Budget so that we could support it.

Let me now recap on why the SDLP is fundamentally opposed to the Budget. First, there is no Programme for Government to which the Budget is supposed to be giving effect, nor was there even any attempt to start to negotiate one. Any Budget should be the financial outworking of a strategic programme. The DUP and Sinn Féin may well try to scramble together a Programme for Government now and retrofit it, but the fact is that the Budget has been cobbled together without any strategic thinking.

Secondly, the Budget fails to recognise that public expenditure is our only real economic lever in the North. Yet, there is no attempt in the Budget to rebalance the economy or any Budget dynamic that will streamline the public sector while driving growth and wealth creation in the private sector. An opportunity has been missed.

11.00 am

Thirdly, there is absolutely no emphasis on or priority given to job creation. The North is in deep recession, and it is our duty, as well as our basic economic imperative, to try to put people back to work. The SDLP has proposed investing in job creation, particularly in the indigenous job-intensive sectors of construction, tourism and food. Add to that a major programme of home insulation, which could counter fuel poverty and provide work for thousands of unemployed construction workers. Despite all the hot air, I have heard no explanation of why that cannot be done.

Fourthly, there is insufficient money for health. Although the Minister of Finance and Personnel has bragged about an 8% increase for health, he knows that it is a substantial decrease in real terms. He employs the shallow and dishonest argument that health is getting a better settlement than other Departments, when he knows that there are greater expansionary

pressures in health than in other Departments. The concerted and bad-tempered attempts to demonise the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are unworthy and unacceptable.

Fifthly, the Budget gives insufficient resources to education. Not only would much-needed investment in new schools and school maintenance provide crucial employment, but, surely, we are duty-bound to invest in better literacy and numeracy outcomes for the many young people whom the education system currently lets down.

Sixthly, there is an absolute failure to identify new revenue streams, additional capital receipts, additional borrowings or cash-releasing efficiency savings. Not only is there a failure to identify self-help measures, there is a stubborn resistance even to consider the available options, as if there is absolutely nothing that we can do even over four years.

Seventhly, no matter what they try to do to make it look respectable, the so-called social investment fund is an abuse of public resources and is unacceptable. The DUP and Sinn Féin have no right to annex £80 million of public money to carve up among their favoured groups. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has obviously no intention of giving way.

Ms Ritchie: I could go on with many more criticisms, but the fundamental picture is that of a lazy and unimaginative Budget that makes no serious attempt to mitigate Tory cuts.

In all the bad-tempered comments from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and what I can only describe as prolonged slapstick from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, no answer has been provided to the central criticism. If anything, surely that is obscene. The reluctance of the Finance Minister to seriously consider the SDLP proposals is disappointing, but at least he took the trouble to look at them. He cannot seriously doubt that we answer the question of how to fund the proposed additional spending. We produced a 70-page Budget paper crammed with detailed proposals. It is the only paper produced by any political party that contains detailed figures. Indeed, it is unprecedented in our politics. It contrasts with the six pages of superficial nonsense, full of pictures, produced by the green Tories in Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin's position is utterly unsustainable. The Sinn Féin socialists have waded through £4 billion of cuts in Northern Ireland without so much as a whimper, while pretending that there is an alternative to the inevitable cuts in the South. The position of that party can be summarised thus: in the North, green Tory; in the South, different story.

The SDLP has made all the running on this Budget and is the only party to set out how, as an Executive, we can help ourselves. Helping people is, surely, what devolution is meant to be all about. The SDLP has been cynically accused of all sorts of motives, but it is in the tradition of this party to hold out for higher standards and better outcomes for all our people. It is with the confidence of knowing that our case is right and with enduring pride that I invite the House to support the SDLP amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McKay):

As Chairperson of the Committee, I think that we should acknowledge at the outset that the Executive have faced an unenviable challenge in developing the Budget in the face of swingeing public sector spending cuts imposed by the British Government's spending review. As a result, £4 billion was cut from our block grant without any assessment of relative need.

The Executive have signalled their intention to remain focused on the strategic priorities of growing the economy and protecting the most disadvantaged in society while balancing the Budget through a mix of savings, efficiencies, asset realisation, borrowing and revenue-raising measures. The application and outworking of those measures across the 12 Departments and other public bodies, combined with the ramifications for the private and third sectors, will determine whether that approach is successful.

Members will by now have received the Committee's co-ordinated report on the draft Budget. The report was informed by a great deal of evidence from a wide range of witnesses, including representatives from the business and voluntary sectors, economists, academics and trade unions. The Committee also received submissions from each Statutory Committee, the Audit Committee and the Assembly Commission. A take-note debate then enabled all Members to debate the Executive's draft Budget 2011-15 proposals.

The Committee's report is a critical but constructive response to the Executive's draft Budget proposals. As well as 45 key findings and recommendations, the report includes numerous supplementary observations and proposals, both at strategic and departmental level. Many of those apply to the medium to longer term, and, that being the case, the Committee will recommend that its successor Committee continue with that work. The Committee's third Budget scrutiny inquiry report will be agreed before the end of the mandate and will aim to identify practical measures to improve future Budget process and to strengthen the role of the Assembly.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel has repeatedly stressed his belief that there are further cash-releasing efficiencies to be found over the Budget period. The area of efficiencies was examined in detail by the Committee in the previous session of the Assembly and again in its consideration of the draft Budget. Members remain concerned that budgetary savings and efficiency gains are not monitored centrally. If they were, that would ensure that savings or efficiencies made by one Department did not have a cost or adverse impact on another Department and that Departments did not lose sight of the need to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the medium to long term as a result of the present focus on the delivery of short-term budgetary savings. The Committee believes that the Department is best placed to fulfil that vital role.

The Committee has highlighted areas in which it considers true efficiency gains can be achieved. Those include rolling out shared services beyond Departments to other public bodies, better management of the government estate, collaborative public procurement, a strategic review of senior staff complements across all Departments and arm's-length bodies and better or more efficient working practices.

Reference has been made to the work that the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) will undertake in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and, given the ambitious nature of the savings required for all Departments, the Committee considered that both an indicative work programme for PEDU and provision for enhancing its capability should be included in the final Budget proposals. I welcome the Minister's comments on that.

The area of preventative spending was also examined in some detail. From the evidence considered, Committee members believe that there is a strong argument to be made that the current public spending patterns are inefficient over the medium to long term. Departments here do not engage sufficiently or strategically in preventative spending, which may partly be to do with the fact that preventative spending in one Department often leads to savings in another. The Committee believes that any barriers to a preventative spending approach can be overcome by strong leadership and steadfast vision. It therefore calls on the Executive to signal their intent to establish a cross-departmental task force to evaluate existing preventative spending initiatives and to develop proposals for future strategic preventative spending programmes.

I listened to the SDLP leader's remarks. It is unfortunate that she had difficulty with giving way. If Members do not want to give way, it is important that they indicate that in the Chamber. It is only good manners. You know — *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: What was that? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: It appears that the SDLP is as good at economics as it is at telling jokes. The SDLP amendment is absurd. It goes back to the economics and the politicking of the past months. Its amendment shows where it wants money to go, but where is that money to come from? What departmental budgets will the SDLP cut? Perhaps it made a mistake when it put forward an amendment to the Vote on Account. It indicated then what Departments it was looking to get the money from. The SDLP's economics are based on electioneering for the upcoming election, which is shameful. However, coming from the SDLP, it is unsurprising. The SDLP has the cheek to call us Tories, but it proposes to cut social funds. It wants to cut the social investment fund.

Ms J McCann: The SDLP amendment seeks to abolish the social investment fund. Poverty, unemployment, lack of investment, educational underachievement and health inequalities affect those who live in areas of disadvantage and need. They affect people who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Does the Member agree

that it is almost a contradiction in terms for the SDLP to call for the social investment fund to be abolished, as that very fund will tackle those issues?

The social investment fund is located in OFMDFM because it is an interdepartmental recipe to tackle social disadvantage and need. Therefore, it sits better in OFMDFM because all Departments can link to it. Does the Member also agree that the social investment fund has to sit in OFMDFM because Departments were working in silos, which meant that projects such as the West Belfast Task Force and the Greater Shankill Task Force and neighbourhood renewal were not working as well as they should have been?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I totally agree. Not only does the SDLP look to cut millions of pounds from deprived areas in our community overall, it looks to privatise services, which has been made clear in its proposals. Of course, the SDLP refuses —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: No. The SDLP refuses to criticise the British Government. It is trying to present the cuts as DUP/Sinn Féin cuts, when we know that they are British Government cuts. With respect, I do not know which planet David McNarry is living on —

Mr McNarry: They are DUP/Sinn Féin cuts —

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: Perhaps the Member behind him will pull him into line. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: The British Government cut £4 billion, but, in the draft Budget, the Executive found £842 million to mitigate the effects of that cut. In the final Budget, we found £527.2 million and another £200 million to assist the Department of Justice. Sinn Féin and other parties have brought £1.5 billion to the table; the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party have brought £0.0 billion to the table. This is all about electioneering for the upcoming election. On the basis of those figures, perhaps good slogans for the parties to my left are “You are worse off with the SDLP” and “You are worse off with the Ulster Unionist Party”. We

are putting forward proposals of substance; we are mitigating the effects of the cuts. We are fighting the cuts in an imaginative way, whereas the SDLP and others in the House are electioneering, which is, frankly, shameful.

We must also remember — I am conscious of my time, a Cheann Comhairle —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is almost up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel: I will leave it there, then.

11.15 am

Mr Frew: I congratulate the Minister on his statement and, indeed, on the Budget. I also congratulate the Executive on their hard work over many months to get the Budget to where it is now, despite obstruction by parties with no responsibility because of their numbers. We can make a difference to our people’s lives. The Budget will affect every person in this country.

Mr McNarry: You are dead right.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: It will affect our poor, our sick, our rich, our businesses and the unemployed. It will affect everyone. That is why we need to be careful to get the best Budget that we can.

No one in the House would be wise to say that everything that is needed is in this Budget and that it is perfect; it is not. How could it be, when it was worked on by five Executive parties that have opposing views and are going in different directions? However, it is the best Budget that we could provide to our people at this time. I believe that the public see that, they feel that, and they know that. I believe that they welcome the Budget.

Unlike some Members, I come from the real world. I worked in the construction industry for more than 20 years. I have seen the situation from both sides. People tell me that they need a four-year Budget. They need to see the bad stuff as well as the good, and they need to be able to plan for the bad stuff. I assure you that the construction industry is glad to have the foresight of the four years to plan ahead.

Indulge me, Mr Speaker, while I speak about the construction industry. Coming from that sector, I know only too well how policies and governments can affect the construction industry, which is a major part of our economy

— perhaps too much so. Over the years, that has been a failing of the economy and, to a degree, of our political system over the direct rule years.

We in the commercial and industrial side of the construction industry saw dark clouds coming when the housing market fell and people who lost their job in that sector started to come over to the industrial, commercial and shopfitting side. The length of contracts that we had was the only thing that saved us in the sector at that time. However, the rot soon set in everywhere in the construction industry. It brought the construction industry to its knees, with many thousands of people losing their job. I feel for that sector now, as I listen to the comments made and the way in which politics is being played about the Budget. We must remember that the Budget affects every person in this country.

The Executive have again stretched themselves to enhance the money available for health by an additional £91 million in current expenditure and £29 million in capital investment. The Executive have also agreed that the Department may reclassify £20 million from capital investment for current expenditure in 2011-12. That is important, but that money must be put to good use. In our system, which comprises Departments with Ministers from different parties, it is crucial that the money that a Minister — from the DUP, Sinn Féin, UUP or SDLP — gets is spent as wisely as possible. It is important that every Department has planned savings and efficiencies. I have not seen enough efficiencies brought forward by Departments over the past few months of the Budget process. I have not seen that yet, and I have certainly not seen it in the Health Department. I believe that those efficiencies could be produced and that they need to be produced.

I welcome the social investment fund and the social protection fund. I see and speak to my constituents in Ballymena, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, Bushmills and every village in between, and they tell me that they need assistance. I know about the good work that has been done in those areas, so I welcome the establishment of the social investment fund, which will receive £20 million per annum. I also welcome the other social fund. I feel that that money can be used to enhance the good work that has started in those areas. Things do not happen automatically; people need money, and the will of the people in those areas, who

have worked so hard over the years, will be enhanced by the social investment fund. That is one way that the Executive have tried not only to strengthen and enhance the economy but to protect the needy and most vulnerable. It is commendable that that has been done.

I welcome the work that has been done on and the money that has been found for the Presbyterian Mutual Society. Having spoken to a lot of my constituents, I know that it is a major issue for the people concerned, many of whom lumped all their savings into the society. Those people are desperate to ensure that their money is safe and secure.

I also welcome the fact that Ministers and Departments will be able to switch capital expenditure to current expenditure. However, I stress to Ministers that they have been given the power to switch budgets to enhance the economy and to strengthen and ease the pressure on the construction industry. I therefore ask Ministers, whoever they may be, to be careful about how they allocate money and about how they switch it back from capital to current expenditure. This is the opportunity to make efficiency savings and to ensure that their Departments is running as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

The decision was taken to take funding away from young farmers' clubs. I am glad, therefore, that we had consultation on that. It was great to see that there were so many responses and that the Executive acted on them. I therefore praise the Executive and the relevant Minister for reallocating money to young farmers' clubs. That was consultation and democracy at work.

The extra money that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will direct towards the arts and libraries is crucial. I put the onus back on Libraries NI to think again about the 10 libraries that are earmarked for closure, especially Kells and Connor Library in my constituency of North Antrim, which could and should be saved.

In my remaining time, I will make a crucial point about the welcome assistance that the Finance Minister and the Executive have given to small businesses through the small business rate relief scheme. Retailers, especially in towns, have been crying out for it. We are at saturation point with out-of-town shops, which are in danger of hurting town centres. The rate relief scheme will go some way to correcting the balance. Having talked to retailers just this

week, I know that they and small businesses in town centres will welcome the scheme with open arms.

Dr Farry: First, I congratulate the Finance Minister not necessarily on the Budget — I will come to that in a moment — but on having the bravery to reference John Rawls at the beginning of his Budget statement last week. Although the Minister referred to him as a nineteenth-century figure, surely it is a sign of progress in Northern Ireland that a DUP Minister can reference the leading liberal political philosopher of the twentieth century in defending his comments.

The Alliance Party will support the Budget resolution today because it is the right and proper thing to do. As a single party, the Alliance Party would have struck a different Budget. It would have been a more strategic, more innovative and more radical document. Indeed, the details of that were set out in our 'Shared Solutions' paper, which we published in October. However, we recognise that we are part of a five-party Executive and that the Budget must be the product of negotiation and agreement. We recognise and respect that process while recognising that it is far from perfect. The Alliance Party did not join the Executive last April to play political games. Indeed, we were not simply providing a Justice Minister but were going to play a full part in the collective decisions of the Executive. We were not going to try to be in and out at the same time.

We recognise that the current political and institutional arrangements in Northern Ireland are far from perfect, including in the Executive. Indeed, we have been leading the call for change to the shape of our political institutions over the past decade, and we have set out detailed proposals in that regard, including 'Agenda for Democracy' in 2004. However, we have to deal with the institutions as we find them today, and we are determined to make the Executive work better and more collectively. That is our position, and I think that that is the position of the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland, who clearly want our politicians to work together. It is a crying shame that other parties have not sought to be similarly constructive.

The positions of the UUP and the SDLP are utterly unsustainable. Those parties perhaps make the most frequent claims about the Executive being dysfunctional, but they stand exposed today as the parties that make the

Executive most dysfunctional. There already is a bare minimum level of collectivity in the Executive through the ministerial code. Any UUP or SDLP Minister who remains on the Executive will be bound by the decisions taken by that Executive, irrespective of how their party votes on the Floor this evening.

The adoption of a Budget goes right to the heart of what makes any Government cohesive. For two parties to be in open rebellion on that matter undermines that collective approach and must call into question the credibility of their continued participation in the Executive. It is bizarre that two members of a five-party Executive would bring amendments to the Floor of the Assembly rather than fight the battle around the Executive table, where it should be fought. Amendments to a Budget are brought by parties in opposition, not by parties that claim to be in government.

I will talk about health and refer to the UUP amendment in detail later. However, let me make some comments about the SDLP approach at this stage. The SDLP keep accusing the Budget of being a DUP/Sinn Féin carve-up. However, yet again, we had an example today from its leader, who has long since departed the Chamber, showing that the revised Budget since December reflects the changes that the SDLP advocated. Therefore, its fingerprints are all over the changes, but it will still say no to it all. Indeed, it is an example of what was once described by George Bush in a campaign against Ronald Reagan as "voodoo economics". The SDLP says that it will keep taxes down and spending will increase. It will protect the public service at all costs but, equally, will rebalance the economy and grow the private sector. It will spend more on health, education, the economy and everything else without making a single proposal where the money will come from. People demand economic competence in this society, not cheap electioneering and cheap populism.

The Alliance Party recognises that there have been some quite strong criticisms of the draft Budget. Indeed, we have made many of those comments, and we stand by some of them. We also recognise the comments that have been made during the consultation process. We do not think that the Budget has been as bold as it might have been in promoting the economy, encouraging the modernisation of public services, investing in the green new deal,

promoting a shared future and raising additional revenue. Nevertheless, we have been working behind the scenes to make December's draft Budget a better Budget in March.

Let me point to some of the gains that we believe have been found. There are additional resources for the Department for Employment and Learning, which is a key economic Department.

Rebalancing has taken place, from revenue expenditure to capital expenditure, which should help the construction sector. Furthermore, for the first time, there is an acknowledgment of the £1 billion annual cost of division to this society and an encouragement for Departments to begin to address that.

11.30 am

We also welcome the endorsement of early intervention and prevention as a key strategic approach and, indeed, the importance of collaboration by Departments, which should provide for better joined-up services and greater efficiencies. Therefore, we now have the potential for a much more strategic approach over the years to come, and, indeed, that must be followed through, not least over the four years of the Budget. I welcome the fact that the Budget review group will now be a standing subcommittee of the Executive. My party has been calling for that. The group's remit will be to seek additional resources and promote cross-departmental efficiencies.

Ultimately, only a finite level of resources is available to the Executive. We are all opposed to the level and pace of cuts to the Northern Ireland block grant, but that is reality. Although we can make decisions here that may make things slightly better or worse, we have limited room for manoeuvre. The Executive and the Assembly are obliged to provide financial stability and certainty over the coming years. Failure to agree a Budget would leave the Assembly and the Executive in default of their legal obligations and would result in a bad Budget being imposed over our heads. Leadership is about being prepared to take the tough decisions, not shirking responsibilities.

The health and social services budget has come under particular scrutiny. My party appreciates the funding challenges facing the Health Service, including the pressures on social care. I am prepared to recognise that health spending in Northern Ireland is now falling behind that in

other UK regions, having been ahead of those regions in the past. Indeed, the situation may well get worse when the higher levels of need are taken into account. There are increased costs from changing demographics, new treatments, more expensive drugs and improvements in technology. All of this creates new pressures and new demands, and, indeed, the funding gap by 2014-15 may well be £1 billion. The status quo is unsustainable. We are not talking about bankruptcy; that is a scare story. However, there must be some proper change in policies and practices in the health sector.

My central point is that, although some people are prepared to argue that there has to be parity between health spending in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, very few, including those who shout the loudest on this point, are prepared to be honest and say that the same level of revenue has to be raised in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK. For me, the two go hand in hand. Ultimately, public services in Northern Ireland cannot be run on the cheap. Therefore, although there is an ongoing problem of underfunding compared to other jurisdictions, we should still consider some protection for the health budget. The Budget provides that to a considerable extent, but let us not kid ourselves: that protection will come at an opportunity cost, given the finite resources. It will result in limiting what can be done with regard to the speed with which we rebalance the economy.

Those are the choices that we must make, and the Budget is all about choices rather than wish lists and dreaming things up. We have to make the tough decision. The decision on giving some protection to health has been made, but, equally, there is a challenge for health to respond by making efficiencies and doing things more smartly and more effectively. There are examples of things that can be done differently such as using out-of-hours GPs rather than A&E; directing patients to the appropriate level more effectively; placing greater emphasis on early intervention and prevention; putting greater focus on public health issues; better use of technology; and greater use of home services and community services. It is important that we employ PEDU in the Health Service and give proper consideration to the options contained in the McKinsey report, which is not a diktat. Ultimately, all parties need to take responsibility for working through this and finding agreement on a better way for health.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Moutray):

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development welcomes the opportunity to provide its comments to the House. I will start by commending the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for overturning her original decision to withdraw funding from the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster. The small amount of £75,000 ensures that significant leverage, in the form of financial injections as well as voluntary activity, is brought into rural communities.

It is unfortunate that the Minister and her Department have not overturned the decision to spend in excess of £26 million on new headquarters. The Committee is not opposed to siting jobs in rural areas. However, at a time when the entire population of Northern Ireland are being asked to tighten their belt, the public sector is being told to make do, and commentators agree that investment in innovation is required to bring us out of these difficulties, DARD chooses to ignore that and pushes on with an untimely and expensive move and cuts innovation to the bare bones. The Department states that Dundonald House is no longer fit for purpose; it is strange that other Departments, including the Prison Service, will continue to use it as their headquarters.

The Scottish Government's economic strategy, which was published in 2007, stated that innovation drives improvements in productivity and, through creating new products, processes and services, creates new jobs and encourages greater economic participation, which are two of the crucial components of increased economic growth. It also recognises the critical role of a supportive business environment as one of the drivers of growth. It is unfortunate that the Department has not had the same vision; rather, it has adopted a simplistic view that focuses on what are traditionally considered as soft touches: innovation, education and farmers.

Stakeholders unanimously agree that the budget lacks strategic direction. It is unimaginative and piecemeal. There was an opportunity to invest in innovation, but it was ignored by the Department, as it slashes to the core the funding for the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. There was an opportunity to save up to £80 million over the comprehensive spending review period through eradicating TB, rather than controlling it at levels similar to those prior to 2001. To date, £200 million has been wasted,

and there is a prospect of another £80 million to come. There was an opportunity to invest in one of the few growth areas over the past couple of years, namely the agrifood sector. It contributes £3 billion to our economy and employs more than 90,000 people. Rather, we see cuts to the food strategy budget and the disposal of business incubation units at Loughry. There is no strategic direction.

There are a few positives in the budget. I previously indicated that the Committee was pleased to see the commitment towards the land parcel identification system. The Northern Ireland economy cannot support the continued application of extreme penalty disallowances by the EU, particularly given the depth of the cuts imposed on Northern Ireland by the Westminster Government.

The Committee also seeks assurances that national contributions to the Northern Ireland rural development programme, co-funded with the European Union, will be protected. The Committee previously expressed grave concerns at the lack of progress of that programme, particularly with regard to axis 3, and believes that it is imperative that those funds continue to be made available and dispersed in the rural community. It will have a positive knock-on effect in respect of the construction and tourism industries. Appropriate investment can act as a catalyst for economic growth in rural communities.

The motion before the House is:

"That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 7 March 2011".

The Committee has concerns about the proposals specifically contained in DARD's budget. However, I have no doubt that, in the new mandate, the Committee will continue to work with the Department to ensure the best use of resources, and, importantly, it will continue to work with the industry to ensure that rural businesses, rural families and rural communities are protected.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My colleagues and I were in the middle of a very intense debate there.

Mr A Maskey: Unlike the one that we were listening to.

Mr McLaughlin: I cannot possibly comment on that.

It has to be said at the outset that the cuts to the block grant have made the usual Budget process and the debate on it even more problematic. Setting aside the positions that have developed since October 2010, most parties recognise the need to respond to the Tory-inspired cuts, which were supported by the Ulster Unionist Party and would have been voted for by it at Westminster, had it had the opportunity to do so. It is worth mentioning the most recent Westminster election, because the electorate here took the opportunity to reject completely that approach. The consequence of that was that no Ulster Unionist Party candidate was elected to that body. The SDLP argued that it wanted to go to Westminster to oppose the cuts. That is a matter of stated record. In particular, the leader of the SDLP wanted to go to Westminster to stop the cuts. Of course, the argument was spectacularly unsuccessful.

In any event, we are where we are. The Budget document represents the outcome of a process to which some parties committed themselves in a fairly mature and collegiate way. Other parties decided, for electioneering purposes and opportunistic reasons, to stand back and disassociate themselves from that process. They will have the opportunity to set out their alternatives in the debate. However, I suspect that members of the broad community who are interested in such affairs have already stepped back, not out of any criticism of the Budget paper in front of us but because it is their desire to see us get on with the job. That is the overwhelming position of our shared community. People want to see us, as elected representatives, getting on with it and not playing silly games, being opportunistic, holding out or teasing them with the possibility of resigning or breaking ministerial codes and so on.

The approach that the Ulster Unionist Party has taken is for its Minister Michael McGimpsey to tell us, no later than last weekend, that he needs an extra £200 million a year. Today we are presented with an amendment from his party that states that he wants an extra £432 million a year. Talk about galloping inflation. Last Friday, the figure was £200 million. Since the weekend, it has grown to £432 million. People will be judged on whether they are being serious.

Mr F McCann: Does the Member agree that, throughout the debates on the Budget, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists have been challenged continually to put meat on the bones of their proposals yet have continually refused to do so?

Mr McLaughlin: Yes. I accept that. The broad point that I am making is that that is increasingly obvious to —

Mr Callaghan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: Will the Member say anything more sensible this time? I will give him a chance.

Mr Callaghan: Thanks very much. Perhaps Mr McCann and Mr McLaughlin have not read my party's document, 'Partnership and Economic Recovery'. If they want to see meat on the bones of our proposals, they should have a look at that document.

Mr McLaughlin: I am glad that the Member referred to that document. Far be it for me to praise a DUP Minister of Finance and Personnel, of all people, but that document was dissected extremely effectively by the Minister. It would probably be helpful if the SDLP actually read the Hansard report of that debate. As well as being a bravura performance by the Minister, it was a lesson in reminding parties that, if they will put out positions, they should at least be consistent. He demonstrated, step by step, how a document produced by the SDLP can, even within a period of 18 months to two years, be flatly contradicted and ignored by that party. Now, if that party can ignore its own documents, it can hardly complain if everybody else ignores them. Therefore, sound bite economics will trip that party up in this debate, as it has tripped it up in previous debates.

In fact, my genuine advice is that that party should ask whether it listens to what people on the street want. People understand that £4 billion was removed from the Budget in October 2010. It was not that long ago. As a result of the Budget debate, the process of developing a draft Budget document, the consultation and its responses and the many, many hours of debate in here, including debates in which we listened to monologues that lasted over 90 minutes, we have managed to add value to the baseline position declared by George Osborne at Westminster. That is effective opposition.

This is the start of the four-year Budget period. In this document, we pledge to continue that

work. The Budget review group exists. It comprises Ministers from every party represented on the Executive. Unless people can argue credibly that they have produced proposals that would have given more financial resources and economic muscle, protected front line services, indicated or identified additional revenues —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

11.45 am

Mr McLaughlin: Let me finish this point.

Unless they make those arguments credibly, the arguments will not be regarded as viable. Not only is the House being asked to believe that the Executive turned their back on those proposals, but so are the public, merely because the proposals were made by the SDLP and the Unionist Party. The record of the contribution, if that is the correct word, of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party to the Budget review group process will demonstrate that they have not added one pound note to the Budget proposals in front of us. They have sought to divide, where others have sought to develop a collective approach.

Last October, there were four billion holes in our financial projections. That has been reduced quite significantly by a process that is yet to be completed but is a credible beginning. That is the proposition that we should take from the House to the concerned public. Members should not promise them Armageddon or play silly buggers, if I may use that expression, about whether they are in the Executive or whether they are going to support the Budget. — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: If it is a principled position, people should act in a principled fashion.

Mr McNarry: What about the 152 days?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr McLaughlin: Vote against the Budget and step back. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Mr McNarry. Order. That applies to all sides of the House.

Mr McLaughlin: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Maybe the truth hits hard. The point of the matter is: if they have no intention of so doing, do they think that people outside the House are stupid? Do you think that they will not understand that this is playing games with very serious issues?

If we had the money, we would not be having the type of arguments that we are having. However, we might have different arguments, because some people are not comfortable in their skin or with their role, size, influence or mandate. That is their problem. There is an election coming up soon. They can present their case, and they will see the outcome. My party will work with the outcome; we will work with whoever gets a mandate to be in this place. We will not attempt to sabotage the genuine attempts that people are making to defend the most vulnerable in our society and the economy. Our proposals are there to be measured against the absence of proposals from the two parties that I have mentioned.

Ludicrous proposals have been made. I took a look at the UUP's proposals, and I described the figures that it presented to us as an illustration of galloping inflation. I also took a look at the SDLP amendment. We should read it; it is worth reading out:

"significant interventions to grow the private sector".

There is a lot of detail there.

Mr O'Loan: What is wrong with that?

Mr McLaughlin: I did not say that there was anything wrong with it; I just said that there was no detail. It also proposes:

"public sector reform and new models of asset management to rebalance the economy".

Mr O'Loan: What is wrong with that?

Mr McLaughlin: I am not saying that there is anything wrong, Declan. Listen. I have not said that there is anything wrong.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: The SDLP also proposes:

"increased investment in job creation, particularly in construction, renewables, ICT, tourism and the agrifood sector".

It could have added, "and whatever you are having yourself". The amendment also proposes:

"adequate funding to support front-line health services and to build more social houses"

and

"an adequate four-year allocation for the social protection fund".

It calls for an allocation that is “adequate”, whatever that means.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is almost up. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Member to finish.

Mr McLaughlin: Perhaps these are costed proposals. I know that the SDLP leader did not take the opportunity to tell us how many millions all that will cost, but, perhaps, the economy spokesperson will do so.

Mr Hamilton: Everybody acknowledges that agreeing a Budget is exceptionally difficult, and, even in the most benign of circumstances, Ministers holding portfolios will argue that more money should be spent in their Department than in other Departments. However, our difficult job here, given the mandatory coalition nature of our Government, was made all the more difficult by the £4 billion worth of cuts imposed on us by the Tory Chancellor in Westminster. Sadly, that was supported by, canvassed for and, had any of them actually been elected, would have been voted for by the Ulster Unionist Party. Some £4 billion worth of cuts in departmental expenditure limits, roughly £0.5 billion worth of cuts to our AME expenditure on issues such as social security and a 40% reduction in our ability to spend on capital infrastructure have had a devastating effect on our economy and Budget. Anyone who knocked on a door in Northern Ireland and asked people to vote for that, as some Members did, should be absolutely ashamed of themselves.

Even in those difficult circumstances, we have a Budget. There was criticism from some quarters of the Chamber that no Budget would be agreed and put before the people of Northern Ireland. Yet, here we have a Budget. In spite of the five-party mandatory coalition, we have agreed a four-year Budget that gives certainty to the public and private sectors in Northern Ireland for a longer period than in any other devolved region in the United Kingdom.

As my colleague Paul Frew said, none of us who will vote for the Budget later today would argue for a second that it is everything that we would have wanted. It is not a perfect Budget. It is as imperfect as the system that created it and the financial circumstances in which we found ourselves through the imposition of Tory cuts. Nobody would say for a second that it is everything that we wanted, but, in the circumstances, it is the best that we can get.

It is no surprise to me or to the people of Northern Ireland that there is opposition to the Budget. There is no surprise either about the quarters from which that opposition comes or its timing. As I listen to some Members, it could be thought that they were not part of the Executive, were not represented on the Budget review group and were not part and parcel of the Budget process from day one. Those Members try to fool people, pull the wool over their eyes and have them believe that they had absolutely nothing to do with it, when every one of them was there from the start and was part and parcel of the process.

I now turn to the amendments. The SDLP amendment is exactly what we have come to expect in the House. As might be expected from the verbose SDLP, it is big on words but short on detail. There is absolutely no substance in that amendment. It contains what we have come to expect — the usual call for more money — but there is no indication of where that money should come from, with one exception. The SDLP’s only suggestion is that we should scrap the social investment fund and that £80 million from that should be allocated elsewhere. That amounts to £20 million a year for each year of the Budget period. Never mind the attack on vulnerable people that that represents, because that is what it does —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will.

Mr McDevitt: I understand that the DUP does not like the SDLP’s 70-page Budget proposals. However, I must hand it to the party that it tried to respond in detail to those proposals, something that the party to my right has never managed to do in any detail, except in rhetorical terms. Does Mr Hamilton agree that we should and could do a huge amount more to realise the latent value of public assets and other potential revenue-raising opportunities in this region and that, if he was not stuck in a partnership with a party that is myopic on budgetary planning and stuck in the 1960s in economic terms, we might be able to get on with making this region a better place for everyone?

Mr Hamilton: The Member and I may be wearing the same colour of tie today, but that is probably the only thing that we have in common. My party and I have been on the record consistently, long before anyone else, making calls that we should make much more of redundant assets, not least

those in the Stormont infrastructure. It is high time that the ugly scaffolding was taken down from outside this Building. Let us look at the Departments, the number of Assembly Members, the quangos and the infrastructure that was put in place, not least by the Member's party.

Never mind the assault of taking £80 million from the vulnerable in our society; it is only £20 million a year. That is probably a lot of money to everyone in Northern Ireland, but it is minuscule in the context of the entire Northern Ireland Budget, and it equates to less than one fifth of 1% of the total expenditure in Northern Ireland each year. Despite that, the SDLP proposes to do everything with that less than one fifth of 1%. It proposes to reform the public sector, to create jobs, to enhance tourism —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Hold on. That party also proposes to fund agriculture and to give more money to health, social housing, social protection and so on and so forth. That is what that party proposes to do with less than one fifth of 1% of the total expenditure in Northern Ireland. The Budget before us —

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way. Time is moving on.

The Budget before us — *[Interruption.]* I will stand here all day and debate with all of you, but the Speaker is going to stop me in three minutes.

The Budget will give £400 million to most of those areas anyway, yet what has the SDLP brought before us today? It proposed £20 million, which is less than one fifth of 1%.

I now turn to the Ulster Unionist Party amendment. Although it is a bit more detailed than that tabled by the SDLP, the first thing that I noticed about it is that Danny Kennedy seems to have lost an argument in the Ulster Unionist Party. His £50 million chunk of the further allocations of over £400 million made in the Budget has been taken from him. Some of us on these Benches are wondering whether that is the only argument that Danny will lose this week and whether he will win the argument to stay in government or whether the Health Minister will win by taking the Ulster Unionist Party out of government. The Ulster Unionist Party amendment proposes to give money to the Health Department and only to that

Department. However — this is a critical point — that amendment proposes to give only an extra £164 million to the Health Department, when the Finance Minister has come to the House with a Budget that proposes to give it an additional £190 million.

Mr McNarry: Over four years.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Hamilton: The Ulster Unionist Party amendment is actually proposing, in reality, to reduce the allocation to the Health Department. However, not only is that party proposing to reduce the allocation to health spending — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Hamilton: — it is proposing — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr Hamilton: I am worried that some Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches will have an aneurysm and so put more pressure on the Health Minister and his services.

The amendment proposes to reduce not only expenditure on health but overall expenditure. It will take away the extra allocations that were made in the Budget to fund schools, colleges and roads. That is what the Ulster Unionist Party proposes to do through its amendment. It tried to put the focus on health, but it will actually cut the allocations to the health, education, higher education and regional development sectors. That is some process. However, what else could be expected from the Ulster Unionist Party, which has a spokesman in the shape of Mike Nesbitt? He went on the radio this morning, and, when he was asked whether the Budget that was handed down from London was a good deal for Northern Ireland, he hummed and hawed and said that that was a difficult question. If anyone thinks that a £4 billion cut to our Budget is a difficult question, there is something seriously wrong with them. However, when he came to the point, he said that it is and is not a good deal for Northern Ireland. That is a bit like Members from the Ulster Unionist Party, who sometimes are and sometimes are not. Are they with the Conservatives or against the Conservatives?

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I have no time left, I am afraid.

12.00 noon

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Hamilton: Everybody knows that this is a cynical electoral stunt. We are lumbered with billions of pounds of cuts, courtesy of the Conservatives and the Ulster Unionist Party.

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

Mr Hamilton: If they want to walk off the playing field —

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

Mr Hamilton: If they want to walk off the playing field, let them go —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must insist.

Mr Hamilton: Let them go and let the rest of us get on with cleaning up their mess.

Lord Empey: At the beginning of the debate, the Minister of Finance said that this is the most important single task that the Assembly has performed in four years. We spent hours and days, quite properly, on high hedges. We have held debates over the past four years that would have embarrassed a parish council. Yet, when it comes to the most important single task that the Assembly has performed in four years, we get 10 minutes each to speak. That process needs to be looked at because that is clearly an inadequate amount of time to deal with such important matters.

Obviously, it is difficult to devise a Budget at any time. As other Members said, it is even more difficult in a time of contracting public expenditure. The idea that we are somehow isolated and insulated from what is happening nationally is nonsense. Our country was on the verge of bankruptcy, and if measures had not been taken in London in May and subsequently, we would end up in the same position as our colleagues in Dublin, where the IMF is parked at the front door. We would have had to deal with all that goes with that because the previous Government overspent and left us with a catastrophe of debt, which will take a generation to repay, just as people in the Republic will take a generation to regain their composure.

People might not like this, but we must remember that this Assembly is a wholly owned subsidiary of Westminster. The money to keep the lights on in this room comes from London. Therefore, we have to participate in what

happens nationally; there is no question about that. As for the previous Government, Alistair Darling said on 25 March 2010 that, if Labour were re-elected, public spending cuts would be deeper and tougher than those seen under Margaret Thatcher. Any idea that we were going to escape that was wrong from the start.

A series of choices has to be made in arriving at a Budget. There was a whole range of combinations that could have been arrived at in deciding this Budget. The Executive decided on one; we are suggesting another. However, within the very narrow confines of what is allowed on the Order Paper, amendments have to be compressed and comply with certain rules. We would like to put forward more detailed proposals, but we are limited. However, the very simple —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Lord Empey: No; I am not giving way. The very simple matter that I want to address is why there is disagreement here today. It is perfectly natural and normal. Indeed, different opinions are to be expected in any democratic society, including one with a mandatory coalition. There would be something wrong with us if that did not happen. I have been conscious of how that has arisen, in and out of the Executive Committee.

Matters could be handled a lot better. The Member for South Down and I prepared a report that we submitted last year to the Executive that dealt with the Hillsborough agreement issues. On 23 September 2010, the Executive accepted most of the recommendations, bar, of course, the one that was blocked by Sinn Féin with regard to the formation of a proper coalition. One recommendation that the Executive did agree was that:

"Leaders of parties in the Executive should commit to regular meetings for the purpose of discussing matters of policy and strategic and sensitive issues outside the Executive" —

to provide and achieve consensus on the objectives of the Executive.

There has been no such meeting despite the report calling for regular and frequent meetings. Indeed, as I have said previously, there has been no such meeting since 2007. So, for four years, the entire term of this Assembly, the leaders of the parties in that coalition never met. That speaks volumes about why we have such difficulties today.

As regards the specifics, there is, of course, the issue of health. As leader of my party at the time, I chose the Health Department because I believed that it mattered to people. In the previous mandate, the parties, by and large, dodged it, and it ended up in Sinn Féin's possession. Health goes to the top. Not one of us in this room knows when we or our families will next need the Health Service.

I disagree with the Health Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Empey: I disagree with the Finance Minister when he says how well the Health Department has been treated. What he does not say is that, when the Assembly term started in 2007, the Health Department was £600 million behind to begin with. In addition, this country's demographics — the number of children being born and the number of people over the age of 65 — show that our population is the fastest growing in the United Kingdom. As Dr Farry said, the demand is rising disproportionately.

In those circumstances, what is the reaction of the Assembly? We tabled more debates on the Health Department than on virtually all the other Departments put together; we asked more questions of the Health Minister; we wrote more letters to the Health Minister than to any other Department; and when reductions were being made in different areas, people, including Members, stood outside the hospitals or homes being affected by closures, with placards saying how awful that was. Therefore, what I say to colleagues — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Empey: They can heckle — I am used to that, Mr Speaker; it will not stop me.

The decision for the Assembly is simple: either we provide the funding or accept a lower level of service. Given the inevitable consequences of that decision, we are looking at significant hospital closures, because there are more hospitals per capita in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom.

We have suggested a mechanism — there could be other ways — whereby the Health Department will be provided with the funds it needs. The reasons for that are simple: we believe that the general public want the highest possible standards of healthcare. If any one of us or our loved ones needs the latest

medicines, are we to be told that we are not getting them? Or are we to be in the position of the Irish Republic where people pay €60 to see their GP? We could raise plenty of money doing that. We have to answer those questions.

I listened to Mitchel McLaughlin's contribution — he is not in his place — and it was as though we were being lectured. Let us face it: he and his colleagues took themselves off for six months until they got their way over policing. They do whatever they like. They closed down the Executive at the very beginning of the recession when we should have been dealing with it. However, until they got their way, they were quite happy to close down the Executive so that they could not meet. Not a word was said about that, and they did that for their own reasons.

Daithí McKay said that Sinn Féin brought £1.5 billion to the table. Does he not realise the utter nonsense of such a statement? If we want to talk about £1.5 billion, I could point out to him that the campaigns run in this country for 30 years, which he and his colleagues supported, cost that 20 times over. Does he not recognise the irony and stupidity of his statement? His leader said that crumbs were coming off the table from London. More than £10 billion a year is not crumbs. Let us remember that every cent that comes into this place, bar a few charges, comes from London. We had better realise that we have an obligation to be part of the national financial solutions. Let us keep the International Monetary Fund out of here and keep our credit worthiness so that we can rebuild our economy and rebuild our charges.

We cannot pretend that we can have the Health Service that we want if we are not prepared to pay for it.

If we are not prepared to pay for it, let us say so and reduce health provision to the level that we can pay for instead of carrying on as if we can do something that we cannot.

Mr O'Loan: The Finance Minister has presented us with a not-an-inch Budget. The Budget will move us forward not an inch when it comes to our economy, our Health Service and our education system. I am pleased, therefore, to support the SDLP amendment and argue against the motion.

I spoke previously about the lack of a Programme for Government, and my party leader

reiterated that point this morning. There is no coherence at any significant level between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Their version of partnership is one for you and one for me, and we all end up being the losers. There is no better example of that than the social investment fund, which is nothing but a corruption of the partnership model that was built into the Assembly.

We listened to the sad story about disadvantage that was presented by at least one of the Sinn Féin representatives this morning. We know about disadvantage, and we understand disadvantage. We were told about the health problems, the education problems and the social problems in areas of disadvantage. There is a simple response to that: provide the necessary money to the Department for Social Development (DSD), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education and let them address those problems. Those Departments have the expertise in such matters that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) does not have.

Let us take a look at the changes to the draft Budget that have been presented in the final Budget. The Minister told us that there is an extra £430 million in the final Budget. That is funny money, indeed, when one looks at it. He was holding back £100 million as a sweetener to make the final Budget look a little bit more palatable. There was £70 million suddenly taken, without consultation, from the Department for Social Development. Perhaps most remarkably of all, a £240 million overcommitment has been built into the Budget.

The Minister has come before us repeatedly in recent times to tell us that we need to take overcommitment out of the Budget. With some pain, the overcommitment that was built into this year's Budget was taken out, because Departments, we were told, were managing their affairs better and we could not, in good financial management terms, have that overcommitment. Now, the Minister has built in no less than £240 million of overcommitment. We are back to a slack management of our finances and putting a bet —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will not give way.

We are back to putting a bet — *[Interruption.]*
The facts speak for themselves. We are back

to putting a bet on Departments dropping elements of their programmes. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr O'Loan: We know that difficulties will arise and that unforeseen things will happen. We have talked about the need for some contingency provision. We know about the things that have happened in the past. What if swine flu returns? What if there is a natural disaster? What if there is a major economic need, such as the one that arose with Bombardier? Not only do we have no contingency measure, but, if any of those situations arise and funds are needed, we will come back to the Minister's only remedy: top-slicing the funding of all Departments, savagely cutting into their pre-planned programmes and sending the message to our community that, once again, the Assembly is in a mess.

So, the final Budget is not an improvement on the draft Budget. It is arguably a worse Budget. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr O'Loan: Even if we accepted the Minister's funny money — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: The extra money that he has ostensibly put into the Budget on the revenue side is 0.7%. I wonder what the 7,000 people who responded to the departmental consultation, and the many thousands of others who responded to individual Departments, will think of their efforts on hearing that.

From his seated position, the Minister is dismissing the people who made those comments.

12.15 pm

A good starting point for what is needed in the Budget comes in the opening pages, which set out some of the economic facts of where we are. What is noticeable is that it does not go on to set out the facts of where we need to go and how we will get there. However, there are two major facts. First, public expenditure represents 62% of our total output and, secondly, our private sector productivity is only 80% of the UK average, and has been running for years at that level. The message there is very clear: we need to rebalance our economy and improve our productivity levels.

I draw Members' attention to the table on page 7, which shows our economic growth in recent years and, from 2000 to 2007, it was doing remarkably well. Although it was not gaining on the rest of the UK, it showed significant growth. We are now in significant recession, a recession significantly worse than that in the UK. This morning, I spoke to Frances Hill, the Bank of England representative who was in the Building, and she confirmed that we are lagging behind the rest of the UK and that we are not pulling out of recession as the rest of the UK does.

What does the Budget say about getting us out of the recession? If we do pull out of the recession in a couple of years' time, what is there in the Budget to give a further lift-off for the graph to continue upwards? The truth is that on the long-term structural problems of the economy and the need for a short-term stimulus to get us out of recession, the Budget fails. It lets down the people in the construction sector who have been thrown out of work in recent years, those other workers in that sector, and others in the public sector who will be out of work over the next four years, and there will be knock-on effects for our private sector economy where other workers will be out of jobs. The Budget does not answer their needs.

I want to comment on the Finance Committee's response to the Budget. If that document had been produced by the SDLP, the Minister would be dismissing it as political argument for the sake of it. It contains 45 recommendations. It is described as a "critical but constructive response", and it was carried unanimously in that Committee, which I note has seven members from Sinn Féin and the DUP.

Lord Morrow: You should be happy enough —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: I wonder whether the Minister will dismiss its 45 recommendations with the same derision that he has shown for the critical but constructive response that has come from this party. The section on strategic concerns uses language stronger even than that used by the SDLP. It says that the Budget:

"fails to explain clearly the rationale and guiding principles behind the proposed departmental allocations".

It goes on to say that it finds:

"no evidence of a proper zero-based review of resource baselines...and how they contribute to strategic priorities."

It also highlights:

"a missed opportunity to find new ways of optimising resource allocations".

It also says that the Budget:

"should have been accompanied with a draft Programme for Government...and an updated Investment Strategy."

It also calls for an annualised Budget. The Minister talks occasionally about a living document but, when pushed, he reverts back to the monitoring rounds as his mechanism for addressing pressures, when something much more fundamental is needed annually.

The section on revenue raising, the related sections on capital asset realisation and alternative sources of finance are most striking. In language every bit as strong as the SDLP has used, it calls for radical revision of how the Budget is done and will be done over the next four years. I noticed that it had much to say on economic levers. The words "corporation tax" appear, and I believe that the words "corporation tax" do not appear anywhere in the entire Budget document.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Loan: This is not the Budget that we need. The challenge that was put to those parties — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, the Member's time is up.

Mr O'Loan: — by the Treasury was: can you do anything about these cuts that we are handing to you. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: That is what the Treasury asked. Those parties said no; we surrender. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, I must insist.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

My party colleague Mr McLaughlin set out the political reality of where we are in dealing with the Tory-imposed cuts. I do not need to

rehearse that argument for the Members of the House. We are all very aware that the Tories are being supported by their UUP friends. Instead of accepting the cuts, Sinn Féin and others who are positively engaged in the Executive have set their minds to raising additional revenue streams to assist us. I welcome the fact that those are reflected in the final Budget.

The fact that we are discussing an extra £842 million to go into all Departments, which the SDLP obviously does not want, is a commitment from the Executive and a massive step in the right direction. It is a pity, and other Members have picked up on this, that there has not been one credible proposal from the party that is shouting from the sidelines.

Mr A Maskey: Does the Member agree that the last speaker from the SDLP made a bizarre observation on this Budget? He said that it is probably worse than the last Budget and went on to say that there is a £240 million overcommitment in this Budget. The logic of that is to take the £240 million out. Has the Member any ideas from where that money might come? *[Interruption.]* As usual, you have no idea about where to take it from.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is typical of the SDLP's Budget position. It says: we have too much money and then it says that we do not have enough money — the party needs to make up its mind. It is clear that the SDLP and the UUP are playing a game of two-faced politics. On the one hand, their Members want to stay in the Executive and be positive members of it, take the ministerial wage and the perks that go with being a Minister, and take credit when positive decisions are taken. However, on the other hand, when they do not get their own way, they say they do not want to play the game any longer and they put their heads in the sand.

As Sinn Féin health spokesperson, I want to pick up on the points about the Health Service needing more money. The SDLP and the UUP have both spoken about that. Sinn Féin is very much aware of that need. We are proud of the Health Service, and it has to be cherished. The Health Service affects everyone at every stage of life and we have always supported additional moneys and resources going into it. We have delivered on that promise, as we always said we would. Since the publication of the draft Budget, an additional £189 million is being invested

in the Health Service, and rightly so. We very much welcome it. We also have a commitment from the Executive that, if and when the PEDU report is completed and submitted to the Executive, and if additional funding is needed, the Executive will look at that matter. That is another commitment to the Health Service and it must be very clear to the public that the Executive prioritise health, recognise the need to invest in the Health Service and maximise additional funding for the Health Service when they can allocate the money.

The current situation is as follows, and it is a testimony to the commitment to the Health Service. The Executive have allocated more than 50% of the entire Budget to the Health Department. We need to look at how that is spent, which is the role of the Minister in charge of the Department. How has he carried out his responsibility as Minister? He has protected £57 million in bonuses paid to consultants. Is that an efficient use of money? The public do not believe so. Frequently, over the last number of weeks, the Minister and his party have referred to the fact that they have delivered on the review of public administration. The Minister may have delivered on it, but what has he delivered but more managers in the Health Service. The Minister can shake his head all he wants, but that is true. Is that efficient? I have spoken to people who work in the Health Service and who previously had reported to two line managers but who now report to seven. That is reality, and that is what the Minister has implemented in the Health Service during his watch.

On many occasions in the House, I have listed many inefficiencies in the Minister's management of the Health Service. I do not need to go through those again because the public are very well aware of them. Time and again, it has been said. The public are aware of how the health budget has been spent by Michael McGimpsey and that that problem lies at his feet.

Over the past number of weeks, I have listened to the claims of insolvency and bankruptcy in the Health Service. Again, I think that that is just scaremongering by the UUP. A health economist said on the radio this morning that that claim is, quite frankly, just silly. When did Michael McGimpsey start to run the Health Service into the ground, because it cannot become bankrupt over night? Has he been working on

that over the past four years? That does happen overnight, so it is a nonsense statement to make repeatedly. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: We know that the UUP and its SDLP friends are electioneering in these Budget discussions. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we are very aware that the SDLP and UUP are overtly electioneering in the most disgraceful manner, and they are using the Health Service as a political tool to do so. However, the public are very aware of that. An election is coming up in which the people will vote, and we will await the outcome of that. As I said at the start of my contribution, Sinn Féin has always believed that we need to find additional moneys for the Health Service and to maximise its funding.

Mr O'Loan: You did not find it.

Mrs O'Neill: We found £189 million. You do not want that, but the Health Service does. As I said, the Executive have given a commitment that if more moneys are needed, more will be found. We need to ensure that we maximise funding for the Health Service while driving out inefficiency. We do not want to see money going towards bureaucratic administration in the Health Service and towards bonuses for senior consultants. Rather, we want to see money going to the front line. Sinn Féin stands up for delivering for the most vulnerable in society. We deliver for the people of the North. Quite frankly, I believe that the SDLP amendment is an attempt —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: OK.

Mr F McCann: Does the Member not think it strange that she is being lectured by the party to the left, given that it was the party that initiated water charges and brought in tuition fees?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely will not be lectured by the SDLP. Its amendment is an attempt to be relevant to the people of the North, but, quite frankly, it is not relevant. As I said at the start, its position —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I am quite sure that Mr McDevitt will have his opportunity to speak to the House at some stage today and that we all eagerly await that. I cannot wait.

Sinn Féin stands up — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, I think that the SDLP has failed in being relevant to the electorate, and the electorate will speak in the upcoming election. I am delighted that more money has been found for the Health Service and that the Executive have given a commitment to look for more money.

Lord Morrow: It is ironic that the two amendments tabled are from two parties that are struggling to stay on the political landscape. As they approach the election, I suspect that this is not going to help them.

Mr McNarry: *[Interruption.]*

Lord Morrow: Well, I do not have any trouble staying on the political landscape, and I have been on it a lot longer than you, Mr McNarry. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Make your remarks through the Chair. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow Lord Morrow to continue.

Lord Morrow: Of course, the real reason why they are criticising the Finance Minister today is simply that he was able to come to the House with a Budget and expenditure proposals. That is what has annoyed the folk to my right. The fact that he has been able to do that has, of course, gutted them, and that is the one thing that has perplexed them most. They thought that the Finance Minister would be in no-man's-land and would not be able to come to the House with any Budget proposals or that, at best, he would be able to come with one-year proposals. However, he has done infinitely better, because he has come to the House with four-year proposals, and that, of course, disappoints them immensely.

Then, of course, we had Mr O'Loan suggesting to his party a few months ago that the best way to stop this was to join up with Sinn Féin to form a pan-nationalist front. However, his suggestion was rebutted. He was sanctioned and put in the naughty box by his present leader, who said, "Look, be quiet for a while, because that is silly sort of talk".

At least he was an obedient servant; I will say that for him. He went away, was quiet for two or three months and was not seen for a long time, and then they allowed him out.

12.30 pm

I will now speak as Chairman of the Justice Committee. I do not intend to go over all the issues around the Department of Justice budget proposals, which I spoke on at Second Stage of the Budget Bill. However, there have been developments and further information in some areas, and I want to cover those today.

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

I welcome the final Budget proposals, which, once agreed, will bring certainty to Departments and enable them to get on with planning expenditure over the next four years. Every MLA should acknowledge that. Some will not, but they can answer to the electorate. I previously highlighted that, for the Department of Justice, one of the most crucial issues in the proposed Budget was the £200 million bid from the Chief Constable to the Treasury reserve to fund exceptional security pressures facing the PSNI over the next four years. At that time, I indicated the grave implications of that bid not being met in full. Since then, confirmation has been received that the UK Government will guarantee £199.5 million for the PSNI to help protect the community and tackle the threat from terrorism. Together with the additional £45 million provided by the Executive, that guarantee will enable the Department of Justice to take forward its key priority of protecting as far as possible front line areas across the Department, the voluntary and community sector and day-to-day front line policing. That is very welcome.

I want to express my thanks to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department for their assistance in dealing with the Treasury during those negotiations. The Department of Justice is, of course, still required to deliver savings and will have to ensure that spending is targeted at key priorities. The Department is required to deliver savings of £162 million by 2014-15. In its draft savings plan, the Department has indicated that achieving that will require the suppression of posts, a redeployment in headcount, workforce modernisation, absorbing vacancies, natural wastage, a reduction in office equipment, reduction in training costs and reviews of the frequency of research work.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. I did not want to let him go too far without him acknowledging the good work carried out by the Minister of Justice in bringing about the extra finance needed to protect our community.

Lord Morrow: I knew that I did not need to do that. I checked that Mr McCarthy was in his seat and, on seeing that he was, knew that he would do that and would save me any bother.

Of particular concern to the Committee were the indications from two justice organisations — the Police Ombudsman's office and the Probation Board — that there may be a need for redundancies to achieve the savings that they are being asked to deliver. The Minister of Justice recently responded to the concerns raised by the Committee, and I welcome the more than £1 million of additional funding that has been provided from within the Department's overall budget to minimise the impact on the front line service provided by the Probation Board. The additional funding to deal with cases referred to the Police Ombudsman's office by the Historical Enquiries Team will provide flexibility to reallocate staff in that organisation. I am, however, still concerned that it is difficult to assess the full impact and implications of the proposed savings on the delivery of services. That is unlikely to become apparent until the savings measures are actually implemented.

Following the preparation of the Committee's written submission on the Budget, additional information provided by the Department highlighted other areas of concern and raised further questions around the level of required savings and their impact, particularly on areas of the justice system that were not apparent initially. The Committee is seeking further clarification and explanation. I am sure that the Minister, who Mr McCarthy spoke about, will provide that post-haste.

I turn to the Prison Service. The recent interim report by the prison review team indicated the need for a substantial and radical change programme. It is also clear that the current financial cost of the Prison Service is unsustainable and must be addressed. That presents a very difficult challenge. The Committee has expressed concerns about the Prison Service's ability to deliver the savings required. It also has concerns about whether the provision of £13 million for an invest-to-save programme is realistic to achieve the reforms

that are being considered. The Committee will wish to closely scrutinise the details of the proposed strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme.

The review team also stated that there was a need for a new custodial facility for women and that they should not be held at Hydebanks Wood. The Committee very much welcomes the provision of an additional £27 million capital funding from the Executive to the Department of Justice and supports the Department's intention to use that to develop the prison estate. It will be a challenge to deliver the requirements for a new women's facility and the redevelopment or replacement of Magilligan prison. Again, the Committee will wish to keep that under review.

There are challenging times ahead for the Department of Justice in the delivery of its key priorities and services within the expenditure proposals set out in the Budget. Nevertheless, I support the motion.

Mr Givan: Does the Member agree that the Executive's decision to provide funding for the training college at Desertcreat is a welcome move? That project was deliberately obstructed by the Health Minister.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for that valid point, which is worthy of comment. I must say that the Health Minister adopted a very unhelpful attitude. I thank the Executive for stepping in and saving the situation. Indeed, if it had been left to the Health Minister, we would probably not have had a training depot at Desertcreat.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The SDLP amendment calls on the Finance Minister to abolish the social investment fund and calls for an adequate four-year allocation for the social protection fund to protect vulnerable people from the impact of welfare cuts. It is my understanding that the social investment fund is to provide funds for organisations that deal with the most vulnerable and deprived. Therefore, I am not sure how those proposals would work.

Mr Callaghan: Perhaps the Member will share information with the House that the rest of us have not been privy to. I do not believe that any information or detail has been given about what the social investment fund, as it is called, will be spent on.

Mr Brady: The Member should read the Budget and other relevant documents. That might give him some explanation.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, I will not give way. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to be seated for a moment. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Brady: In the last election, the SDLP leader made much of going to Westminster to fight cuts, including welfare reform. Unfortunately, she seems to have given up the ghost on that as well. Her recent stance has shown the SDLP to be bereft of constructive economics. Welfare reform will have a huge impact on people across all levels of our society. The so-called reforms are an opportunity to impose punitive cuts on the most vulnerable.

Since the changes were put forward, initially by a British Labour Government and now by the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition, Sinn Féin has opposed the cuts and how the changes will be implemented. When welfare reform measures started to come through, we put forward amendments designed to protect the most vulnerable. We opposed the privatisation of areas of the Social Security Agency. However, we were told by the then Minister for Social Development, now the SDLP leader, that privatisation would not happen. It has happened. It is very apparent, with the introduction of people being medically examined for benefits, that medical support services have been privatised.

We were told that the current Minister for Social Development would not impose sanctions, but that is now happening to lone parents. I have had to deal with several cases in which lone parents, some of whom have children as young as seven, are forced to justify themselves. They are not available for work because of various domestic circumstances. It is welcome to read that a childcare strategy is being proposed in the Budget, because it is much needed. I have not heard much from the SDLP on that issue today or at any other time in discussions about the Budget.

The current Minister for Social Development has told us how he has made an impact on welfare reforms by meeting frequently with Lord Freud in London. As I have said in the past, he might

have had more success with Sigmund Freud, as he certainly has not had any success with Lord Freud. Changes are being implemented and will continue to be implemented.

The Minister talked about stretching parity to the limit. He needs to consider the most effective way of ensuring that vulnerable people here are protected and do not become more and more irrelevant. The Committee for Social Development produced a comprehensive report on disability living allowance, which was designed to help people receiving that benefit who were most in need, but it has been ignored. The buck stops with the Minister, and it is time for him to face up to the issues and do something constructive to oppose the cuts, instead of posturing.

Mr Callaghan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, I will not. Sinn Féin has been instrumental in ensuring that the social protection fund is brought into the Budget to protect the most disadvantaged, people who are on benefits through no fault of their own. I am getting fed up listening to all the so-called experts pontificating on the unemployed and saying that they should be able to get out of the situation in which they find themselves. I have been dealing for a long time with people on benefits, but I have never met anyone who is happy to live on benefits or considers it to be an acceptable situation. It is time that parties here stopped posturing, accepted the realities that we face and started doing something constructive to oppose the cuts and alleviate the hardship that they will undoubtedly cause. At least Sinn Féin will stand up for the underprivileged, the elderly, the disabled and the most disadvantaged in our society.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that the social investment fund will be delivered in a strategic way that will allow it to make a difference in areas where there is disadvantage and need? The SDLP amendment outlines eight different ways to reallocate the social investment fund across all Departments. It is a very small piece of funding, so it must be targeted. Communities will decide where the social investment fund goes. They will set priorities in their own communities.

Mr Brady: I agree absolutely. Even if the social investment fund is abolished, the social protection fund remains. I understood —

Mr McDevitt: Will Mr Brady give way?

Mr Brady: No, Mr Brady will not. Mr Brady has been listening to Mr McDevitt for the past few months and has not heard him say anything constructive yet.

On that note, I will carry on. It is my understanding that infrastructure is needed so that people can use the social protection fund. If the social investment fund is abolished and the infrastructure is taken away, it will be very difficult for people to access the social protection fund.

As I said, Sinn Féin will stand up for the underprivileged, elderly and disabled people and the most disadvantaged in society. We will not use their situation for political posturing.

12.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I will make a few comments about the Budget as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. First, the Committee welcomes the Executive's allocation of an additional £154 million to the Department of Education for the Budget period. The Committee also notes and welcomes the fact that the Executive Budget document states that that additional £154 million will:

"allow the Education Minister to direct more funding to frontline service delivery."

That is to be welcomed. However, I will return to that point.

Unfortunately, I must report that the Committee still awaits the Minister of Education's spending proposals and key information on the impact of her savings proposals. We desperately need to have sight of those. Despite not having that essential information, on 15 February, the Committee for Education provided a substantive response to the Department's draft budget to the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Education. That has now been published in the Committee's finance report to the House, and it is also available on the Department of Education's website.

One of the Committee's key concerns was the impact of the Minister of Education's proposal to remove substantial money from the aggregated schools budget. That money goes directly towards funding our schools and classrooms. I remind the House that the 2011-

12 saving was to be £2.65 million, and this builds to a colossal £180 million in year 4 of the Budget period. That is almost one fifth of the cuts to the school budget. It is only right that the Committee's concern is registered in the House. I trust that the Education Minister will use much of the additional £114 million of current expenditure to lessen her savings proposals in respect of the aggregated schools budget and thereby protect front line services in our schools and classrooms.

In its response to the Minister of Education's draft budget proposals, the Committee registered its concerns about the proposed transfer of £41 million from capital to current expenditure. That created a risk that there would be insufficient capital resources to fund statutory maintenance work. For example, there is a massive £250 million backlog of essential health and safety work to be done in our schools. I trust that the Minister of Education will not now seek the Executive's approval to reclassify the £41 million capital expenditure as current expenditure in 2011-12. As that reclassification would require his and the Executive's approval, perhaps the Finance Minister could confirm what the situation is. The Committee will also ask that question of senior departmental officials next week, and I hope that we will at last be informed about the Minister's spending proposals.

I want to make one final and important point about potential additional efficiencies or savings in the Education Department, which the Finance Minister may be able to shed some light on. Back in August 2010, he announced that there would be a joint PEDU and Department of Education efficiency review. The Committee was informed that stage one of that review commenced in mid-November 2010 and was to be reported on within six weeks of that date, with stage two due to commence mid-January and, again, be reported on within six weeks. That was to lead to a joint meeting of the Finance and Personnel Minister and the Education Minister in the week commencing 28 February 2011. Will the Finance Minister confirm whether that has taken place? It would seem that we have now run out of time as regards reporting back to the House about the work of PEDU.

I will now speak as a Member of the House. It was unfortunate that, when we were coming to the House today, we were subjected to a

member of the Ulster Unionist Party who, apart from knowing what day of the week it was, did not know much. It was the soon-to-be Member Mr Nesbitt — if the electorate are silly enough to send him to this House. We heard Mr Nesbitt on the radio this morning. He was not sure whether the Budget was a good or bad deal, and he then castigated the Department of Education over the establishment of the ESA. He was right that the Department squandered £10 million on the establishment of the ESA, a body that this party was very clear should not be established, and we gave reasons for that. However, the Ulster Unionist Party then cast doubt in my mind as to whether it was in favour of the establishment of ESA. Perhaps in some of their interventions that party's Members will confirm whether that is the case.

I move on to the SDLP and its attitude to the Budget. I was wondering whether that party should go through a rebranding exercise. There is a well-known airline in Northern Ireland called Flybe. Perhaps the party should become "FlySDLP", because it seems happy to propose to sell an airport but is not capable of bringing any logical or sensible proposals on the Budget or the future of Northern Ireland.

We can continue to play politics and try to get the sound bites, but the reality for the people in Northern Ireland is that we still require our services to be funded and supported. It is a shame and disgrace that the two parties on the Benches to my right are prepared this afternoon to abdicate every ounce of responsibility that they promised to the electorate when they were elected.

Mr McNarry: You have already done that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Does the Member want to intervene?

Mr McNarry: No.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: If he does not want to intervene, maybe he would have the manners to listen.

Let us remind the Member of where this all came from. Was it because of an alliance between the DUP and Sinn Féin, or was it because of an alliance called UCUNF — I think that that was the name, or was it New Force? The people of Northern Ireland will be reminded that the party on the Benches beside us in the House aligned itself with the Tory cuts.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member explain why the DUP backed the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats on, I think, five different occasions against Opposition motions in the House of Commons? Why did the DUP vote with the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in trying to maintain the Programme for Government? Explain yourselves.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

That comment is wrong and deserves to be put in landfill. Let us remind the people of Northern Ireland —

Lord Morrow: Which landfill site?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

I will ask the Member to clarify which landfill site we are referring to.

Let us be clear: it was the Tories and the Ulster Unionists —

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to make comments that are clearly at odds with the Westminster Hansard reports of June last year? Is it in order for him to make inaccurate comments?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member agrees with me that lots of things are not in order at the moment. I appeal to everyone to give the Member the opportunity to be heard, because, as Deputy Speaker, I also have a responsibility to know what is said. Carry on.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

When we start to unveil the Ulster Unionist Party's past on that matter, it is clear that it sits uncomfortably with it. It made a mistake; it has now ditched the Tories. Its members are now going to be Ulster Unionists — *[Interruption.]* Well, maybe it has not.

Mr McNarry: It is a franchise.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

It is a new version of McDonald's for Northern Ireland. Will the people of Northern Ireland forgive any politician in the House who does not see that there has to be collective responsibility? I do not sit comfortably with the fact that we have to have the governance arrangements in Northern Ireland that we do. Those arrangements were, by and large, the architecture of the Ulster Unionist Party. It created the 11 Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Now we have a situation —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

Now we have a situation where —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please resume his seat?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

— that party is unprepared to take responsibility. That is why this party will show leadership and will be endorsed on 5 May.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr McCallister, I again appeal to Members to allow the person who is speaking to be heard.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the DUP Members will want to hear what I have to say.

Turning to the issue of health, let us look at some of the achievements of our Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, in reforming the Department over the past few years. He has cut the number of trusts and changed the number of boards, having started in 2007 £600 million behind the position in England. He delivered £700 million in efficiencies in the CSR period that is drawing to a close. That is a mammoth achievement set against a backdrop of year-on-year rises in demand for services of 8%, 9% and 10%, more activity in the Health Service, pressures on technology and new developments and drugs.

So often, we in the Chamber simply debate health issues to the exclusion of social care and public safety responsibilities, such as the Fire and Rescue Service. I heard Members shout about the new college in Desertcreat. They seem to forget that, if the Budget goes through today, there may be the money to build it but no money to run it. That is what they have to focus on and remember when they vote on the Budget.

Who is setting out the case for an increase in health spending? Yes, the Minister, quite rightly, has led the charge in declaring that health needs increased funding. His permanent secretary wrote to the Minister of Finance to detail how the Health Service would effectively go bankrupt, but the Finance Minister seems

to ignore that. The Chief Medical Officer has questioned whether we can operate a safe Health Service with this Budget, yet no one from the DUP or Sinn Féin is coming up with any answers.

As regards the reforms, the Health Department is the only one to have fully met its RPA commitments and delivered the savings it was meant to. It has delivered real change on the ground. Where will this hit hardest? Sinn Féin and the SDLP debate the social fund or, as some people refer to it, the slush fund. It is claimed that it will help vulnerable people. How many vulnerable people does the Health Service help? Everyone who goes through its door is a vulnerable person. Everyone who needs social care or domiciliary care is vulnerable, and they need and demand our help and support. That is what this Budget is about. That is what this vote and this debate are about. Are we going to help those people, or are we going to turn our back on them and forget about them and say that we can sort that out the next time?

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I want to raise a point about the social investment fund. It is referred to on page 28 of the Budget document, but it contains little in the way of detail. That confirms the suspicion of your party and mine that this fund is simply a slush fund to be divided up between the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Mr McCallister: And then they have the nerve to say that we are light on detail, when actually —

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I really do not have time to, Mickey. On a normal occasion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would.

The Minister has welcomed some things in the McKinsey report — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat.

I am sorry to say that a couple of individuals to my right are persisting in shouting from a sedentary position. I warn them that they will find it much more comfortable to listen to the debate in here than somewhere else.

1.00 pm

Mr McCallister: There are things to be welcomed in the McKinsey report, but we should

not rush headlong into accepting everything in it, as the DUP and Sinn Féin would, without even asking whether that is the type of Health Service that we want.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I will see whether I have time.

I have considerable concerns about various aspects of the report. Issues that are to be welcomed include moving on generic prescribing, which the Minister is doing as part of delivering real savings through year-on-year improvements. That is the type of thing that will make a huge difference to the Health Service. The DUP and Sinn Féin need to decide which bits of the McKinsey report they are for and which bits they are against. Are they in favour of aligning prescription charges, dental fees and social care contributions with those in England — I did not think that Sinn Féin would end up wanting to do so much of what is done in England — or additional charges for outpatient appointments, GP attendances and inpatient stays along the lines of those in France and Germany —

Mr B McCrea: Who wanted that?

Mr McCallister: Apparently, the DUP wants us to accept the entire McKinsey report.

The introduction of such charges would break the founding principles of the NHS, which our party brought to Northern Ireland in 1948 and which we have continued to support. Time and again, Minister McGimpsey has said that the Health Service should continue to be free at the point of delivery. The DUP and Sinn Féin need to tell us whether they want to introduce additional charges for services such as domiciliary care. Is that the road that they want to take the Health Service down? That is the cornerstone of the debate. Do we want that type of Health Service? I accept that the Health Service is constantly evolving, but do we want to keep the principle that it should be free at the point of delivery? That is the difference between them and us. They want to charge people for GP appointments. They are happy to do that because that is what happens in the South, but they can afford that because they have so much money coming in. I believe in the founding principle of the NHS, and we should protect it.

Turning to wider economic issues —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I will if I have time, but I want to make a couple of points.

The First Minister should know better than anyone else about the mess that the coalition Government had to pick up after 13 years of Labour Government. When he first went to Westminster, a Conservative Government had to pick up another Labour Government's mess. Labour always ends in failure. We now have a Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition. Last year, I was a Conservative and Unionist candidate, and the bit in our manifesto of which I was most proud was our commitment to protect health. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government have honoured that commitment.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: No, I have only one and a half minutes left.

The coalition Government have honoured the manifesto commitment to health on which we stood and which, incidentally, the Finance Minister has not passed on in full to the Health Minister. He has to realise that we campaigned on that commitment. It is perfectly obvious that we did not win any seats. The DUP admits that its eight MPs have less influence at Westminster than we do with no MPs. Their MPs are irrelevant at Westminster. We need to tie into the national debate — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. That is better. The Member may continue.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I did not realise that I had upset them again.

Mr Hamilton made allegations about us canvassing on doorsteps. Should he not be ashamed of promising on doorsteps last year that the eight or nine MP seats that the DUP hoped to win would deliver? The DUP almost thought that it would be in government. It wanted to form some sort of Liberal Democrat-Labour Government and join all the nationalists as Little Ulster nationalists. The DUP wanted to do that instead of working in the national interest.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I think that the Member will find that I am out of time —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McCallister: Otherwise, I would be happy to take on any of those points. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sure that Members will want to discuss that matter over lunch. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Pat Ramsey.

The sitting was suspended at 1.05 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Dogs (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Dogs (Amendment) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 became law on 8 March 2011.

Budget 2011-15: Programme for Expenditure

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 7 March 2011. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Which amendments were:

No 1: Leave out all after the first “Assembly” and insert

“calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15, as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 7 March 2011, by allocating 38 per cent of the additional £432 million resources identified for key public services (as indicated in the Minister’s statement of 4 March 2011) to year 1 revenue for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and further calls for the spending requirements of DHSSPS to be reviewed annually thereafter over the Budget period and for the balance (62 per cent) of those additional resources to be allocated towards key public services by agreement of the new Executive.” — [Mr McNarry.]

No 2: Leave out all after the first “Assembly” and insert

“notes that the Budget 2011-15 is not based on any up-to-date Programme for Government; recognises the need to provide a more transparent and detailed breakdown of expenditure proposals over the four-year period as highlighted in the consultation process; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to revise the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15 to include a strategy to raise additional revenue and capital resources, to abolish the social investment fund and to reallocate the £80 million from that fund and any additional resources raised to provide for:

(i) significant interventions to grow the private sector;

(ii) public sector reform and new models of asset management to rebalance the economy;

(iii) increased investment in job creation, particularly in construction, renewables, ICT, tourism and the agrifood sector;

(iv) adequate funding to support front-line health services and to build more social houses;

(v) an adequate four-year allocation for the social protection fund to protect vulnerable people from the impact of welfare cuts;

(vi) greater support for the school building and maintenance programmes;

(vii) a guarantee that any public sector redundancies will not be compulsory; and

(viii) support for universities so that student fee increases become unnecessary.” — [Ms Ritchie.]

Mr P Ramsey: I am pleased to be called to speak and to support the SDLP amendment. As the SDLP spokesperson on employment and learning, I am, in one sense, pleased that an extra £50 million has been allocated to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). However, given the current requirements of the higher education sector, apprenticeship programmes and many other important areas, the Budget does not come close to addressing the complexities that need to be funded in this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. That begs the question of where the £50 million that has been allocated to DEL will go.

Our young people are faced with the prospect of higher fees for higher education. It is a system that many people from poorer backgrounds will simply not be able to access. That is not the kind of modern higher education provision that we should be laying before our future and younger generations. It is a shame that, although many Members have benefited from free higher education, it is proposed that we raise the financial bar for that vital opportunity out of the reach of many. I say that in the context of the exhaustive inquiry that the Committee for Employment and Learning carried out into young people not in education, employment or training, which took place over 12 months. We looked into the fact that there are 40,000 young people across Northern Ireland in that situation.

If we allow the increase in fees, we will ensure that more young people will find themselves NEET. The issue of young people who find themselves in those circumstances has to be a high priority in the CSR and the Programme for Government. I note that the First Minister is in the Chamber, and I hope that he will take note of that.

The £50 million that was allocated to DEL in the final draft of the Budget is quite simply not enough. Lifting the MaSN cap was a key indicator for the Ilex regeneration plan for the city of Derry. The Magee campus of the University of Ulster, which is in my constituency, would require £8 million more to increase its student numbers by 1,000. That would bring economic benefits not only to my constituency of Foyle in the north-west region, but to Northern Ireland generally. Of course, that is not within the scope of the Budget.

It has been recognised that more young people will want to remain here because, even if the fees were increased, they would remain at less than half of the level in England and Wales. We know for a fact that, over the past number of years, more young people from all of our constituencies want to pursue a degree in higher education. In those circumstances, how do we meet the demand? One way of doing it is to ensure that the maximum student number (MaSN) cap is relaxed so that we are able to allow young people from Northern Ireland to pursue higher education. If we do not do that, more young people will be abandoned and become NEET (not in education, employment or training). Because of the increased demand and limited capacity, only those who reach the higher A-level results will have access to higher education.

On top of that, an increase in student fees is required due to a lack of funds, and that will further deflate the higher education system. The Stuart review initially pointed to no increase in fees, and now the fiscal position means that, based on the Browne review and the existing CSR provision, there could be a massive yearly increase for the next generation of students.

If the proposed increase goes ahead, more students will want to study at local universities, which many people will see as a positive thing. However, we have the smallest higher education sector in the UK regions, and, with the efficiency measures being brought forward and sought from our universities, local people who want to go to local campuses could be turned away because they cannot afford it or because the universities cannot cope with the huge demand.

Queen's University will have £42 million in real terms taken from its budget up to 2014-15 because of the proposed Budget decrease and the cuts in the higher education budget.

In pure terms, that will mean a loss of more than 750 jobs and the closure of schools in the university, and it will affect more than 1,300 direct jobs in the service industry and the wider sector. It will further impact on the ability of the higher education sector to deliver high-class courses to our young people, particularly in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which we all acknowledge is where we should be going to prepare the future workforce and to help the local economy. Those 1,000 places to which I referred earlier relate to STEM subjects that the University of Ulster's Magee campus intends to increase.

All that has a knock-on effect on the economy in my constituency and on the regional economy. We are trying to create a smart, skills-based economy, yet the research opportunities and spin-off jobs that are created by our universities will be at serious risk, creating a tripartite stranglehold of increased fees, less choice and fewer research-led jobs, which, make no mistake, will have a detrimental effect on growth potential in the higher education sector and, therefore, in the wider economy. The Finance Minister said that the economy will be the number one priority. However, it will fail.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Ramsey: I do not have time to give way. The Minister has an hour and a half in which to speak, but Members have only 10 minutes.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will get you later then.

Mr P Ramsey: I am sure that you will. I will move on to apprenticeships. The draft Budget sought to remove funding from adult apprenticeship schemes throughout the region. In my constituency alone, 800 people benefit from such schemes through upskilling and gaining work-related qualifications. Skills and employment are key factors in the aforementioned regeneration plan for the north-west through Ilex. How can we seek to transform our economy, to grow jobs and to create wealth in our communities without the support that apprenticeship programmes bring to local businesses and the local workforce? A company in my constituency that delivers the ApprenticeshipsNI programme has a 98% success rate of adult learners achieving NVQ level 1 and NVQ level 2, yet it faces closure if the programme's funding is withdrawn. The cuts

will affect not only my constituency but all our constituencies.

The draft Budget seeks to encourage employers to bear a greater proportion of the costs associated with the delivery of other current adult programmes. How on earth can we expect employers to bear the cost of anything when the Budget will put their staff's upskilling opportunities at risk, price local students out of the market and make them less competitive?

I will now turn to a health-related matter. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) will get an extra £189 million in the final draft document, yet the service that we have to provide in Northern Ireland will still suffer major cuts. This morning, some Members had the opportunity to see a number of young people with severe learning disabilities who had come up here to ask us to champion their cause. Their parents and teachers from special schools also came along. Across Northern Ireland, some 600 children and young people with severe learning disabilities face the closure of music therapy services. It is a crying shame on the House if these savage cuts come down on the most vulnerable people in our community. I told the Labour Party leader face to face that this House and its Ministers need to be champions for people in our community who are vulnerable and less well-off. If they are not, those families, young people and people with severe learning disabilities will become more disadvantaged.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Ramsey: Sorry, Jonathan, I do not have much time.

I want to finish by thanking the Minister of Finance for being kind enough to meet all of the Foyle MLAs in relation to the radiotherapy unit. It is important that the House makes a statement on that. There is no point in saying that we have the capital for the project, but that we cannot provide the revenue money. It is not a project for Derry or for the north-west of Ireland —

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

Mr P Ramsey: It is a project to increase capacity for cancer sufferers who require radiotherapy.

Mr P Robinson: I want to indicate that, today, I will wear my hat as leader of the DUP, rather than as First Minister. Quite frankly, however, I

would say what I have to say no matter what hat I had on my head.

First, I congratulate my colleague Sammy Wilson on bringing forward the Budget in the most difficult of circumstances. There are Members of the House who have let the community down severely. One thing that became clear when people knew how difficult it was going to be was that they wanted politicians to set aside party political issues and not get involved in party point-scoring or play games with the Budget, but work together to reach agreement.

From the very first day, we knew that that was not going to be possible. When we had the Minister of Health coming in late, leaving early and saying nothing in between, it became clear that the Ulster Unionists were never going to sign up to the Budget. When we had the SDLP's posturing and phoney documents, which had no substance in reality, it was clear that that party was not going to sign up to the Budget either.

If one were an outsider listening to certain people in the Chamber, one would think that there was significant disagreement about the basic principles upon which the Budget is crafted. I want to test that in this Chamber this afternoon. I invite all of the parties that are present in the Chamber to indicate whether they disagree with any of the assumptions that I will make. If they do, Members can put up their hands and let us see, so that we can gauge the level of agreement and disagreement that there is and what it is that parties are disagreeing with.

The first principle is as follows: does anybody in the Chamber disagree with the fact that the most significant cause of the restrained Budget is the UK comprehensive spending review? No hands are going up. Let us go to the second issue. Does anyone disagree that £4 billion has been cut from the block grant? Again, no hands are going up. Therefore, we have established two principles on which the whole Assembly is agreed.

Does anybody disagree that during the most recent election, the key issue that was fought out on television and elsewhere between the main parties was the speed and, indeed, the depth of the cuts that would take place during the following period of government? The Conservative Party argued for immediate, speedy and deep cuts. The Labour Party argued that it should be done over a longer period. Does anybody disagree with that reality? Nobody

disagrees with that. Does anybody disagree with the fact that the Conservative Party and the Ulster Unionist Party advocated that the cuts should be immediate, deep and fast? Nobody disagrees with that.

Does anyone disagree that all of the other main parties from Northern Ireland, during the course of that election, argued that the cuts should be made over a longer period and that, because of Northern Ireland's particular position as the part of the United Kingdom that always lags last, its cuts should not be as deep or as fast? All of the parties here argued that, with the exception of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Therefore, we have agreed four basic principles so far. Does anyone disagree that, during the course of the election, none of the parties, except the TUV and the Ulster Unionist Party, argued in favour of cuts to the Northern Ireland Budget? No hands go up. Therefore, we agree on that principle as well. Does anyone disagree —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

2.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: If the Member had given way to me, I would have been willing to give way to him. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member may be playing the role of the teacher, but some of the pupils are misbehaving. Please make all your remarks through the Chair.

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure how many of them will pass their maths exams, given some of the amendments that have been tabled.

Does anyone disagree that the Executive have a responsibility to produce a Budget based on the CSR allocation that has been made to our block grant plus any additional revenue that we can gather ourselves? Does anyone disagree with that principle? Again, no hands are going up, so we are making real progress.

Does anyone disagree that the Budget produced by the Finance Minister identifies between £1 billion and £1.5 billion of additional spending power?

Mr O'Loan: I disagree with that.

Mr P Robinson: You disagree with that. Is your hand up?

Mr McDevitt: Will the First Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: If he is going to —
[*Interruption.*] Just a wee second, I am speaking.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. [*Interruption.*]

Mr P Robinson: I am speaking at the moment.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The style of the debate is not making life very easy for the Deputy Speaker. All remarks should be made through the Chair. The only “you” is me.

Mr P Robinson: Let me make it very clear to the Member: SDLP Members were invited to give way twice, and they refused to. They are getting dished out the same medicine that they have dished out to others. If you want to intervene in debates, you should be willing to let people intervene when you are speaking.

During the whole of this debate and the debate that we had on the draft Budget, nobody suggested — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. Members should not persist when it is obvious that the Member speaking does not want to give way.

Mrs D Kelly: There are no hands up.

Mr P Robinson: I recognise that there have been no hands up. Nobody has disagreed with any of the principles that I have stated thus far, and nobody has suggested during the course of this debate anything that would have taken the amount of additional revenue below £1 billion. Nobody has suggested that. Not one Member who has spoken at any time during any of the debates has been able to suggest that. I think, therefore, that we can agree that principle as well.

On the basis of those facts, two unassailable conclusions can be drawn. The first is that the only party in Northern Ireland that is directly responsible for our Budget cuts is the Ulster Unionist Party. The second is that far from being responsible for any cuts to the Budget, the Executive are responsible for increasing the level of the Budget and being able to increase the power of spend for Northern Ireland.

Let me deal with the distribution of our funding, which falls within the second issue. Does anyone disagree with the fact that, in cash terms, only four Departments end up with an increase in their budget? If Members have any difficulty with that, I ask them to go to

page 31 of the Budget document. They will see that only four Departments end up with a positive outcome in the allocation. Does anyone disagree that those four Departments are the Health Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)? Those are the only four Departments that end up with a positive allocation. It is the Ministers of three of those Departments who are suggesting that we should have a negative vote on the Budget, but it is their Departments that do best out of the Budget. I think that we have established another principle: the Health Department, DEL, DSD and DETI do best in respect of allocations. I think that we are making real progress, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let me move to the next issue. Does anyone disagree that the largest increase to any Department in Northern Ireland is to the Health Department?

Mr McCallister: Thanks to the Conservatives.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: If the Member does not want to listen to other Members, he should, at least, listen to himself. Earlier, he was on his feet criticising what he called a reduction in the Health Department budget. Now he is saying that we should thank the Tories for that increase. Not only has the Health Department got the best settlement in Northern Ireland, it has a better settlement than any Health Department anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In his intervention, Lord Empey asked Members to behave properly and not behave as if they were in P1 or P2. Who is behaving as if they are in P1 or P2 now?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. I ask Mr Robinson to resume his speech, and I ask other Members to stop making remarks across the Floor.

Mr P Robinson: Not only have we now established that the best allocations were given to the parties that seek to vote against the Budget, we have established that the Budget cuts were the responsibility of the Ulster Unionist Party and that the Executive managed to increase the amount of spend that they had.

Now let us look at their amendments to see the alternatives. The Ulster Unionists provide an alternative: take 38% of the additional funds provided by the Finance Minister and allocate them in year one to the Department of Health. Let us do some simple maths for the Ulster Unionist Party: 38% of that amount of money is just over £160 million.

Mr McNarry: Well done.

Mr P Robinson: Well done, indeed. Let us see how good the Member's maths are, because the amendment is in his name. He then suggests that we take that £160 million out of the amount of money in the first year. How much money is there in the first year? Did the Member look? There is only £55 million available out of that Budget in the first year. Therefore the all-wise, respected and responsible Member — incidentally, he says that about himself in the 'Newtownards Chronicle' [*Laughter.*] — wants us to take £160 million out of the £55 million that is available. Even the young children from schools in our Province in the Public Gallery would tell him that you cannot take £160 million out of £55 million, but the Ulster Unionist Party does not seem to have learned that lesson.

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

Mr P Robinson: I will spare the SDLP, only because of time —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr P Robinson: — but its only alternative to the Budget is to spend more money.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Robinson, your time is up.

Mr P Robinson: You cannot spend more money when the Budget is reduced because of the Tory/Ulster Unionist cuts.

Mr McNarry: Attacking other unionists; that is all you are good for.

Mr P Robinson: Mike Nesbitt will sort you out. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As I said last Friday, the Executive faced a choice. They could meekly accept the Tory cuts, as some told them to do. Some told the Executive to hurry up and sign off because if we did not do so in the same

time frame as Scotland and Wales, we would be failing the people of the North. The choice that the Executive took, which was the right choice, was to work hard to deliver a better way.

There is clear evidence that we were in a very bad place after the £4 billion Tory cuts that were imposed on us. The draft Budget put us in a better place, and the final Budget in an even better place, but that is not the end of the story. As the Finance Minister said on Friday, we have much more work to do to tap into the opportunities and potential that are still there.

We have found some solutions to the Tory-imposed cuts, which have the UUP's fingerprints all over them. It was not just a branding problem that resulted in the UUP's failure to get one MP elected; it was — and, in our opinion, still is — the links and ongoing connections with the Tory Party. One need only look at where the previous UUP First Minister is now: in the House of Lords as a Tory peer — Lord Trimble.

I want to touch on some key policy issues for OFMDFM: victims and survivors; good relations; children and young people; older people; tackling problems; and tackling poverty and deprivation.

There is considerable pressure on the Budget due to the Tory/UUP cuts. Members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister opposed those cuts, whereas the Chairperson of the Committee and the leader of the UUP assented to them. Today, the UUP leader's spokesperson, a former victims' commissioner — the First Minister made this point eloquently just before I got on to my feet — did not even know that the £4 billion of Tory cuts resulted in a bad deal for the North. The dogs in the street know that it is a bad deal. The public spending budget is under pressure, our economy is still in recession, and, as a result, the gap between the haves and the have-nots will undoubtedly increase unless we take steps to reduce inequality.

Sinn Féin is a party of equality that seeks to end the persistent patterns of deprivation that condemn whole sections of our community to poverty. New initiatives and approaches are required, and we simply cannot continue along the existing path. We have constantly said that we must change the patterns of the past to deliver outcomes for the most deprived across society. That is why we welcomed the introduction of the social investment fund of £80 million, which is targeted at the most

deprived and disadvantaged communities in the North. That is also why we welcomed the establishment of the social protection fund and the £12 million to roll out a childcare strategy aimed at supporting new measures to reduce barriers to employment and encouraging and supporting economic activity. The SDLP/UUP will vote against all that.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: I am sure that the Member will have his time —

Mr Callaghan: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: I will not. I have enough to say, and we have listened to the Member enough.

I am absolutely alarmed that the SDLP amendment proposes to abolish an initiative that is in development and withdraw £80 million targeted at ending or tackling deprivation. Although I am alarmed, I have to say that, as a member of Sinn Féin, I am not surprised. The SDLP abandoned those communities a long time ago, but Sinn Féin will not. Over the years, the SDLP sought, through political vetting, to close groups such as Dove House Community Resource Centre in Derry, the Conway Mill in Belfast and many others. Sinn Féin stands on its record for community-based participation and regeneration.

Mr Callaghan: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Member is wilfully misleading the House about history.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. The Member will resume his seat. I remind Members again that they should not shout across the Chamber. It is time to make a list of those Members who are not taking my advice and pass that to the Speaker. In future, those Members may not be called to speak.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Pól Callaghan referred to somebody as having deliberately misled the House. Will you rule on that, please?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be aware that the Speaker has already ruled on that issue. It is not out of order.

Mr Bell: It is not? Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member questioning my judgement?

Mr Bell: No, I am not, but further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to be extremely careful and to resume his seat.

Mr Bell: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is it about something different?

Mr Bell: No, it is the point about misleading the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but I am moving on.

2.30 pm

Ms M Anderson: The position that the SDLP took on political vetting is a matter of public record. So, I stand over my comments; they are factual, accurate and can be proved.

The SDLP settled for political privilege and gave up a long time ago the battle against deprivation and inequality. I spent two years working to get targeted proposals for the Foyle constituency that demonstrate in a mark II regeneration plan what will make a difference to the most deprived groups and, we know, as members of the strategy board and working group, where the resistance to all that came from. Some came from those privileged few.

Sinn Féin is working hard to tackle and resolve problems. We will continue along that pathway. The SDLP amendment, like its approaches, does not add up. The party is all over the place. It seeks to take £80 million of the social investment fund, which is set aside for deprived communities, to help to fill a gap of over £4 billion of Tory cuts to the block grant, and an additional reduction in excess of £400 million in welfare cuts.

Let us deal with the welfare cuts: the SDLP Minister has an opportunity not to implement the Tory cuts. He should refuse to fund the assessments needed to assist the Tory cuts for those on disability living allowance, the most vulnerable in our society. He does not have to do the assessments, and if he does not have the information, the Tories will not be able to use that information to cut the benefits of those who most need them.

You have to hear this one: Margaret Ritchie spoke at the party conference, as everybody

knows, about building a consensus with the UUP. We see that consensus today. However, we also see evidence of the SDLP/UUP/Tory link strengthening because, although Margaret Ritchie, Mark Durkan and many others went to Westminster to stop the Tory cuts, let us look at what Margaret Ritchie said in the House of Commons on 31 October 2010. This is how she was going to stop the cuts:

“on current expenditure, we are facing a cut in real terms of 7% by the final year of the CSR. That is challenging, but it is not insurmountable.”

Not insurmountable?

Mr Callaghan: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: What a fight.

Mr Callaghan: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: What a fight. That hardly challenged the Tory cuts. That was not what the people of the North —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am asking a particular Member on my left not to insist that other Members give way when it is patently clear that they do not wish to do so.

Ms M Anderson: That probably hurt a little bit there. Tá brón orm if it did, but I am just presenting you with the fact of what your leader said in the House of Commons. That was hardly a fight or a challenge to the Tory cuts. Not insurmountable? She might as well have said, “Sure, look, it doesn’t matter. We’ll cope with that. Sure don’t worry about it, you know.”

The SDLP/UUP/Tory relationship is a cynical consensus based not on what is best for the community but on what they believe is best for their parties. I believe they are wrong, but the people will judge for themselves. Let them go into west Belfast, the Shankill, the Bogside or the Fountain and tell the people there that they can continue to live in poverty and deprivation, and that they want the £80 million that the Executive were going to use to target the most deprived communities taken off them. Let them tell parents that affordable childcare policy cannot happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Ms M Anderson: I trust that the entire community will see through —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, your time is up.

Ms M Anderson: — what I regard as the toytown politics —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to resume her seat.

Ms M Anderson: — of the SDLP/UUP

Mr Lunn: I support the Budget. I commend the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his departmental team for finally bringing us to today’s debate and the vote.

I also commend those Ministers who have engaged constructively in the negotiations, recognising the difficult financial settlement imposed on us by the UK Government. We are in difficult times; we are not masters of our House in this country. It is encouraging that most Ministers, having fought the good fight on behalf of their Departments, are now prepared to acknowledge their collective responsibility and to work within the agreed terms for their particular areas.

Having said that, I do not wish to give the impression that the Alliance Party is happy with all aspects of the Budget. Like every other party in the House — the Finance Minister’s and Sinn Féin and, perhaps more so, the parties to my left and right — we have concerns. I will mention some of those shortly. For a start, despite the Finance Minister’s protestations in the last debate and earlier today, this Budget is not based on an up-to-date agreed Programme for Government, as would normally be regarded as good practice. He said earlier that it is all to do with the economy, but there is a lot more to it than that. We really have put the cart before the horse in that respect. I hope that the next Assembly can rectify the situation as quickly as possible, even though the Budget is, quite rightly, a four-year plan.

We do not think that the Budget has been sufficiently bold in promoting the economy, encouraging the modernisation of public services, investing in the green new deal, promoting a shared future or raising additional revenue. Although we have the beginnings of encouragement for Departments to address the cost of division, it has been a long time coming. Those costs and the long-term savings available have been estimated at various levels. At one time, Deloitte said £1.5 billion. Our party said £1 billion. It has been set at other levels by interested observers. They are frequently dismissed as unattainable, but does anyone still

deny that the extra cost, whatever the figure, of managing a divided society is a huge burden on public finances?

If the £300 million that is often quoted as the figure being wasted annually on segregated education could be squeezed out of the system, or, for that matter, if the £600 million that the McKinsey report states is capable of being saved in healthcare expenditure could be realised, the budgetary calculations for both those Departments would be transformed. They would be vastly different. However, wherever it came from, the extra money that has been found for the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education is most welcome.

As a member of the Committee for Education, I recognise the critical problems in respect of primary school funding, school maintenance and the schools estate, special educational needs and, of course, the nonsense of persevering with an out-of-date administration system when ESA is on the table and ready to go. I also have to recognise that the resolution of those problems is a long-term project. In the meantime, the extra allocation to education must be used to produce real improvements in educational outcomes, addressing literacy and numeracy and low educational achievement. It should not be used to prop up an inefficient and inflated administration system. A commitment to address the segregated nature of our education system should come with that funding. I am glad that the First Minister recently joined us in that opinion.

The extra funding for the Department for Employment and Learning is also welcome, provided that it can be used in a way that improves the necessary skills in the workforce and leads to an increase in the competitiveness of Northern Ireland business. Concerns are being expressed that adult apprenticeships are still under threat. We must aim to provide our major employers with employees who are equipped with the skills required, and I hope that the extra allocation to DEL will be used appropriately.

It is estimated that 45% of the voluntary and community sector's funding comes from a cocktail of departmental sources, which enables the remainder to be leveraged from outside sources. The various Departments involved need to work collectively to ensure that that

additional revenue is not lost as a result of their individual cuts to those services.

The extra funding to the Department for Regional Development has produced a commitment from the Minister to protect rural and community transport services, which is very welcome. However, we still have concerns about the effect of the Budget on transport services generally.

My party colleague Dr Farry dealt with the health issue earlier, so I will not dwell on it. In addition to what he said, the Alliance Party will call for the establishment of a cross-party working group to discuss and agree major reforms in the Health Service.

Just about every Member who has spoken in the debate has emphasised the critical importance of the Health Service to the people of Northern Ireland. That issue deserves special attention, probably at the level of an Executive subcommittee.

We have read the amendments proposed by the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, and although there are points in them that we would not disagree with, in their totality they are unrealistic at this stage of the process and we cannot support them. Both parties have had every opportunity to make their case during the protracted negotiations over the past few months. It is just not on to propose major amendments at this late stage.

We have stayed out of the inter-party dogfight that has characterised the debate so far, but it is hard to view the amendments as anything other than an opportunistic electoral ploy. Although I would not have used the phrase myself —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: I will in a moment.

Mitchel McLaughlin's description of the two parties playing silly buggers is probably close to the mark.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member inform the House what part of the SDLP amendment he objects to? That amendment is posited on the idea of creating jobs here, creating wealth and moving out of recession. What part of the Ulster Unionist amendment does he object to? That amendment aims to create a Health Service that provides for the needs of the most vulnerable and the sick in our society.

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr Maginness for his intervention. The aims of both amendments are perfectly laudable; I am saying that they are unrealistic at this stage of the process. Others have rubbished them.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Member not accept that this is the only stage of the process at which an amendment can be tabled to the motion on the four-year Budget, because this is the only time that the Assembly will have to debate the motion on the four-year Budget? Therefore, there is no other time to amend it. Is he saying that we should bypass our democratic right to seek to influence the Budget for the sake of his party not having to face up to the reality that it is propping up a bad Budget between Sinn Féin and the DUP?

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr McDevitt for his intervention. I stick to my point. The amendments could have been suggested earlier. There were other stages of the process at which parties could have brought amendments. Over the course of the protracted negotiations that have taken place over months, the SDLP and UUP had every opportunity to raise the points in the amendments and they did not.

The system of government that we are working under is far from perfect, but it demands that we work collectively for the good of the community. I hope that the other parties, particularly those to my left and my right, having made their point, come together, make the best of an imperfect situation and support the Budget. The public, commerce and industry — everybody out there — need certainty from us, and we are not giving it to them at the moment. I hope that in a few hours we can deliver that certainty.

Mr Bell: The major cause for us today cannot be one of celebration. The cake that we have been given to slice is substantially smaller as a result of what the Ulster Unionists and Conservatives have cut out of what we should reasonably expect. If the Ulster Unionists and Conservatives want to make a contribution, they should go back to David Cameron and ask for the £4 billion back.

It was no secret that that cut was going to happen. David Cameron went on 'Newsnight' and said that he would target Northern Ireland. That was before he came to a local hotel, posed with all of the Ulster Unionists and asked them to support his cuts agenda. They all lined up beside him. I was in a house in Strangford and

was explaining where the cuts were coming from, and the lady who I was speaking to still had the Ulster Conservative and Unionist New Force leaflet. I understand that there is a lot of airbrushing going on, but the people know who campaigned for the cuts and acted as Cameron's cheerleaders for the cuts one year ago. They want to airbrush him out of the literature now because they are the Ulster Unionist and Conservative spent force.

Mr Savage: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: Not yet; I will come to you in time.

Now that they are the Ulster Unionist and Conservative spent force, they want to airbrush Cameron out.

The literature is still in homes across Northern Ireland, and it is fresh in people's minds. When David Cameron appeared on 'Newsnight', he did not mess about. He said that he would cut Northern Ireland, the only part of the United Kingdom that is still in recession and that has one of the highest levels of relative poverty — and they laugh. They laugh at the poor, they laugh at the sick and they laugh at the hospitals that need £189 million. They find it funny, and they were cheerleaders for Cameron. A day of reckoning is coming. The UUP may airbrush Cameron out of its literature, but the people know who delivered £4 billion less to Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

At every single door, we will tell people that we prioritised the economy. The 20,000-plus small businesses that benefit from rate relief are not telling us not to. Is it not the case that the Executive have delivered more jobs than were delivered in the same period under direct rule? When we pushed that party and said that its sums did not add up, Basil McCrea's response was to cut funding to Invest Northern Ireland and stop job creation. At a time when we need to grow the private economy, they will stop job creation.

I served for 21 years on the front line of the Health Service in health and social care and child protection. I have a huge amount of sympathy for staff. I have family who are nurses and doctors. I served on the front line with my social worker colleagues, and I have probably forgotten more about what it is like on the front line of health and social care than Michael McGimpsey will ever know. I want the £189

million to go directly to health and social care, and I want a better deal than that party can give.

People do not forget that the Health Minister donned a cloth cap and stood at Belfast City Hall with the health unions to oppose the cuts, and then he took off his cloth cap and went with Cameron on imposing the cuts. People do not forget that it is not a cloth cap that he needs, because, in reality, he has cloth ears as far as the needs of patients and the most vulnerable people in society are concerned. When he posed with the unions wearing his cloth cap, he did not tell them that he was going to join Cameron in targeting them for cuts of £4 billion. He then took off his cloth cap and told them that they had cloth ears. Now he even tries to tell the unions that £189 million of additional money for health is a bad news story. That is pathetic.

I turn now to the SDLP amendment, which offers nothing and cannot be afforded or paid for. I do not know how poor Ms Ritchie leads the Spanish McDevitt and labour party, but she has to do it. She serves as the lady-in-waiting to Conall McDevitt, who can talk and wave his arms but cannot count. How did the SDLP offer to pay for its proposals? Pól Callaghan has run away to hide behind his freckles, but no amount of fake tan will spare his blushes on this one. The SDLP offered to sell Derry City Airport — the family airport for which John Hume appealed. From John Hume to Pól Callaghan, we have gone from hero to zero. I have heard of selling off the family silver, but I have never heard of selling off the SDLP family airport. Had the SDLP the good sense to send Helen Quigley, who serves on the council, instead of some minor party functionary Callaghan, who has now run away, it would have known that it was selling something that did not belong to it. With the SDLP, it is not Flybe, it is fly maybe. The SDLP wants to call the last flight out of Derry and sell off Derry City Airport. I do not know who will tell John Hume. Who will tell Ireland's greatest that he will have to take the boat?

Let me turn to the Farren fees. I asked the Minister for Employment and Learning about this, and he promised me, "Jonathan, if you get my Department an extra £40 million, I can stop the student fees increase." I said to him, "Are you on the record?" He said, "I am on the record; get me another £40 million, and I will stop the student fees increase."

I grew up as a working-class boy who paid no student fees. I received a grant, but I do not want to pull up the drawbridge behind me. When I was a student union leader in Belfast, we marched to oppose fees. This House had an opportunity to turn down fees. What happened? The British Labour Party, the SDLP's sister party, brought in fees, and then the SDLP had its opportunity. Did it have the moral authority of the House? Yes, it did. There was a unanimous vote in the Assembly not to impose the Labour Party student fees. What did the Minister do? He introduced the Farren fees.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: Now the SDLP runs and says, "We are the friends of the students."

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: Can somebody tell me what the Spanish for "no" is? It is "no"?

Every student who is in debt —

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The cut and thrust of debate is enjoyable. Some Members have a certain colour to their language, but is it in order, Mr Deputy Speaker, to address a Member in a way that refers to neither their constituency nor name?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to use proper names when addressing other Members.

Mr Bell: The Member's intervention is based more on the fact that the message will go out from this House that the SDLP wants to sell City of Derry Airport. The Member wants to knock me off the fact, which I will tell every student —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: I will not.

I will tell every student I meet that their £3,290 debt is a direct result of the SDLP. It is the Farren fee. It is the Farren debt. The SDLP should not play games with the students today, given that it had the opportunity to help them and to assist the most vulnerable. What did it do? Farren said, "This will cost £35 million. I cannot afford that, so I will ignore the entire Assembly and bring in SDLP student fees." That is the reality. The SDLP wants to punish the students.

What would happen if we did not have a Budget? The schools would close. Teachers would be put out of jobs. Classroom assistants would go. The

extra £189 million for the Health Service would not be given. The most vulnerable would feel it.

I say to the shameful Ulster Unionist Tories that, if they do not vote for the Budget, they are letting down the people of the Presbyterian Mutual Society. If this Budget does not go through, the assistance to the people of the Presbyterian Mutual Society will be lost.

I will vote for the Budget so that more money can be put into health and education. Danny Kennedy asked for £40 million, and now he has been given £51 million. I say to the SDLP/Tory alliance, as it now is, that it should be very careful what it does to student fees, because it has its £40 million and an extra £11 million. It is time that we in this House stood up for those who are most vulnerable.

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

Mr Bell: Please do not let down the people of the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

Mr Kinahan: I am extremely pleased to be speaking in this debate, particularly after the previous Member. As Members all know, because I said it in the previous debate, I find that many of the public with whom I talk are appalled by exactly that type of speech, as they consistently involve petty point scoring, half-truths, bending of truths and electioneering all the way through. Yet, I am caught doing the same thing, because we get trapped into it. However, there is a complete lack of honesty and sincerity.

I listened to my former party leader say earlier that we should spend more time debating incredibly important issues such as this one. However, if Members look back over this and the previous Budget debates, they will see that three quarters of the time was spent point-scoring. I go back to the plea that I made the last time that I spoke: we need to start talking to each other, discussing matters and coming up with a solution. Had the DUP and Sinn Féin worked properly throughout the past four years — I have been here for only two of those four years to see how this has not worked — by sitting down at group meetings to discuss everything and had carried on doing so, they would not have to say, "We attended the Budget review group and were, therefore, included". A lot more discussion was needed.

Lord Empey also mentioned that there had been an agreement to hold a meeting of leaders, but that never happened. Those are just two examples of why we should be talking to each other, discussing the things that matter and getting on with good government. A mass of people outside the Chamber think that this place is just a waste of space. We must, therefore, get better at this.

As Members would expect, I support my Health Minister totally. However, this is not just about supporting him but about supporting the whole health structure in Northern Ireland for the future. We are grateful for the offer of extra money, but, if that sum of money is not enough, it is not enough.

Mr P Robinson: So where are you taking it from?

Mr Kinahan: That is your job. This is where we fall into exactly the same trap every time.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I am not going to give way because you will have your time at the end. Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise for saying "you" instead of making my remarks through the Chair.

We have heard the Chief Medical Officer say that the Health Service is nearly on its knees. It is nearly bankrupt. However, we are getting sucked into petty politics here whereby we talk about one set of figures against another. We need to find the way forward. We know that the Health Service needs more money and that most of what it has to spend is decided by others across the water. I am, therefore, asking everyone here to do the proper thing and to actually talk to each other to come up with a solution. We know that there would be more money available in other areas if we cut road projects such as the A5 project, or even made some of the cuts in a better way. A lot of the Budget is thin on actual detail, so there must be more room to find money. Maybe there is another £4 million under a bed somewhere that will turn up another day.

I am the environment spokesman for the Ulster Unionist Party. Little has changed in the environment budget, but I welcome what is there. It has been looked at, but, again, there is a lack of detail. The non-governmental officers who deal with the environment here on our behalf and who follow the European guidelines do not as

yet know what has been cut and what the effects of those cuts will be. However, we know from OFMDFM that we are not properly engaging in Europe. We do not know what infractions are coming forward, but any small cuts to that chunk of the Budget may lead to enormous fines. We, therefore, need to know more.

I spoke against the extraordinary motion to gain accelerated passage for the legislation on plastic bags. The levy would raise £4 million, which seems sensible, but that would be achieved not for the environment but for the Budget. We, therefore, opposed it. Then, there was a complete about-turn. The legislation will now come back to whoever is here in the next Assembly mandate, when there will be proper consultation on it. We can take that forward when we know how it really affects the environment and the Budget.

We need better government instead of hiding behind the vagaries of what we are doing at the moment. In the past four years — as Members know, I was not here for all of them — the RPA came through, which cost us £120 million or so, but it did not get anywhere. A document on the same thing is out for consultation at the moment. However, the Budget has nothing about the savings from or, indeed, the cost of the RPA.

If we all sat down and discussed those matters properly, we could deal with them, instead of coming in here and wasting three quarters of the time point scoring.

3.00 pm

I have made my points. I do not need 10 minutes to do that. When the public watch a debate such as this, they really do think that it is a waste of time.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At the outset, let me say that I will not take any interventions, particularly from my SDLP colleagues, because of what Mitchel McLaughlin referred to earlier as the 90-minute monologues that we have heard from them in the last few weeks. Someone classified those perhaps better as the anal monologues, given what we had to listen to.

Although we have heard a lot about the Budget and its proposals, we, in Sinn Féin, think that we have not heard much about the detail. For example, the SDLP's amendment:

"recognises the need to provide a more transparent and detailed breakdown of expenditure proposals".

To go from this to the detail of the Budget speaks for itself. A line in the amendment refers to:

"significant interventions to grow the private sector;".

The amendment refers to "increased investment", "adequate funding", "adequate four-year allocation", "greater support" and "a guarantee". Those are the types of proposal in the SDLP amendment. Not one of them is costed; not one of them produces a figure. As Mitchel McLaughlin said, not one of them puts a single extra pound into the Budget that we all have to deal with.

I also went through the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. In an overarching sense, the Ulster Unionist Party's contribution thus far defies credibility. It has no credibility. Its contribution to the debate came, on the one hand, from its new economic guru and celebrity candidate, Mike Nesbitt. On the radio this morning, he could not work out in his own mind whether the £4 billion cuts were a good idea or a bad idea. He went on to say that, if you agree with the Barnett formula, the cuts are fair, but, if you do not, they are not fair.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maskey: No, thank you. As I said, I will not be taking interventions from quarters that, in my opinion, have had ample time to speak and address these important matters but have not addressed a single issue with any credibility.

We have also heard from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety himself. I have worked with Michael McGimpsey in the constituency for a number of years, but his behaviour as a Minister has been deplorable.

Mr F McCann: Hopefully, I fit into the category of people who the Member will give way to.

Listening to the Ulster Unionists this morning, I heard one of them talking, rightly, about the vulnerable people who go through the Health Service. What he failed to mention is that his party fully supports the welfare reform cuts that will devastate communities across the North.

Mr A Maskey: Thank you very much. The Member generally makes very worthwhile contributions, and that was another.

The Ulster Unionist Party contribution has least credibility, particularly as it is part of the party that imposed the £4 billion cuts on our Budget in the first instance. It does not have a leg to stand on. As I said, I have worked with Michael as a constituency representative and have worked very well with him over the years. However, I am sad to say that his performance as a Minister and his recent remarks, which characterise his contribution, have been very limited and very poor. When asked where some of the other money would come from, his attitude and response, which was repeated by one of his colleagues a moment ago, has been that that is not his problem, it is not up to him, "Find it somewhere else yourself". If that is the level of contribution that we are getting from him, it is scandalous.

Last night, I watched a television programme in which GPs talked about the way in which they have been able to manage their budget and save millions of pounds by switching from branded to generic medicines. That saved a massive amount of money. On the same programme, a trade unionist referred to the figure being saved in that pilot project as equivalent to 1,800 jobs. By my calculation, those 1,800 jobs are almost half of the 4,000 jobs we are told that the Budget will cost the Health Service. I look forward to hearing the trade union say that. That trade union representative said that this is the way to go. I welcome that, because it shows that there are people in the Health Service who are determined to play their role in making efficiency savings and cost savings and in meeting and coping with the difficulties faced by all Departments, including the health Department. I welcome that very positive contribution, which I saw on television last night.

It is important to remind ourselves that the SDLP fought last year's election campaign almost exclusively on the basis that it needed to be returned to take its seats in Westminster so that it could stop the very savage cuts that everyone knew were coming. The First Minister referred to that a few minutes ago. That, of course, has been an abysmal failure. I do not fault the SDLP for not being able to reverse the cuts decisions of the British Tories and the Lib Dems. In fact, before last year's election, the First Minister and deputy First Minister invited all the parties to work together to challenge the British Government's proposed cuts. Where I do fault the SDLP's failure to stop the cuts at

Westminster, as it said it would, is that it has completely ignored the fact that those cuts were imposed on people here by the British Government in London. The SDLP has tried, for its own narrow political interest, to blame Sinn Féin and the DUP, which is incorrect and quite disgraceful. Instead of rolling its sleeves up with the parties that are trying to make sense of the cuts, find additional revenue savings and further explore what additional resources might be delivered in the time ahead by changing legislation if that is what is needed, the SDLP has criticised every proposal, recommendation or suggestion for the Budget.

The SDLP's contribution has been shameful. I am no fan of the SDLP. However, the juvenile, schoolyard behaviour and commentary of some SDLP representatives in the Chamber over recent weeks makes people such as Séamus Mallon, Bríd Rodgers and others seem like giants by comparison. Those Members' juvenile, immature expressions, catcalling and name-calling belittles the Chamber and demeans the party itself. I dearly wish that people who vote for the SDLP had the opportunity to read in Hansard the remarks, interventions and contributions made by a fairly small coterie of SDLP Members. Their remarks have been shameful.

The people we all represent want to hear what the Budget is about, what all the parties here are prepared to do, what we are trying to do and what we are committed to doing in the time ahead. This four-year Budget will evolve and develop. That will require all parties, whatever their size or mandate when they come back here, to face up to the challenges.

The SDLP has given no words of welcome or encouragement to anyone who has tried to ensure that a major focus of this Budget is job retention; the rate relief scheme, which is about redressing the imbalance in favour of local, indigenous small retail businesses as regards out-of-town shopping, arterial routes and town-centre shopping; and funding to ensure that we protect front line services in the education sector, through the school building programme, and the Health Service. It is interesting that the Budget proposes to provide more money to the Health Service than is contained in the UUP amendment. That is a startling illumination of how shoddily that party has behaved. Those in the Executive who are working collectively, sensibly and constructively are trying to

ensure that they protect the road building programme, build our infrastructure, look after special needs children, ensure that those who suffer from educational disadvantage and underachievement get the additional resources necessary to give them an opportunity in life, and deliver the childcare strategy contained in the proposals.

As I said, people in our community want to hear hope over negativity from the parties here. They want to hear proposals over criticism, and, more important, they want to hear maturity over juvenile politics.

Mr Attwood: I suggest that Alex Maskey listen to himself. He berates one party for what he refers to as juvenile and schoolyard behaviour and language. He should reread his opening remarks in Hansard and then draw a conclusion about who has been juvenile and who is of the schoolyard. It is certainly not the SDLP.

There is no doubt about it: this Budget could have been much better. This Budget, this vote and this moment have been coming for the past two years. We should have been preparing for this moment for the past two years, but it was not for lack of opportunity. Two years ago, the SDLP and a range of other economic commentators said that we needed to plan for this moment, reconfigure our Budget and explore other revenue-raising options. Two years ago, when the SDLP made that proposal, Sinn Féin and the DUP, in my view for political reasons, recklessly disregarded it.

As a consequence, we are now running to make up time. Rather than having in place the law that would enable us to take money from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and rather than having in place the mechanisms that would allow for the responsible disposal of public assets in Northern Ireland, all the good work that could have been done over the past two years has not been done. Two years ago, when this budgetary situation began, the DUP and Sinn Féin refused to take up the opportunity provided by the SDLP and many others to get the Budget processed and fit for purpose in a way that would deal with people's needs.

I remind the Assembly what it endorsed on 28 September 2010. A resolution stated that, in supporting me in my negotiations in London on welfare, the Assembly urged:

"the introduction of appropriate measures to ensure that the proposed welfare reforms do not have a disproportionately negative impact on Northern Ireland." — [Official Report, Volume 55, No 6, p326, col 2].

That is what the Assembly unanimously endorsed in the autumn of last year. That was to be translated into our Budget in Northern Ireland to ensure that our people were not disproportionately disadvantaged by what was coming from across the Irish Sea. I proposed a hardship fund of £20 million and £30 million each year over the next four years. What was the response of the Alliance Party, the DUP and Sinn Féin last Thursday? It was to endorse a hardship fund of £20 million in year 1 only, with no guaranteed funding and no Budget line in years 2, 3 and 4. How can we credibly go to London and argue that the Government should not pursue reforms that have a disproportionate impact on people in Northern Ireland when our own Government, when they had the opportunity to put money on the table to protect people in welfare need, did not take that opportunity?

At the same moment, when the Executive refused to endorse a significant hardship fund for people in welfare need, the Alliance Party, DUP and Sinn Féin raised their hands for another Budget line, a Budget line of £80 million for the so-called social investment fund. I suggest to the House that we drop the "I" in SIF in order to see the real tale behind that proposal. When the Executive voted for that proposal, they did so without a scrap of paper being produced, without any conversations with any other Ministers and in a way that was over the heads of the community. How can Members reconcile a proposal for a hardship fund for the many, getting £20 million in year 1 only, with a proposal to give £80 million to a select group over the four years of the Budget term? What message does that send to people in need in Northern Ireland?

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. Only people in the know will have access to that £80 million. What sort of values, ethics and politics does that demonstrate to the people of Northern Ireland, especially those who are in need?

Ms J McCann: Does the Member not think it a contradiction that, when he is talking about protecting the vulnerable and those who are most disadvantaged and in need, his party's

amendment will take £80 million away from the moneys that are going in? That is additional money. The priorities will be set by local communities. Is that not a contradiction? The SDLP wants to divert money for that fund into eight different areas, and it will not make an iota of difference to the people and projects that really need it — those who are disadvantaged and in need and those who are vulnerable.

3.15 pm

Mr Attwood: Let there be no doubt about it: I endorse money going into areas of need in Belfast and elsewhere, but what I do not endorse is what a political representative said at a meeting in the City Hall, when those in the know were developing the proposal for the social investment fund. That political representative said, “I do not give a so-and-so about Tigers Bay. This is our money”. That is the thinking behind that proposal: to deliver money in an elitist and exclusive way —

Mr O’Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member to quote from an alleged meeting without producing the actual document, quotation or reference point whereby other Members can confirm that quotation?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have no idea what the document is, and I have no intention —

Mr O’Dowd: That is my point exactly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Allow me to finish. I have no intention of getting involved.

Mr O’Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is the role of the Speaker to get involved. I asked, on a point of order, whether it is appropriate for a Member to refer to a quotation without —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Resume your seat, Mr O’Dowd. I cannot, as Deputy Speaker chairing this meeting, get involved in a debate. Continue, Mr Attwood.

Mr O’Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have asked a question — *[Interruption.]* If there were some order in the House, I could get my point across. I have asked whether it is appropriate for a Member to make reference to a quotation from a meeting without referring other Members to the meeting or to the document to confirm the quotation. I ask for

a ruling, not for anyone to involve himself in the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has made his point. I hope that he appreciates that I know nothing about the document, so how can I get involved? Continue, Mr Attwood.

Mr Attwood: It is highly revealing that Sinn Féin’s line of defence of this Budget is an attack on the SDLP. That is the level of conviction that it has for this Budget. Commentators have remarked that Sinn Féin’s contribution to the Budget debate — save for Mr O’Dowd’s intervention on my remarks, which seemed to irritate him — reveals a party that is unable to think and act boldly, has Ministers who are in government but not in power and has less and less to offer, except for what the DUP tells it to. That is the narrative that people are beginning to draw from Sinn Féin’s contributions.

My reply to the Member is that dozens and dozens of community organisations have come to me and others and complained about the elitist and exclusive way in which that proposal has been developed. That is confirmed by the fact that not one scrap of paper has been produced to government to date detailing how that money has to be spent. I rest that particular case.

Last Thursday, a senior Minister said to me:

“There is an argument to consult Ministers, but things happen at the last minute”.

Think about that as a concept. In what is meant to be a Government of five parties, dealing with the most severe Budget situation in a generation, the basis on which decisions are made is:

“There is an argument to consult Ministers, but things happen at the last minute”.

That means that, when £80 million was taken from the housing budget, which equates to 1,000 houses over the next four years, at a time when we will have increased housing stress and need, when people are going to lose their house because of mortgage arrears and the banks’ practice of repossession, the conclusion of this Budget is that, although there is an argument to consult Ministers about that kind of proposal, other parties and Ministers can impose their will, irrespective of the consequences.

The same happened on Thursday afternoon with respect to the jobs that would have been created by the Royal Exchange development in the city centre. The hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs that could have come on stream over the next number of years are impeded because the Finance Minister decided at the last minute and in a unilateral and arbitrary way, without consulting Ministers, to pull down the shutters on the development of Belfast.

This Budget process tells us one thing: the DUP and Sinn Féin believe that what is good enough for them is good enough for everyone. It is not. It is not good enough for those two parties to have buried their head over the past two years rather than take best advice about preparing for this budgetary situation. It is not good enough that 1,000 fewer houses will be built in Northern Ireland over the next four years because of arbitrary and unilateral decision-making. It is not good enough that the many in need will suffer because of the few in the know.

In the next few hours, many Members will dutifully vote for the Budget. I will not be one of them.

Mr G Robinson: On behalf of my party, I am pleased to speak today in the Budget debate, as I wish to expose the hypocrisy of some Ministers in the Executive.

To begin with, we must all remember that the Northern Ireland Budget has been cut by £4 billion over four years thanks to the UUP and Tory manifesto. Some Ministers have short memories. This time last year, they were campaigning for the Westminster election on the issue of cuts, but, now, they do not wish to take the responsibility for the unpleasant reality that they supported less than a year ago. I have listened to some Ministers, in media reports and in the Chamber, trying to distance themselves from the cuts that they supported and the damage that they are doing to Northern Ireland.

We have a health system that is better funded than any other in the UK. As almost 50% of the entire Northern Ireland Budget is spent on health, where does the Minister want to make cuts? Does he want to cut education, training or apprenticeships? Does he want to reduce investment in the water infrastructure? The Health Minister and his party want more cuts to bolster his budget. Tell this Assembly where to make them. Perhaps he supports his colleague Basil McCrea in calling for a cut to the Invest Northern Ireland budget.

The pill that the UUP and Tories have forced on Northern Ireland is bitter. The UUP and the SDLP have to understand that they are part of an Executive who have been partly starved of funding thanks to the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition in Westminster. That coalition is heaping pain on the people of Northern Ireland and strangling the Executive's ability to do everything that they hoped for. The Finance Minister finds himself in a thankless job that some parties criticise. However, he is doing a superb job in difficult circumstances.

Do the UUP and the SDLP not sit in a coalition Executive and a Budget review group, where they had every opportunity to have a responsible input into the Budget instead of making spurious criticism? In a challenging economic environment, the Finance Minister has managed his Budget well when you consider that he has to deal with £4 billion less than he hoped for from Treasury and its UUP cheerleaders. Any Minister or party who does not accept reality, threatens to resign or just complains is guilty of the worst type of electioneering and should be roundly condemned. This Budget is about the people of Northern Ireland, not the political advantage of individuals or parties.

I commend the Finance Minister for finding a way to deal with the cuts and still produce a four-year Budget, which some parties said would never happen. If all Members would only live in the real world and accept that fact, it would be much better for all of us. I commend the Budget to the House.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Robinson: Unfortunately, I am finished.

Mr Bell: Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Fra McCann.

Mr Bell: Can I ask the Member —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am quite sure that Mr Robinson was finished. There cannot be an intervention after a Member has finished speaking.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde. I want to respond to something that the Social Development Minister said about his work on welfare reform with Lord Freud. Weeks ago, on radio, the Minister said that he was able to move the British Government into his way of thinking on incapacity benefit and ESA. When I

challenged him in the House, he admitted that it was on a minor technicality and that, at the end of the day, he was unable to move the British, who were going ahead with savage cuts under welfare reform.

It comes as no surprise to me that the SDLP has adopted this stance. In the past several weeks, we have seen the party's economic document torn to pieces by the Minister of Finance and others in the House. When challenged to put meat on the bones of their rantings, as they have been on numerous occasions, SDLP Members adopt the Ulster Unionist position of waffling rather than making concrete suggestions on how to deliver better services in this time of need.

Sinn Féin has been to the fore in arguing that, at all costs, front line services and those in need must be protected. We have argued with others and got £80 million over four years for the social investment fund to help those in areas of high deprivation. There is also £20 million for a social protection fund.

I have interrogated the Minister for Social Development and his officials at length about what their proposed budget will deliver over the next four years. Sinn Féin did so to see what picture is emerging from the Minister and his Department. I have to say that they gave depressingly little information. For example, they were uncertain about how many new social houses will be built during the lifetime of the Budget. I asked what impact the Budget will have on the maintenance of Housing Executive properties; they were uncertain about that as well.

The Minister and his Department said that they were guided by the Savills report for the Department, which stated that properties were maintained to the highest standard. Yet, 17% of Housing Executive properties do not meet the decent homes standard, and 11% of those failed because of inefficient heating systems.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No thanks.

There are also 3,000 Housing Executive tenants with glass-fronted fires. Will homeowner grants, which are essential to the upgrading of homes, be maintained? Will Egan contractors, who supply replacement windows, kitchens and doors, be maintained? What will the impact of the cuts be on all other aspects

of maintenance? Those factors will have consequences for the condition of public and private sector housing. If such provision is reduced, there could be thousands of job losses in that part of the construction industry.

What are the consequences of the proposed job losses in the Housing Executive over the lifetime of the Budget? They are also unsure of that, yet the figure of at least 500 jobs going in the Housing Executive — a fifth of the workforce — is doing the rounds. What impact will that have on the Housing Executive's ability to deliver services? It may be that this is part of a long-term strategy to downgrade the Housing Executive as a regional housing body.

In the midst of all that, the Minister said that there would be no redundancies in his Department, which has grown significantly in the past four years. It seems that, except for his Department, everything is up for grabs. We have argued for some time for action on the mortgage protection scheme. How have the Minister and his predecessor responded, except by making some money available for advice and conducting a costly consultation process, which was confusing and delivered nothing? The Minister has applied for money in almost every monitoring round for a mortgage protection scheme. However, he made no effort to adjust his budgets to ensure that an effective scheme was delivered, despite the fact that, in the same period, multiple millions of pounds went unspent in other parts of his budget. Hopefully, he will apply to the social protection fund for money to protect those in danger of losing their home. I am sure that his Executive colleagues would support the fund's use in that way.

That brings me to the subject of the Royal Exchange. I read a press statement in which the Minister warned of the consequences of losing £70 million in the third year of the Budget for that project. What he does not say is that, during the present mandate, he and his predecessor twice handed back £110 million that was earmarked for the Royal Exchange.

We have argued that he should end the sequencing of developments in Belfast, but he ignored us. We also asked that he argue for the money that he had available for the Royal Exchange to be spent on clearing up the severe dereliction in the north and west sections of Belfast city centre in order to deliver economic regeneration.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

3.30 pm

The Minister for Social Development can run, but he cannot hide from his responsibilities. His cynical approach to the Budget has more to do with the election than with delivering a service. He should remember the old saying: you can fool some of the people all the time or all the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time.

Mr Poots: When looking at the Budget, one needs to reflect on the necessity for it to cover a wide range of areas. Although the debate has concentrated largely on Health, it is important that the Executive and the Assembly reflect the community's needs. Indeed, to have a healthy population, a wide range of areas need to be financed. Does anybody honestly believe that we would have a healthier population if we did not have clean air or water, which are very important issues for DOE and DRD? Does anybody believe that people would be less obese if they did not participate in recreation? Indeed, when Minister McGimpsey was in DCAL, he argued that Health should have less money and that more money should be directed towards DCAL so that people could engage in sport and recreation, which would keep them out of hospital.

The position that Minister McGimpsey took at that time was perfectly logical. Coming from a farming background, I know from looking after animals that prevention is better than cure. The same thing applies to the health of the population: prevention is better than cure. Keeping people out of hospital is more cost-effective and better for the population. Mr McGimpsey seems to want to spend all of his money on hospitals, but none on keeping people out of them. Should I do away with my road safety budget, given that we have halved the number of people killed on the roads last year and given that the number of serious accidents was reduced by 24%, both of which kept people out of hospitals? Should we not put money into those things, or should we only put money into clearing up the mess afterwards? I do not think so, but that is the line that the Ulster Unionist Party is promoting: everything should revolve around Health, and the other Departments have no consequence.

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for Lagan Valley for giving way. I invite him to comment on the fact that, on Friday, the Health Minister told us

on the radio that he had not lost any nurses, yet on Monday, on the radio, the Royal College of Nursing said that it had lost 200 nurses. Is it not the most shameful incompetence to lose 200 nurses in a weekend?

Mr Poots: I will leave it to Mr McGimpsey to pass comment on that matter.

In the past year, Tory Tom's team recommended that the people of Northern Ireland should support the Conservative and Unionist Party. That party then cut £4 billion from the Northern Ireland Budget, leaving the family in Northern Ireland with a smaller cake. What happens when we come to divide that cake among the Departments? The UUP's Ministers want more. Having ensured that we have a smaller cake, they then ask for more of it. Indeed, very generously, many of us allowed them to have more. In fact, Health now has 43.5% of the cake, which is more than when David Trimble was First Minister. Health now has a higher proportion of the Budget. If Minister McGimpsey wants to challenge that, I will give way to him. I hear silence, so it is quite clear — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to be heard.

Mr Poots: When the pack is howling, you know that the stones are landing, and I need no help to deal with the howling pack.

The reality is that the current Executive are putting more into Health than the Executive led by the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP.

Mr McGimpsey received an 8.3% uplift, which Mr McCallister earlier claimed was a cut. How does an 8.3% uplift in a budget transpire to be a cut? The Department of the Environment budget has been cut by 6.6%, which is a real cut.

How has Mr McGimpsey handled his budget? Recently, we had an announcement that people will no longer be able to buy branded drugs but will have to buy generic drugs. That will lead to a saving of £30 million per annum. Why was that decision not made at the start of the term? Why did Mr McGimpsey give £100 million of taxpayers' hard-earned money to the plcs? That is not a very socialist policy and is, perhaps, a way of supporting his Conservative friends. The Ulster Unionist Party's engagement in the Executive on this issue — particularly from Minister McGimpsey, because Minister Empey and Minister Kennedy engaged in a somewhat

different way — was irresponsible, opportunistic, duplicitous and hypocritical.

Perhaps after 5 May, Mr McGimpsey may not be the Health Minister, and he might be looking for something else to do. He may well consider, for example, taking up songwriting. Mr McGimpsey is very often down in the dumps and sad, and country music can sometimes be a bit sad. What about poor Dolly Parton? If Michael was writing the lyrics, he would say that the 'Coat of Many Colours' would become a body warmer, and instead of being in many colours, it would be all grey.

Mr McNarry: Dolly Parton could do with a body warmer. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: He could always take up musicals and use a line from 'Oliver Twist' and say:

"Please, sir, I want some more."

Perhaps 'Les Misérables' would be more suitable for him, or perhaps he could go down the opera route, because that really is depressing. Perhaps he could try popular music and start off with 'Money, Money, Money' and the line:

"If I had a little money".

He could then move on to 'The Crying Game'. Then he would be 'All Cried Out' and, ultimately, after the next election, he will have met his 'Waterloo'.

However, the Ulster Unionist Party has been found wanting, and, in particular, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has said the same thing every year over the past number of years. He has said that he does not have enough money, yet he was able to offer free prescriptions and give £100 million to the plcs to buy generic drugs. He has been caught out. He is the boy who has cried wolf. Had he come to the Chamber today to make the argument that he has identified savings for the NHS and the difficult decisions that he can make to deliver for the Health Service but that he needs £x million to supplement that, we could have looked at and addressed that argument. However, we have simply heard the same argument and rhetoric. He says that he does not have enough money and has never had enough money, yet he has engaged in stupid giveaways.

Danny Kennedy was making lots of threats over the weekend. If Michael had been writing a tune for him, it would have been 'Should I Stay or Should I Go'. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: However, like the Art Garfunkel tune 'Bright Eyes', he is the rabbit caught in the headlights and, ultimately, as in the Squeeze tune, they have put the top on the bottle and bottled the decision that they could have made to step down from the Executive if they are not satisfied with the Budget.

We are coming into an election, and the Ulster Unionists have played a cynical game with the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. The Budget has been set out and seeks to deal with the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves because of the cuts from the Conservatives/Ulster Unionists. As a result, we have sought to get the best possible deal out of what is on offer to us and to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland have a good and continuing Health Service.

I will lay it on the line today: this time next year the Health Service will not be bankrupt. There will be no chapter 11. It is an untruth, and we will not have a bankrupt Health Service. We may have a bankrupt Ulster Unionist Party because of the policies that it is putting forward, but the Health Service will survive. In fact — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Poots: Unlike the Ulster Unionist Party, it is more than likely that the Health Service will thrive, in spite of what Minister McGimpsey has left behind through his mismanagement and bad handling of the Health Department.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I do not know how I will follow that, Mr Speaker. I apologise in case I wake any Members from their slumber. They have been here all day.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I am pleased to make a contribution to the debate on the final Budget for 2011-15. Reflecting the importance of the Budget for the future development of Northern Ireland, the Committee for Regional Development devoted considerable time to scrutinising the Department's proposed spending and savings plans and engaging with

stakeholders and others on the likely impact of DRD's proposals. The Committee published a short report reflecting that work. I thank the officials, stakeholders and academic experts for helping the Committee with its work.

I welcome the additional £107 million announced by officials from the Department for Regional Development when they briefed the Committee yesterday. We were pleased to hear that the additional allocations will go some way towards addressing the concerns raised during consultation. It means that the rural transport fund, the transport programme for people with disabilities and the Rathlin ferry subsidy are protected. In addition, smaller savings are required from road maintenance activities.

Even with that additional £107 million, the Department for Regional Development faces a significant cut of 11.6%. That will have a severe impact on the most vulnerable in society. It will affect economic competitiveness and the accessibility and sustainability of transport throughout Northern Ireland.

I turn to the balance between investment in public and private transport. The evidence received was that the Budget will roll back the progress made in recent years on accessible and sustainable transport, discourage the use of public transport as an option for those with choice and lead to social exclusion for those without alternative transport services or access to a car. The Budget will lead to job losses in public transport. It will reduce the number and frequency of services as well as the number of people who use public transport. Unless we link land use and planning with transport planning, do something radical to take cars off the road and provide viable public transport options, the Budget will lead to increased transport-related emissions.

The Committee recognises the progress that the Department has made during this mandate to improve the accessibility and sustainability of transport in Northern Ireland and is particularly disappointed that that good work will be lost. Members were also concerned that the allocations to the water capital budget in years 3 and 4 do not meet the agreed levels in PC10, and the profile is not best designed to support the infrastructure delivery.

On the old Committee chestnut of structural maintenance, there are individuals and communities across Northern Ireland for whom

public transport is not a viable option. Many of those people live in rural areas, and the Committee is concerned that the inadequate investment in structural maintenance, particularly in rural roads, will have a significantly detrimental impact on people without viable transport options who depend on private car use to travel to education and work and to participate in social and cultural activities.

If we do not invest adequately in infrastructure, we will not grow the economy. The scale of the cuts to the DRD capital budget, with reduced levels of investment in road schemes, road structural maintenance, public transport initiatives and water and sewerage services, will place additional pressures on businesses across Northern Ireland and make growing the economy more difficult. There will be congestion, poor road maintenance, even longer and less reliable journey times and an increase in the cost of doing business in Northern Ireland. If road networks in rural areas deteriorate further, businesses that are based in rural areas and do business in rural areas will also be disadvantaged by less reliable journey times. The quality of our entire infrastructure, including public transport and water and sewerage services, is a key factor in determining the attractiveness of Northern Ireland as an investment location for foreign direct investment.

3.45 pm

The Committee heard from the Department and stakeholders that the proposed cuts will have a negative impact on all section 75 groups and will directly impact the most vulnerable in society, including people with disabilities, older people, people in rural communities, and people who do not have access to a car. The Committee is very concerned about that anticipated impact. Many people, such as older people, young people and people with disabilities, do not have access to a car.

At the Committee's evidence event on 23 January 2011, stakeholders demonstrated vividly that available and viable public transport options underpin their inclusion in and exclusion from society in Northern Ireland. Young people demonstrated the same at the launch of the 'Transport Matters' report on 12 January 2011. Such options provide them with a means to engage in social and cultural activities, with access to education and employment opportunities. The Committee is concerned that

the proposed spending and saving plans may lead to a social exclusion of those groups and may undo the progress that has been made in recent years.

Members are deeply concerned that the release of £40 million for Belfast Harbour continues to be assumed in the Budget. It has not been fully established whether it will be possible to release that revenue from the port or what the public expenditure impact will be. Belfast Harbour's view, based on legal advice, is that there is no legal means for the transfer of assets, including cash, from Belfast Harbour to the Government and that the opportunity costs of releasing revenue in that way will be detrimental. That being the case, perhaps the Minister could explain why the Executive increased the presumed revenue in years three and four from £15 million per annum to £20 million per annum.

The Committee heard from stakeholders that a considerable amount of transport resources are available across other Departments, such as Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Education. The Committee recommends a cross-departmental approach to planning, utilising, as a matter of urgency, those existing transport resources in a flexible and responsive way. The Committee also heard from Translink, which has started work on this issue, although that is at a very early stage.

In the current climate, there is strong economic rationale to utilise existing transport resources more effectively. It is the Committee's view that strong political leadership will be required across Departments to drive forward a move to integrate the transport resources that are held across the public sector and to harness them to meet the needs of all groups in society, including young people, older people and people who live in rural communities. Members support that approach and recommend that Translink and the Department take forward work on that issue on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of urgency.

Finally, Committee members appreciate the evidence on the Budget that stakeholders and the Department provided, and the Committee will continue to work with the Department to secure the best possible outcomes for regional development in Northern Ireland.

Dr McDonnell: I know that this has been a long debate and that it has a bit further to go, but I

want to try to be serious, because people out there who are watching snippets of the debate will want us to take some of this stuff seriously, rather than reducing it to a schoolboy squabble.

We find ourselves in very challenging economic times, partly as a result of historical factors and partly as a result of the global economic downturn. There is a need for vision and leadership in how we move on from here. However, the first thing that strikes and concerns me about the Budget is that it needed to be tied to a skeleton Programme for Government with a robust programme for jobs. I understand the arguments against this, including those that talk about the new mandate, but it is very difficult to put a financial plan in place unless there is a strategy to which that plan pertains.

However, each of us in this House has a clear responsibility to rise to and meet those challenges and to do what it takes to enable people to get back into work. Each of us also has a clear responsibility to help those in work to progress and enhance their skills and the earnings that they receive for their work.

Similar to what the Minister said in his opening remarks today, I too want to be as creative as possible within the constraints and parameters imposed on us, and, like the Minister, I want to drive forward the efficiency and effectiveness agenda in our public service. The Budget is one of the key opportunities to make some levers available to the Northern Ireland Executive to fulfil the responsibility of getting people back into work.

I regret that the Budget has not gone as far as it should and could have to do that. That robust view is not only held by the SDLP but is confirmed by leading economists, businesspeople, many in the health sector, the voluntary and community sector, and trade unions. Indeed, outside the two main parties in the Assembly, it is difficult to find anyone who is unconditionally supportive of the draft Budget. They cannot all be wrong.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he also take into account what the Institute of Directors said on the Budget? It stated:

"The severity of the funding cuts was not unexpected but we had hoped to see the Executive's alleged commitment to prioritising economic growth evidenced in the budget allocations. Close inspection revealed otherwise."

Mr Bell: It also said water charges.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: I fully accept my colleague's point. Over the past two months, I have had discussions with various interested parties. Certainly, the big hope, and, indeed, the big demand, out there is that we will get a programme for jobs that will operate out of the Assembly. That will require some financial underpinning.

We need desperately to begin to make the changes that are necessary to create a balanced, competitive and sustainable economy, with an unswerving focus on job creation. We need to make a concerted effort to stimulate growth and to do more than juggle around the margins of the finances that are available from what is, in effect, a hand-me-down Budget from a Tory-led coalition Government. The Budget has not put into place the measures that are necessary to grow and strengthen the private sector, upon which our recovery totally depends. To my mind, the severity of cuts to Invest Northern Ireland's budget from £56.3 million this year to £8.4 million in four years' time will sound the death knell for Northern Ireland's potential to secure future high-value-added direct investment and international company start-ups, as well as real growth in our indigenous companies.

As my colleague mentioned in his intervention, members of the business community have repeatedly asked why money is wasted on trade missions if Northern Ireland is not in a financial position to follow through on them. Why continue the existence of a body such as Invest Northern Ireland if it does not have the funds to follow through and back up jobs that are sourced round the world? Why have the big establishment, if there is no end product?

Mr Bell: I thank Dr McDonnell of South Belfast for giving way. Earlier, his party leader said that she was going into an alliance with the Tory/Ulster Unionists. The Tory/Ulster Unionist policy, as evidenced by Basil McCrea, is to cut the Invest Northern Ireland budget further. Is that the first crack in the SDLP/Tory alliance?

Dr McDonnell: Mr Speaker, I am not even sure that that deserves a reply.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we continue, I am conscious that, as the debate goes on, we really should be calling parties by their proper names. I made that ruling in the House quite a while

ago. However, I am hearing all types of names bandied around the House. Let us stick to the names by which parties are known and under which they are registered in the House.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I just register that I would like you to look in the Hansard report at the comments and allegations that Mr Bell made so that we can deal with the matter at another time?

Mr Speaker: I have been watching the proceedings from elsewhere. Quite obviously, Members have made a number of such comments on a number of issues. Once again, I ask the entire House: let us be in good temper. I would go almost as far as to say good cheer, although, perhaps, that is pushing it and expecting too much. It is a Budget debate. I know that, sometimes, things are said that, on reflection, Members might have said differently. Therefore, let us be in good temper in the House, irrespective of what the debate in the Chamber might be.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you for your comments, Mr Speaker. They reflect my attitude entirely.

My comments are in no way intended to be any criticism of Invest Northern Ireland as a body, and even less so of its highly committed and outstanding chief executive, Alistair Hamilton. However, what is the point of having a Rolls Royce organisation if there is neither petrol in the tank nor a driver to drive it?

I will give an example of one area in which jobs could be created. We need to expand our Belfast financial services cluster, which, at this stage, is small. There are a significant number of companies there, such as Liberty Mutual, Citibank and Santander, but we need one final push to push us past the tipping point where we will have the critical mass in providing a serious cluster of back-office financial service support for the various global institutions that require it and which are in the pipeline. My concern is very simple. Invest Northern Ireland has done a massive amount of work. There have been trade missions to the US and elsewhere in which many of our Ministers, including the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, took part. There are opportunities in the pipeline. If there is not the money to bed them in, they will not come or the deals will not be completed. That is a genuine concern. It is in the interests of everybody that it is addressed. There is an onus on every Member, regardless of what party they

represent, to ensure that we get an act together on that.

I want to make another point very quickly. As our local finances and sources of public finances dry up, Northern Ireland must look more to Europe to unlock available supplementary funding. There is still quite a bit of that available. Today, Members have said that we have unlocked or disconnected in many ways from Europe. However, I have taken a particular interest in the fact that there is €50 billion available in a large R&D pot to last for five years in the seventh framework programme. I have had quite a bit of dialogue with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that. When that €50 billion is finished, there will be another €50 billion in the eighth framework programme. We are not taking full advantage of that. Minister, I am arguing genuinely and sincerely that we need to find small bits of money to pump-prime some of those projects so that we can grow jobs.

Northern Ireland is lagging behind the Republic and other European regions in respect of successful bids towards Europe for money. We need to push Northern Ireland to the fore; we need to invest a bit of money. We need more people in Brussels who are focused on sectors across the range of industry, for example. It is not enough to have one or two jacks of all trades there. We need to have individuals there who are absolute experts in such fields as renewable energy and food and who can focus on those sectors. If we have that, we can build the partnerships with Europe, not only for making things but for selling things.

Mr Callaghan: Does the Member agree that one of the sectors that have been badly hit over the past few years is the construction sector? I agree with him that we need a balanced and competitive economy. It needs to be balanced not only between the public and private sectors but between west of the Bann and east of the Bann and in enhancing North/South co-operation. Does he agree that investment, through a Budget, in the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin, the A6 upgrade, the expansion of Magee and in social housing would be productive ways of increasing jobs in that sector?

Dr McDonnell: Maybe the Member wants to take over. He must have been reading over my shoulder, because I was just about to mention the construction industry. We need to recreate

10,000 jobs in the construction sector as soon as possible, and we need to do that by getting the funds. There are various ways of doing that. We need to explore ways and means of getting those funds in, but, equally, we need to be pump-priming tourism and looking at ways of getting something moving in the agrifood sector. If the Minister or anyone else wishes me to cost those proposals, I will be happy to do so. I am not running at them ramstam; they can be costed and worked out. A small amount of money would go a long way.

I do not want to run over my time, so I will make one last point. We need to remove some of the obstacles to renewable energy development.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Dr McDonnell: Renewable energy can provide us with 20,000 jobs for very small amounts of investment here and there. That is the sort of issue that we need to be looking at. I beg the Minister to find ways and means of opening up some of those doors.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak during today's debate and to outline Sinn Féin's position. The Budget proves that we can achieve a better deal for our people when we work together. What started off as a terrible Tory Budget that was imposed on the people and on the Executive has been significantly improved by those who have engaged with other parties in trying to achieve a better outcome for our society.

I accept that we have much yet to do, but I believe that, where there is a willingness by parties in the Chamber to work together, we can improve the lives of the people we serve.

4.00 pm

Sinn Féin is a republican party. We envisage a future that is not based on partition or partitionist economics, which have not served the people of the island, North or South. We have a much higher aspiration than to be dealing with the ungraciously named block grant. Despite the claims earlier by a senior UUP MLA, all the money does not come from London. Billions of pounds of taxes leave this island every year and head to the coffers of the British Government. It is quite simple: the people of the North pay taxes.

The British Government have dominated the economy of Ireland for centuries through

economic, political and, when it suits them, military means. Sinn Féin wants to reshape those relationships. We want an economy on the island of Ireland run for the needs of the people, not bankers or greedy developers with no social conscience. We want an economy that works with our nearest neighbours in England, Scotland and Wales and is based on mutual respect and growth of our nations. In the short term, what is required is an all-Ireland economic recovery plan. We will not build our way out of recession by ignoring the Twenty-six Counties, nor will they by ignoring us, or by having two competing economies on this small island. It has not worked in the past and it will not work in the future.

This has been a significant day for our party in regard to republican politics. Our 14 comrades have taken their place in the Dáil, and today we will continue to defend citizens' rights here in the Assembly and in the Dáil. That is all-Ireland politics at work. Others told us that they would head to Westminster, swear an oath of allegiance to the English Queen and prevent Tory cuts, but we have shown that there is a better way here in Ireland. Our focus remains on a new Ireland.

Sinn Féin's TDs will continue to work in opposing the bad EU/IMF bailout and the attack on the low-waged, the poor and the vulnerable now being carried out by the Fine Gael-Labour coalition — an economic strategy that was endorsed in the Chamber yesterday by Conall McDevitt of the SDLP, despite his earlier assertions that the SDLP would not interfere in Irish politics.

His party leader, Margaret Ritchie, also endorsed the author of the economic collapse in the South, when she said:

"Brian Cowen excelled as Finance Minister."

Of course, Sinn Féin's party leader is in Leinster House and Margaret is getting on a plane heading to Westminster, where her challenge to the Tory cuts — mentioned earlier by Martina Anderson — has been:

"The impact of the CSR settlement ... can be assessed ... First, on current expenditure, we are facing a cut in real terms of 7% by the final year of the CSR. That is challenging, but it is not insurmountable."

It is not insurmountable: that is the challenge that was presented to the Tories.

We have listened with interest to the many contributions from the dysfunctional SDLP and Ulster Unionist Party axis. In particular, the SDLP leader claimed that we were engaged in "ostrich economics", but that party was telling us last week that all the improvements made to the Budget were actually based on SDLP revenue-raising plans. Either they are good ideas or they are bad ideas, but you certainly cannot have it both ways. The reality is that if Sinn Féin had not been to the fore in securing additional moneys, it simply would not have happened.

We clearly saw the outworking of the dysfunctional SDLP/UUP axis when they were the lead parties in the Executive. As a direct result of Sinn Féin working with parties willing to engage, the Executive Budget now has an additional £1.5 billion. The SDLP and UUP are set to vote against a Budget that includes an additional £1.5 billion for health, education, housing and the economy. Not one penny has been produced by those parties shouting from the sidelines. The SDLP and UUP position does not stand up to scrutiny. The proposed amendments to the Budget are too little too late. The only financial commitment made by the SDLP is to take £80 million from the social fund.

Members are presented with an option. They can vote for a Budget that is fully costed and runs to 130-odd pages, or they can vote for the amendments. That is the choice before Members here today: vote for a fully costed Budget or vote for a list that is not costed in any way.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not. Sinn Féin has set out in its economic paper, released on 20 October, its position in opposition to Tory cuts and, more importantly, its alternative, by addressing ways to promote economic growth and deliver public services.

That paper identified potential savings and revenue-raising mechanisms that would release £1.6 billion of additional moneys to the public sector. Despite repeated calls by the other parties to set a Budget based solely on the block grant and the Tory cuts, we have consistently advocated the need for additional revenue to be added to the block grant. We have been successful, and the parties that engaged with one other, worked together and took the difficult decisions made achievements beyond what the other parties wanted us to accept. An additional £1.5 billion is now available to the

public services, the private sector and all in this society. That is the result not of standing on the sidelines and shouting about the Budget or going into television and radio studios and scaring the life out of people, but of working together.

The amendments tabled today offer no costings whatsoever. They are wish lists that any of the parties in the Chamber could have drawn up. However, that is not where we are in this debate. We are in the eleventh hour before a Budget must be decided, and any party that tables an amendment must also bring forward a fully costed document.

The Executive's Budget presents us with major challenges as a result of Tory cuts, and the parties that worked together have made major improvements. However, as I said, Sinn Féin sees Irish unity as the economic way forward for the long term.

Listening to the contributions today, I find it increasing difficult to tell the difference between the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. At this late stage of the debate, I appeal to the SDLP — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr O'Dowd: I appeal to the SDLP to take a step back, before they, too, are identified as a Tory franchise in the North.

Mr Easton: I support the Budget. The truth is that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety received the largest increase of any Department in the Budget. It will receive an increase of 8.3% over the next four years, and it will have 41% of the entire Budget in the first year, rising to 43% over the next four years. In monetary terms, the Department will receive an extra £189 million over the four years of the Budget, with an extra £20 million being moved from capital expenditure to revenue expenditure to help the Health Minister.

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

Two amendments were tabled today. The amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party offers no new ideas on getting extra moneys for other budgets. The SDLP tabled the other amendment, and it seems that that party is opposed to the Budget, because the Minister for Social Development had a temper tantrum over the social investment fund. Had the SDLP

managed the budget for the Department for Social Development properly over the past four years, there may have been no need for a social investment fund, but it failed to do so.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No. At a recent meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Ulster Unionist Party members tabled a motion for the Committee to recommend that the health aspect of the Department's budget be protected. DUP Committee members supported the Ulster Unionists on that motion, and that is exactly what the Finance Minister delivered through the Budget. However, the Ulster Unionist Party moved the goalposts and changed the rules. It also changed the amount of extra money that it said was needed for the Health Service. The Ulster Unionist Party started off with a figure of £600 million and then changed that to £400 million. At a recent meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, it changed that figure again to £200 million, and today that figure is £165 million. The Ulster Unionist Party does not even know what it needs for its budget; it is a complete farce.

Last week, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety discussed the McKinsey report. The permanent secretary of the Department and the chief executive of the Health and Social Care Board appeared before the Committee. They reported on the £1.1 billion that McKinsey felt could be released from the Health Service. It was interesting that the Department and the board were very much up for looking at that report and exploring it, but they are not allowed to explore anything that is better for the Health Service, because the Health Minister will not allow them to look at it. Shame on the Health Minister from the Ulster Unionist Party that he will not even look at documents.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No. The Ulster Unionists canvassed with the Conservatives for the £4 billion cut at Westminster and seem to forget about that conveniently when the difficult decisions have to be made.

The Health Minister, as late as only last Tuesday, proposed the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. What is interesting about that Bill is that it is good because it is getting rid of bureaucracy

and quangos. That is part of the Tories' cuts agenda, yet the Health Minister is able to support that but not his own budget. There is quite a bit of contradiction there.

What is more interesting is that the draft Budget was announced on 17 December 2010. I enquired of the Finance Minister as to what meetings he has had with the Health Minister over the January and February period. Guess what: the Health Minister did not bother to contact the Finance Minister about the draft Budget over a two-month period, which shows how little he cares about the staff of the Health Service and the healthcare of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Minister and his colleagues were unable to present the Committee with even an efficiency plan, and the Committee was unable to reach a proper verdict on the draft Budget because we lacked information. Over the next four years, apart from the £189 million and the £20 million capital-to-revenue, the Minister will be able to keep any efficiency savings that he decides to make. He will also have the capital-to-revenue and be able to bid in monitoring rounds.

What galls me most is that I have made suggestions for efficiencies over the past four years and the Health Minister always pooh-poohed them. However, I will go over some of the again so that Members can be reminded about what can be saved in the Health Service without affecting front line services. In fact, the savings could be ploughed back into front line services.

The Health Service has more than 800,000 sick days each year costing it £1.1 million, yet the Health Minister is doing absolutely nothing about that. Independent sector providers for out-patients cost more than £6 million each year, yet the Health Minister is not doing anything to reduce the 14,000 out-patient appointments. If those appointments were tackled, more than £6 million would not have to be spent on independent sector providers to make up the shortfall.

Almost £40 million is being paid on agency staff, who cost three times more than ordinary nurses. If that money were ploughed back into nursing we would not have to have agency staff, and the Minister would have a better budget. The Minister likes to spend his money on art. Over £278,000 is being spent on art each year, and he has failed to tackle that. I would have

thought that the health of patients was more important than art.

Management consultancy fees are over £1 million. What is the Health Minister doing about that? Zero. There are medical negligence claims topping £13 million. Surely the Minister should be trying to stop those claims happening in the Health Service. Legal fees of £3 million: more wastage going down the drain. Phone bills cost nearly £9 million and mail costs nearly £7 million. You cannot say that efficiencies cannot be found.

Even staff travel claims can be examined: £32 million goes on travel claims in the health budget. You cannot say that the Minister cannot find savings of 10% in travel claims. That would save £3 million, yet the Health Minister does not want to tackle that. The energy costs are £28 million: surely, the Health Service can become more energy efficient. Bonus payments to managers are over £180,000, and bonus payments to consultants, as mentioned earlier, are £57 million, yet the Health Minister does not want to do anything about that.

The Health Minister does not seem to be too interested in sorting out the taxi situation, which costs £2 million over all trusts. The hospitality budget for the trusts over the past five years was over £500,000 yet the Minister does not want to tackle that.

The bed occupancy rate is 85% in the rest of the UK but is only 82% in Northern Ireland. Why can we not increase ours? It would mean that we could get more patients through the doors.

4.15 pm

The Minister makes a big play of saying that he is the only Minister to have done the RPA. Well, let me tell Members something. Management costs have increased by 13% following the RPA under the Health Minister. They have risen from £107 million to £120 million. That is hardly an efficient way to introduce the RPA. There are also unused buildings at a cost of £0.5 million. We are paying rates and heating bills for all those buildings, and nothing is being done about that. We are spending almost £1 million on suspended staff. What is the Health Minister doing about that? Absolutely zero. The cost of advertising in the Health Service is £6 million. What is he doing about that? Absolutely zero. The cost of advisers is £800,000. What is the Health Minister doing about that? Guess what

the hospitality budget for the Health Minister and his permanent secretary was in 2008-09: £22,000. Now we know what the Health Minister has been doing for four years: he has been drinking tea and doing little else.

Let us consider mental health services. Praxis Care has been in touch with every political party and, indeed, the Department. It is able to find a 30% decrease in costs if it were to look after the mental health section of our Health Service. Mr McGimpsey has known about that for years but has done absolutely nothing about it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor, and I ask that other debates cease.

Mr Easton: I am going to wind up now. In conclusion, if the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and the Health Minister want to vote against the Budget, to resign or to do whatever they want, I will be glad because I want the next Health Minister to be able to work with all the political parties and the Health Committee. The current Minister has not worked with any of us and has been a disgrace to the Health Service.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the previous Member who spoke for his pitch for the job of the next Health Minister. He seems to know a lot about it. He seems to know how to make friends and influence people. If only we had asked him earlier, we would have known what to do. I cannot believe that we missed that.

I want to raise an issue about the party opposite. I listened to Mr O'Dowd and Mr Maskey, who went on about it being Tory cuts and it being nothing to do with them and they never touched it. Do Members know what that means? I am going to say to them what the electorate in the South said: Sinn Féin is economically illiterate and does not understand it. I do not know whether Members have had a chance to read the Budget document, but, if they look at page 15, they will see a very nice graph. The blue line represents expenditure; the green line represents receipts; and the difference between them is the gap that cannot be funded. If Members turn to page 16, they will find that it says:

"The UK public sector deficit in 2009-10 was the largest in its peacetime history at 11 per cent of GDP, and the Government was borrowing one pound for every four it spent."

That is simply unacceptable and unsustainable. It cannot be done. It is not Tory cuts. It is not anybody's cuts. It is economic reality.

I will give the party opposite some credit. At least, at some stage, it had the courage to take the Health Ministry. However, the party over here — its Members stand and jibe at the sides and come forward with all the answers — will not do it. It is the run-away party. It will not take it on. When will it stand up and meet its obligations? It is no good standing at the side and saying, "we could do better", if, when it comes to the first choice or the second choice or the third choice, you do not take Health. If you know all the answers and think that you can do better, you should do so. The rest of the country and I will be watching.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr B McCrea: What happens quite often in this place is that there is an element of challenge. People ask about where the money that is being put somewhere else is being taken from.

The counter-challenge, which has not been put, is that need must be addressed, because it is either the right thing to do or it is a statutory provision. If there is insufficient finance, how to meet that need is the challenge.

As has been highlighted by others, the Budget is a shoddy, rushed and ill-informed piece of work. I can make those allegations, and the Minister will no doubt say that it is not. However, I think that it was Mr Maginness who said earlier that the Committee for Finance and Personnel said that the Budget does not work.

In the time that is available to me, I can address only a number of issues. I cannot quite understand why, in the draft Budget, the capital allowance for next year for the Department of Education was £127.4 million. We then had a statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel in which he said that he had found more money and would be giving the Department of Education an extra £40 million. However, what did we find in next year's capital expenditure for the Department of Education? We found an allocation of £114 million, which is a reduction of £12 million. So, getting more money appears to mean getting less money. When I asked for an explanation, I got no answers or detail from the Minister of

Education. The entire Committee for Education has asked about that.

We can ask about the additional money that might go into revenue, but it is not clear to me whether that still includes the £41 million of capital appropriations that we were going to transfer into revenue. That is really important, because the aggregated budget for education affects each and every school. I cannot drill down the detail in the Budget to say exactly what the impact will be for education, but I can tell Members the figures that are bandied around about the aggregated school budget, which affects the employment of teachers, janitors, cleaners and classroom assistants, seem to be down by about 20%. Members may ask themselves whether that will mean that one in five teachers, classroom assistants and janitors will be made redundant. Will they be made redundant next year? I do not know, because when I ask for the information, it is not forthcoming.

One of the things that it quite strange about all this is that the Minister of Finance and Personnel talked about PEDU going into the Health Department, but he did not talk about it going into the Education Department. Two Departments were supposed to be finding efficiencies. There was supposed to be a timescale within which we would be told where the efficiencies in education would be found. We have no knowledge of whether any of that information came back. Why is that? That is symptomatic of the fact that the Budget cannot be relied upon, because it is all top-line stuff and we simply do not have the necessary information.

There are other issues that we might wish to deal with. *[Interruption.]* I observe Mr Bell having some light relief on the Benches to my left. Perhaps he will confirm — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There is banter across the Floor from all sides, but I ask all Members to respect the Member who is speaking and not to speak from a sedentary position.

Mr B McCrea: I now move to the policing and justice budget. One issue that has not come out in the Budget discussion is the agreement at Hillsborough that the first £12 million of police hearing loss claims would be met by the Executive and not by the police. The Treasury had made an arrangement that, if the £12 million was not available, land sales worth £60 million would be made available.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the PSNI main police grant was required to fund the first £12 million for hearing loss, not the Executive. The Department of Justice has currently provided only £6 million for next year and £3 million for the following year. That is an issue that gets through without property scrutiny. That is taking money away from front line policing, and we ought to have had more discussion and more detail on the issue.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not draw comfort from the promises made by Mr O'Dowd in his newsletter across Upper Bann that Sinn Féin is ready to fight the cuts?

Mr B McCrea: There are many things that provide a little bit of light relief in the Chamber during what is a serious debate. One of them is the fact that Sinn Féin continually campaigns on “fight the cuts”. It is all over the place. It shows that Sinn Féin members are absolutely illiterate: they do not understand it, and they cannot shake it off. I will have great —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry; I will have to get through in my allocated time.

Other Members wear badges that support NIPSA. I wonder where that is coming from. This is incoherent economic policy, and it will be found out in the next four years.

Some people have mentioned my comments about Invest Northern Ireland. I invite Members to read the Hansard report, as I said to the Speaker. The issue was this, and it was admirably raised beforehand: is it right that we should not attack layers of management? We appear to have five or six layers of management between the chief executive and the coalface of Invest Northern Ireland. It is true that, as others have said, there is good news in the pipeline. However, one must ask whether that is because of the change in state aid rules or some artificial hiatus. What is the real argument for building long-term strategic wealth and well-being for our country? This is a country of SMEs. We should be widening the base.

We talk about reports. Do Members want to see where they might save some money? They should look at the Barnett report on economic policy, which suggests that the future of this place is in skills. Yet, when we look for 1,000

ICT students, we do not have them. There is no redressing of our people coming out. They are failing to tackle those issues. There was a suggestion that the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should be combined. I, for one, would like to see that. At least we would have an Ulster Unionist looking after the place and the country would be well run, and not by a bunch of economic illiterates.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. May I speak on behalf of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee? If you do not mind, David, I will have a go here. I hope that you are keeping well, apart from that.

Throughout the Budget process, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee engaged with the Department and key stakeholders on a regular basis on the impact of budget cuts to the business areas of culture, arts, leisure and sport. I welcome the fact that a significant change to the Budget has occurred that will have a positive impact on a number of organisations. I refer specifically to the additional allocation of £3.5 million for arts funding and, very significantly, £4.5 million for libraries across the budget period. Perhaps, in his concluding remarks, the Minister of Finance and Personnel might confirm whether I have got those figures right. The £4.5 million for libraries interests me greatly.

I welcome the fact that the overwhelming views of approximately 5,000 supporters of the arts who contributed to the consultation process have been taken on board to some degree.

4.30 pm

Our Committee has continually campaigned for a fair deal for the arts, and we support the view that arts funding should not have suffered the large cut proposed. To support that argument, we consistently highlighted the fact that spend on the arts results in a net contribution to the economy and it is often said that for every £1 invested by the Arts Council there is a return of over £3.60 to the local economy.

Our Committee also noted with concern that we have the lowest arts spend per capita compared to other regions. Despite an additional allocation in this Budget settlement, that situation is unlikely to change. We also raised concerns about the use of lottery funding to substitute core funding for arts and sports. That

was a concern for more than 5,000 respondents to the draft Budget consultation. Although I welcome the Executive's acknowledgement of the importance of the arts in economic and social terms, I note that the issue of lottery funding has not been addressed by the Executive, despite that acknowledgement.

I turn to the creative industries. The Committee previously welcomed DCAL's commitment to nurture and support the creative industries, and I am pleased to see that the commitment to allocate £1 million per annum to support emerging artistic talent has remained in the Budget. I note that DCAL, in partnership with district councils, will continue to promote the community festivals fund and the Annual Support for Organisations Programme (ASOP), which is run by the Arts Council. Unfortunately, that support appears to have been reduced, and we want some additional final detail on that.

I turn to libraries. This aspect will interest many Members because current proposals by Libraries NI are to close 10 libraries in rural areas. Many Members will identify with the library in their constituency that is currently earmarked for closure.

Mr McNarry: Killyleagh.

Mr McElduff: David McNarry obviously identifies with the case of Killyleagh.

Earlier today in the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, we heard from children from St Mary's Primary School, Draperstown, who made a strong case for the retention of their library. On a constituency level and speaking personally, I am very exercised by the threat to Fintona library, which has mobilised that community. So, rural communities throughout the North are fighting for their library. That is important. I am pleased to note that £2 million of extra revenue has been allocated to libraries, and an additional £2 million has been allocated to the capital budget. On that, I seek confirmation from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

In addition to that I am advised —

Mr Bell: Will the Member apply the comments that he makes to all libraries? We face a severe cut in Killyleagh library, to which your comments are pertinent. Some people say to me that libraries are only for children to read about Asterix and Sooty and Sweep and everything else, but they are much more important.

Mr McElduff: I agree with the Member. They are the lifeblood of many rural communities, and we heard particular evidence of that today in respect of the Draperstown community. Mr Bell has appropriately championed the cause of Killyleagh library.

I want assurance about a further £0.5 million which is to be set aside for much-needed capital maintenance. I hope that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is able to apply pressure on the arm's-length body, Libraries NI, to bin proposals to close 10 rural libraries.

Mr G Robinson: Let me remind the Member that a new library was opened in Dungiven in recent weeks.

Mr McElduff: More of the same is required. That is good news for Dungiven, but the prospects are bad for 10 rural communities, and that needs to be addressed.

I seek assurance that the additional money that has been rightly allocated to libraries will be used to stall plans to close 10 rural libraries. I accept that the consultation exercise that we are currently in the middle of will have to conclude. However, the Committee and I strongly hope that Libraries NI will go back to the drawing board in respect of the proposals to close those libraries, in the face of strong evidence from communities that they matter greatly, even more than Libraries NI thought.

The proposal to close 10 libraries is shocking when we consider that — this is an absolutely crucial point — there was £19 million of slippage in libraries spend over the past three years on capital build programmes as a result of changes to the governance structures of libraries when the education and library boards gave way to the new organisation, Libraries NI. That raises the question of whether the library closures at stage 1 in greater Belfast and at stage 2 in rural areas would have been necessary at all, had that slippage not occurred and the resulting £19 million been applied to capital infrastructure development.

In relation to museums, I particularly welcome the additional funds made available in this Budget for the new world development plan at the Ulster American Folk Park outside Omagh.

In relation to sport, the Committee has always felt that adequate funding was needed to implement the Sport Matters strategy for sport

and physical recreation. It is, therefore, good news that funding will be made available in year 1 for projects such as the Mourne mountain bike track and stadia safety. The Committee welcomes the capital budget allocation that will enable regional stadia development to progress, and it is positive that the £110 million allocated to the three stadiums — Casement Park, Ravenhill and Windsor Park — has been rephased to enable work on those projects to start sooner.

Mr A Maginness: The Member dwelt for some time on libraries. I note that page 43 of the Budget document states:

"Libraries Northern Ireland will seek to maintain viable libraries where possible. Funding has been secured to replace the electronic libraries system which underpins much of the body's operational activity".

There is not much hope of libraries being retained if that is all the revision that there is in the Budget.

Mr McElduff: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. The Member's question would be best answered if he read the Minister's Budget statement from last Friday. That is why I seek confirmation of my notion that £4.5 million of additional money has been allocated to libraries. That is something that I would like the Minister to tidy up. I am reading it positively.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McElduff: Do I get an additional minute? What way does this work?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Mr McElduff: I will leave it at that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am satisfied that I have been heard.

Mr B Wilson: I sympathise with the Minister on having to delivering this Budget. I have no doubt that he is aware of the negative impact that it will have on the Northern Ireland economy. I am sure that he recognises that the Westminster cuts agenda is ideologically driven and economically illiterate and will have a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

The Minister will also be aware that, whatever impact the cuts may have on the rest of the United Kingdom, they will have a much greater impact on Northern Ireland. The rest of the UK may have emerged from the recession, but there

is no evidence that we in Northern Ireland have. We are in a different phase of the economic cycle, and making further cuts when unemployment is still rising and house prices are continuing to fall will drive us back into recession.

I want to begin by welcoming the Minister's decision to introduce a levy on large supermarkets and out-of-town shopping centres. I proposed such a levy in my speech on the draft Budget, so I am pleased and surprised that the Minister has taken up my suggestion. A similar levy was proposed by the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Government. This involves increasing the business rate for large retailers with a rateable value of more than £750,000 and will apply mainly to supermarkets and out-of-town retail parks. As well as raising extra revenue, that would support small traders and town centres. If it encouraged people to shop locally, that would be more environmentally friendly. A levy would also mean that expenditure in local shops would remain within our economy and not be transferred to shareholders in multinational companies. It will make a positive contribution to our economy and our environment.

During the Second Stage debate, I indicated that I could not support the draft Budget. My position remains the same. I am still concerned that the Budget is not credible and lacks detail and that some departmental figures do not add up. The Budget includes some extremely optimistic assumptions, particularly in the area of asset sales and revenue raising. Although it is a four-year Budget, it will have to be reviewed after the election.

I remain concerned that there is still no Programme for Government. That means that we have no objectives, outcomes or targets against which the Budget can be assessed. It basically accepts the Tory analysis and its solution to the UK's economic problems. The Green Party accepts the need to reduce public borrowing. However, the Tory proposals are vindictive and ideologically motivated and will create severe problems for the Northern Ireland economy. Taking demand out of our economy at the present time will inevitably lead towards recession.

The Tories claim that the cuts are fair and that everybody must share the pain. That is not the case. A recent report for the Institute for Fiscal Studies points out that the Budget is regressive and will hit the poorest hardest,

particularly those with children. As with so many previous Tory Budgets, it is focused on cutting services to the poor, the elderly and the most vulnerable. Instead of imposing taxes on the banks and financial institutions that caused the financial crisis, the Tories have increased VAT, the burden of which falls heaviest on those with a low income. Similarly, the cuts in welfare, housing benefit, disability allowances and tax credit will have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable. According to the IFS, it is the most regressive Budget in generations. The fact that we in Northern Ireland are more dependent on public services means that we will suffer disproportionately. We should not slavishly follow the Tory-imposed policies. The Minister could have shown some flexibility.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to the green new deal but am concerned by the lack of resources to implement that.

The budget for Invest NI is inadequate. I am concerned by that, because growing the economy and creating jobs remains a priority. The reduction in Invest NI's budget means that we may not have sufficient funds to support the foreseeable number of new investment projects. We are at risk of missing valuable job creation opportunities.

My fundamental objection to the Budget remains the Health Service allocations. I welcome the additional funding for health, but that will do little to redress the long-term structural underfunding of the service. As I pointed out previously, I have no political axe to grind with anyone on this issue. I speak as someone who has had a long interest in health economics since my appointment to the Eastern Health Board in 1981. My concerns about health spending are long-standing and began with the previous Budget, in which our Health Department received an increase of 2.6%, while the NHS in England was given a 4% increase in real terms. Our 2.6% increase did not meet inflation, was the lowest for many years and compared badly with the average of around 8% during the previous five years of direct rule. Unlike in 2007, when I was one of the few MLAs to highlight underfunding in the Health Service, NHS funding has, unfortunately, become a major political debate. We need a rational, objective debate on the present state of the Health Service. However, it has now become just a political football.

The 2007 Programme for Government included new programmes to reduce the suicide rate, promote healthier ways of living, halt the rise in obesity and implement the long-delayed Bamford report. However, the Budget did not provide any additional resources to fund those programmes. The Appleby report compared the standard of care in Northern Ireland with that in England and identified a shortfall of £500 million over the CSR period. Therefore, not only do we have lower standards of care, but the gap between entitlements and expectations, compared with those in England, continues to widen.

Appleby concluded that, at funding levels then, access targets and waiting times would not match English levels in the foreseeable future. When I voted against that Budget, I warned that it would mean NHS cuts, job losses and longer waiting lists. Those have all come about and will be accelerated if we accept the current Budget. I accept the Minister's assertion that health has received the biggest increase of any Department and that it consumes over 40% of the Budget. However, that does not address the funding of previous years. Funding should be based on need and not on what proportion of the Northern Ireland Budget it makes up. It has to meet increasing demand.

4.45 pm

There have been demographic changes. Compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, we have more elderly people. We have more young people and more children. We have a much higher incidence of disease and much higher rates of cancer and heart disease. We have more smokers and more obesity. The differential in health expenditure between Northern Ireland and England has reduced significantly in recent years. A recent study shows that, taking account of age profile and deprivation levels, the Health Service in Northern Ireland requires 10% more resources per head than England, owing to the higher levels of need. In 2007, the differential was 4%. We now hear that the differential has actually swung the other way and that expenditure per head in England is more than in Northern Ireland.

On that basis, I certainly cannot accept the Budget. The Health Service should be taken off the political agenda. Let us try to sort the thing out. There is a definite need. Anyone who looks at it seriously will see that need is increasing

because of demand. Demand, of course, is insatiable, but we have to provide more.

Mr Givan: The Budget is a serious issue. Having listened to speeches from the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP today, I am disappointed that they have not taken the matter seriously. They have attempted to play cheap party politics with a Budget of billions of pounds that will affect public services in the next four years. They have decided to engage in petty politics. Some of those Members have stepped into the gutter and thrown personal insults at the individuals and parties that have sought to take their responsibilities seriously. The public will see through the agenda that individuals in those parties have.

Earlier this afternoon, our party leader set out the context in which the Budget is being brought forward by the Stormont Executive. No one disagreed with his analysis that this was set at Westminster. Some £4 billion of cuts came through the block grant that the Ulster Unionist Party supported. It told people to vote for the Conservative Party. The Ulster Unionist Party has hundreds of Members of Parliament at Westminster through the Conservative Party, but it has shown absolutely no influence over its Conservative masters. One wonders what deal they get out of being a franchisee. It appears that the Ulster Unionist Party has sold its soul for 30 pieces of silver to bankroll its last election campaign. The Ulster Unionist Party has betrayed the people of Northern Ireland. Shame on it for taking that position.

In dealing with issues such as health, which is very serious, it is important that we do not play on people's fears. Sadly, the Ulster Unionist Party has sought to whip up people's fears about the Health Service. I was with a group of about 40 pensioners this morning. We discussed the Budget and health issues. They are frightened by the Minister of Health's statements. They are concerned and do not want to get ill because of the misrepresentation and untruths peddled by the Ulster Unionist Party. We need to be clear and provide the absolutely honest position when we deal with these matters.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: No, I will not give way. That honesty has been lacking in the Ulster Unionist Party's position.

I should declare an interest when dealing with health matters. Members of my immediate family work in the Health Service. One family member is a consultant, one runs a GP practice, and another is a midwife. One is a nurse, one is a dietitian, and others work in Health Service administration. I am fully aware of the health issues that are important to people because I hear about them at first hand from those individuals. They have been let down by the Health Minister's mismanagement over four years, presiding over the Department but failing to take decisions.

The McKinsey report, which was commissioned by the Health Department and cost £300,000, was delivered over five months ago. We have to ask why the Health Minister has sat on that document. Why has he not taken any decisions that would drive through efficiencies which, the report states, will not affect front line services but benefit them? Only last week senior Health Service managers told me that the sooner the election takes place, the better, so that they can have a Health Minister who takes the position responsibly. They know that the Health Minister is playing party politics. He refuses to take decisions because of the election, and that is an indictment of him and the Ulster Unionist Party, which does not take its positions seriously.

For decades, the Ulster Unionist Party prided itself on being the party of government. Now, however, it does not take seriously the positions that it holds, nor does it act responsibly. It is not the party of government; it is the party of irresponsibility, and the public will see that. The Ulster Unionist party will set out its position in the election, we will set out our position, and the people will decide. That is democracy. However, people will not be conned by the spin that the Ulster Unionist Party is trying to put on this Budget process.

My colleague from Lagan Valley Basil McCrea talked about policing and justice. We need to clarify that point as well. The first £12 million for the call on the police hearing loss claims has to be found initially in the Department of Justice. If that Department cannot find the money, the call goes to the Executive and to other Departments. What Basil McCrea did not go on to say was that, as a result of the deal that was negotiated, any hearing loss compensation claims over and above the £12 million will be paid out directly by the Treasury.

That is why, this year, over £10 million is being paid out directly from Westminster, not by the Executive or the Department of Justice. He also failed to point out that, as part of the devolution settlement, we got access to Treasury funds for the police to deal with the dissident threat. Only in the past couple of weeks, the Finance Minister and the Justice Minister have secured £200 million over the next four years. That was as a result of what we secured through the talks at Hillsborough and the devolution package for policing and justice. I know that the Ulster Unionist Party does not like to pay tribute to our party when it comes to negotiations. That is no wonder, when it was that party that negotiated the Belfast Agreement. It does not want to point to our successes when it comes to negotiations.

The Ulster Unionist Party does not point out that, when policing and justice was being devolved, not only did we push on that issue but the First Minister secured a financial package for the Presbyterian Mutual Society. I do not particularly want to pay tribute to the deputy First Minister, but he played an important role in that. If the Ulster Unionist Party wants to put its hand up on this Budget, it can tell the Presbyterians who lost money why it is voting against a Budget that would provide security for small savers in the PMS. It can answer that question. I, for one, will put my hand up for a Budget that will help those people, particularly the small savers in the Presbyterian Church who are suffering because they cannot access their money, which was put aside, for example, to pay for funerals or to help them get through difficulty and hardship.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: No, I will not give way. I have listened enough to the Tory boys on my right.

The SDLP needs to put a little honesty into its position and stop the pretence that it is somehow going to fight the cuts. When it had the opportunity, holding the positions that it did, it could have prevented Northern Ireland students having to pay fees. When the Westminster Government were pouring money into our institutions, what did the SDLP do? It decided to fall in line with whatever its sister party was doing in the British Labour Government. The SDLP can go to the students and tell them that it is just pretending and that it is not really in favour of students trying to pay fees that are as low as possible because, ultimately, it brought in the Farren

fees. However, it will not do that. It will not be honest with the public on that issue, and nor will it be honest when it says that it wants to privatise the water service.

Mr Bell: Now that Conall McDevitt has assumed his place on the Front Bench and the leader has been dispatched, is it time for the SDLP to give us a clear direction? The SDLP stated earlier that it will join the Ulster Unionists and become a Tory force. Is it now time for it to declare that it will not join the Ulster Unionist Tories in increasing student fees?

Mr Givan: It is interesting that the SDLP has aligned itself with the Tory cutters in the Ulster Unionist Party. It might want to change its name now and reflect the fact that it is aligned with the Conservative Party in Northern Ireland. It would not surprise me if the SDLP wanted to change its position.

The SDLP will not be honest, particularly in the north-west, when it wants to sell the airport in Londonderry. It will not be honest on that issue, but what it will not tell the public is that it will help the Executive —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Givan: It will not tell the public that it will help the Executive and their Budget by selling something that the Executive do not even own. It cannot con people, and the Ulster Unionists cannot con people —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time. I call Mr Tommy Gallagher to speak for five minutes.

Mr Gallagher: I want to point out a few of the reasons why I oppose the Budget, as does my party. I have heard nothing all day to make me less certain that I need to oppose it.

First, this is a partitionist Budget. *[Interruption.]* It has absolutely no all-Ireland vision. John O'Dowd, his eyes glazed over, told us that Gerry Adams was in the Dáil today. I would like to wish everyone in the Dáil today well in their endeavours in the year ahead. Gerry Adams is smiling broadly in the Dáil today —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I gave leeway in allowing the Member five minutes to speak, but I ask him to keep to the subject of the amendments and the debate today.

Mr Gallagher: There is an absence of an all-Ireland vision, which is an important part of the Budget. Why would Gerry Adams not be smiling when he has abandoned his colleagues here so that they will trot through along with the DUP to vote in a partitionist Budget?

[Interruption.] There is no mention of any new North/South bodies anywhere in the Budget.

[Interruption.] We need such bodies for health, the environment and lots of other things.

[Interruption.]

So that not all the jeers come from the DUP, I am happy to make comments about how the Executive are dealing with the public purse and looking after the purse strings, which is their main responsibility. How the most loyal followers of Sinn Féin and the DUP must have cringed this morning. When an Executive looks after the purse strings, it is their job to add value to taxpayers' money. Whether they pay £1,000 or, if they are very wealthy, £10,000 or more each year, they are entitled to that. How those followers cringed this morning when they heard that two Ministers — one from the Finance Department and the other from the Agriculture Department — had conspired about Crossnacreevy. A figure of £200 million was mentioned. What value was added to that £200 million of taxpayers' money? It was frittered away to £2.5 million. That is one reason why I am happy to defend the SDLP's amendment.

5.00 pm

We heard the usual lines from the Alliance Party — there are not many of its MLAs here — about the SDLP being irresponsible in not backing the Budget. The Alliance Party asked how we could be in the Executive and not back the Budget. Given its mandate, I will not be dictated to by the Alliance Party. Our mandate is much stronger. I fully support and defend the course of action taken by the SDLP.

Not only are there no extra North/South bodies in the Budget —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gallagher: As a representative of a border constituency, I know that people of all political persuasions there understand that we need good, strong North/South co-operation. There is nothing in the Budget about the North/South Parliamentary Forum, which is a shame, or about an all-Ireland civic forum —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gallagher: — which is also a shame.

As the SDLP's spokesperson on health, I know that we have frequently highlighted the importance of an all-Ireland health strategy, which would mutually benefit all the people of Ireland. I have repeatedly called on the Health Minister to publish the feasibility study on all-Ireland health, and, as he is here, I repeat that call now. Given the huge spend on health in both jurisdictions, it is important that we continue to look at co-operating and improving working arrangements. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has given a practical example of that by saving £7 million over the next six years —

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

Mr Gallagher: — through important all-Ireland health arrangements.

Mr McDevitt: Can I say — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McDevitt: What has been most upsetting about today is not the words exchanged in here but the message sent from this place. That message is that when given the opportunity to discuss what we all agree is a grave Budget, we much prefer to spend our time — some 37 of us, including me, have had the opportunity to be heard — taking the mickey out of one another. What will that say to a new generation of so-called new Northerners whom this place is meant to promote? What will that say to the many thousands of young families who will bear the brunt of the Budget cuts? What does it say to the 9,000, and possibly more, public servants who face the dole as a consequence of the Budget? What does it say to the 7,400 public servants who are already on low pay and will get relatively poorer over the next four years because of the Budget?

It says two things. First, for regrettable reasons, Sinn Féin and the DUP would rather spend an afternoon attacking others than trying to explain how they ended up in this mess. The worst thing about today is the basic dishonesty at the heart of our debate. The most serious of cuts are heading the way of our community, and the people with the most political power in this region are either in denial about them or trying to deceive the population about their impact.

This is possibly the most serious day that we have faced as a devolved Administration because, until now, the money, to some extent, has flowed. After today, however, we face a new reality in which the students, who are out there in the Great Hall and have all the ambition in the world to go to university, will be forced into making false choices.

Mr McGlone: I seriously do not find it a topic of humour or mirth that people could find themselves on the dole queue as a consequence of what happens here today. I suggest that Members treat this with the gravity that is required and the respect due to people who will be affected by the Budget.

Mr McDevitt: It is pointless, at this stage, Mr Deputy Speaker, to engage in name-calling; not when you have put your name to billions of pounds' worth of cuts. Name-calling will not take people out of poverty. It is not going to improve this region. It is not going to reunite Ireland. In fact, all that it is going to do is confirm in the minds of people out there what they already feared about his place: that, in fact, it is twice as divided as our society; it cares less about our people's future; and it is more interested in the preservation of narrow, sectoral interest than in the transformation of the lives of the many.

That is the thing about this Budget. It is a Budget for the few. It is a Budget for the few who will benefit from £80 million which, as we all know, is a slush fund. The Budget document itself says that it is a slush fund. It states that the Executive had to cut back on the funding in year one because they did not know what they were funding. It is a budget that tackles and addresses nothing to make life better for the poor, and that is in the document. At the end of the Budget document, you will see written in black and white the fact that this Budget is bad for the disabled, the young and the elderly. That is what the Executive have had to put in the Budget. Yet, rather than debate it honestly and rather than prepare people with dignity for the impact of what is ahead, Members chose to come in here and take potshots, like in the olden days — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McDevitt: The way this place used to be in the old, bad Stormont, a place which was parodied all over the world for all the right reasons. Yet, two parties have come in here today and tried to turn it back into that place.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: I commend the amendment because it is an attempt to put people back at the heart of budgeting; to do as much as we can to try to mitigate the impact of the cuts on ordinary people; and to give the one thing that has been missing from today's debate — a little bit of hope — to everyone.

Mr Elliott: We have heard quite a lot of bluster today, and I am pleased to hear that so many on the Benches to my left are glad to see me getting up to speak. Obviously, Budgets are about protecting essentials and priorities, and this one should be no different. If you have a household budget to draw up, you must protect the essentials and priorities, and that is why the Ulster Unionist Party had no difficulty in making health a priority. We had no difficulty putting health to the fore in this. Nobody that I have heard from out there in the community disagreed with that, because they know the difficulties that there will be in this Budget and its outworkings.

It is impossible to refer to all the contributions by Members who spoke in the debate, but I want to refer, in particular, to Paul Frew, who said that this Budget can make a difference. He is right, and you just wait to see the difference that it will make to the old, the vulnerable and the people who are most at risk in this society. That is who it will make the difference to. I want to see you people go then and tell your elderly friends and relatives and all the constituents who come to you: "Yes, I didn't support additional funding for health and social services".

Mr Deputy Speaker: All remarks through the Chair.

Mr Elliott: Tell them: "I didn't support health and social services funding". You can tell them that they are not going to get their domiciliary care or their healthcare package.

I also note that Paul Frew referred specifically to the construction industry. Let us remind ourselves what the construction industry — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There are a lot of conversations going on between Members across the Floor. *[Interruption.]*

Order. That applies to all Members. The only person who has the Floor is Mr Elliott.

Mr Elliott: Mr Frew talked about the construction industry, and he was quite right to do so, but let us remind ourselves what the Construction Employers Federation said about the draft Budget:

"Our community must now face up to the harsh realities that this budget is likely to result in the loss of a further 10,000 construction jobs on the back of the 26,000 that have been lost over the last three years."

That is what the draft Budget means for the construction industry and the Health Service. It is rich for the Sinn Féin/DUP partnership to tell us how responsible we should be, given that they could not even meet in the Executive for 152 days. They failed to meet and work for the community in Northern Ireland. That is how good they are, yet now they are trying to lecture us.

I noticed that the Chairperson of the Education Committee, Mr Storey, referred to the Ulster Unionist Party's support for ESA. Did we support ESA? Let me remind the House that the Ulster Unionist Party went through the Lobbies to oppose ESA; whereas, at the start of the process, the DUP supported it. We are the party that has held firm on ESA throughout the process. We saw that the Education Minister was making a mess of it, but it took others a long time to catch up.

I heard the allegation about relationship between the Ulster Unionist Party and the Conservative Party. They tell us that it is all our fault. Whose fault is it really? It was the Labour Party that put the United Kingdom into the mess that it is in, supported by the DUP, which kept them in Government for so long. The DUP then had the cheek to vote against the Labour amendments to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Programme for Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Elliott: Let me also remind the DUP about another Conservative link. I was at Hatfield with some of its members — the party leader and the Finance Minister — at the invitation of the Conservatives, and I can tell the House that some of those members were keen to do a deal. In fact, most of them were; they wanted an electoral relationship with the Conservatives, only to be snubbed by them. Maybe some of those members —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Again, there are far too many conversations going on across the Floor.

Mr Elliott: Maybe some members of the DUP will want to ask their party leader and the Finance Minister who they were going to sacrifice to allow Ulster Unionist Party and Conservative Party candidates to run.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that there is very little analysis of the impact that the Budget will have. Given the cuts and changes in welfare benefits and the projected job losses in public services, the Budget will impact severely on some of the most vulnerable in our society, particularly women, children and young people. Where is the protection for women and children in the DUP/ Sinn Féin Budget?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for her intervention, in which she clearly highlighted what I have been trying to say. We are highlighting the discrepancies in the Budget. The Ulster Unionist Party will always put the public first, and the public deserve a better Budget. I have heard no one in the public complaining about the Ulster Unionist Party putting vulnerable people at the heart of the Budget and delivering for them.

Ms Purvis: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, is it in order for someone in the House to say "What about David Ervine?" and speak ill of a dead Member? I ask the DUP Member who said it to withdraw his comment.

Mr Bell: I said that David Ervine would never have supported the Tories, which is exactly what the Member is doing now. She is shamefaced to ruin the reputation —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All Members should restrain their language and co-operate with each other.

5.15 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I do not really know whether I am sad or glad to see the end of this very long Budget process. I notice that Mr Empey, now that he is in the clouds of the House of Lords, thinks that we did not have enough time to spend debating the Budget. We have had over 40 hours of debate in the Chamber. I am not so sure that there has been 40 hours of new material; maybe one hour of material has been

regurgitated. Nevertheless, we have had a long time to discuss it in the Assembly.

The one thing that has become quite clear is that, through all the hours of debate, no minds have been changed. Despite the fact that we have heard from those who oppose the Budget that they want to be convinced that it is worth supporting and that they want to have an input into it, this long process and their contributions throughout it have really been all about teeing themselves up for an election in May. As I said during my statement on the Budget, even when you say "yes", they cannot take that for an answer and still want to find a reason to oppose the Budget.

We have two amendments today; one from the SDLP and one from the Ulster Unionist Party. Neither of those parties spoke to their amendments, and I can understand why they did not. In fact, even when Mr McDevitt had the opportunity to sum up about his Budget proposal, all he could do was give us the usual patronising, preaching and parsimonious attitude that we get from the SDLP on all of this. He said that we have had too much name calling. I can think of "ostrich economics", "not-an-inch Budget", "unimaginative", "green Tory party", reference to a Member's tan, and so it goes on and on. When it comes to name calling, Mr McDevitt should maybe look at some of his party members before he starts preaching at the rest of us.

I want to try to deal with some of the issues in the Budget, because I believe that the Budget is defensible.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a moment or two; let me get started first.

Mr Elliott did not even mention what was in his amendment. He talked about ESA, Sinn Féin, 152 days and about justifying the Conservative link. His five minutes were used up ignoring the fact that he had put an embarrassing amendment before the Assembly.

The debate has been dominated by comments about health. That is a great pity. Mr Poots, in his contribution, made a very important point. One would have thought that we were discussing the health budget today. I reckon that about 70% of the time spent talking about the

Budget was about the health budget. The fact that the Health Minister has, over four years, created difficulties that have embarrassed the Health Service and embarrassed the party that put him into that position should not lead us to have a Budget debate that is dominated by the unfortunate consequences of four years of misrule in the Health Department.

However, Mr Poots made an important point that we have to bear in mind. This Budget is about the whole range of services that we have to administer in Northern Ireland. One criticism of the Budget has been that it is far too pigeonholed, that there is a silo mentality and that there has not been enough cross-fertilisation of ideas between Departments. Of course, by necessity, we have to allocate money to budgets. However, as Edwin Poots pointed out, when we spend on DCAL and on leisure and sport, it has an impact on the health budget because it helps to deal with obesity. When we spend money on road safety, it keeps people out of hospitals and, therefore, has an impact on the health budget.

When we put people into jobs, there is less likelihood that they will have mental difficulties and be reliant on the Department for Social Development as a result of living in poverty.

The Budget is joined-up, because, when we spend money on one Department, Ministers understand fully that there is an impact on spending in other Departments. It is an easy throwaway line to say that we have allocated only on a silo mentality and that we have not allocated on the basis of a new Programme for Government. We set priorities and spent money in Departments. The money that is spent on one Department will have an impact on another. It is naive to say otherwise, and those who try to make something out of the fact that we allocate money Department by Department do not understand. The common theme that has come through in the debate shows that Members fully understand the impact but do not want to understand it, because they are looking for ways, excuses and opportunities to make the Budget an electoral issue.

I honestly think that Mr O'Dowd was right in his assessment that, despite the terrible impact that it would have had on Northern Ireland, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party would rather we failed. Rather than be successful, they would prefer to be sitting here towards the

end of March, with the permanent secretary of DFP having to put in place an emergency Budget that would have had more severe cuts than this Budget.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a moment or two.

The whole theme has been that the Executive are dysfunctional with dysfunctional parties and a DUP/Sinn Féin carve up and that it could not possibly work. It did work, and it did so because we were determined to make it work. I pay tribute to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the role that they played in that. It worked because we knew that it had to work. We did not go for some shoddy, one-year deal that we would need to revise after the election. We went for a four-year deal, because that is what people said they needed for certainty.

The two other parties, which had every opportunity, really did not want this to work. They are miffed, so they are looking for holes. I will look at the criticisms that they made and the holes that they say are there, and we will compare and contrast that with what they offered in the amendments and in the paltry documents to which at least one of them keeps referring — the other is too embarrassed to refer to its submission. Let us see where the real meat of the argument lies.

I promised the Member that I would give way, so I will.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for giving way. I understand that he needs to resort to robust language to cover up what it says in his own document. It states the Budget will lead to widespread redundancies that will affect the most marginalised in our society and that it will lead to further job losses outside of the public service. How can the Minister not address the 7,400 public servants who will be worse off as a result of his Budget? What is his direct message to the 9,000-odd public servants who will lose their jobs because of the Budget?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member quoted from our own document. We have been accused of being dishonest and of trying to withhold and hide the facts from people on the Budget. We have not done that, and it would have been foolish to do that. We have openly accepted that, when you take £4,000

million out of public spending over a four-year period, there are bound to be consequences. We have sought to mitigate those consequences.

The Member talks about the 9,000 job losses that his party and the Ulster Unionist Party estimate will be lost in the public sector. I do not believe that that will be the case, but there will be job losses. However, one of the SDLP's policies was to freeze wages over £33,000 rather than wages over £21,000. What impact would that have had on public sector employment? It would have led to another 1,700 people in the public sector losing their jobs.

We have made hard decisions to try to safeguard employment in the public sector. Of course, we will get flak for it, and I have had flak for it already. People have told me that they earn £22,000 or £23,000, and their wages are going to be frozen, but prices will continue to go up. The easy thing for us to have done would have been to take the route that the SDLP took because it did not have to implement its proposals. That would have been the easy thing to do, but we did not do it because we were concerned about mitigating the effect of the £4,000 million that was coming out of the Budget and that would have an impact on the economy in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we have been honest in the document, and we have admitted that there will be impacts.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member tell me who is right? Is he right or is Mr O'Dowd right? Mr O'Dowd said today that £1.6 billion of additional revenue had been brought to the table in the Budget, whereas the Minister tells me that £758 million of potential additional revenue will be factored into firm departmental allocations only when there is confidence that the measures can be delivered. Therefore, who is right? Is the Minister right or is Mr O'Dowd right?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will come to the revenue that we have factored in to the Budget already, but the Member will know that when the draft Budget was first brought out in December 2010, we brought in over £800 million, and, in the final Budget, we brought in another £388 million. I will go through the revenue that we have raised. At least our revenue proposals are a bit more robust than the revenue proposals, which I am going to refer to, in the SDLP's document.

I will come now to the proposal and to the speeches that have been made. First, Mr

McNarry, who is not in his place, proposed the amendment for the Ulster Unionist Party. I like Mr McNarry. I like his style of debating. It is very similar to mine. You headbutt them, kick them and leave them lying on the ground, and I enjoy that. However, even he tried to work himself up into righteous rage today, but he could not do it because he knew that his heart was not in it. He started off by saying that he was opposed to the Budget because it is no plan for the way forward. That is why his party proposed the amendment.

The implication is that the amendment that he proposed contained a plan or even a cunning plan. However, the Ulster Unionist Party is not very good at cunning plans. It had a cunning plan to link up with the Conservatives, but it has renounced that. It had a cunning plan that it would become a franchise, but it has renounced that. Basil McCrea had a cunning plan the other night that if we cut the Invest NI budget, it will give us enough money for health. However, he forgot that the Invest NI budget does not even meet the amount of money that is required for health. Therefore, that cunning plan was discarded. The party had a cunning plan this morning to put one of its celeb candidates on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' to explain the Budget, but he could not make up his mind whether it was a good idea or a bad idea or whether the £4,000 million was a good cut or a bad cut. I think that Baldrick has had more cunning plans than those of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Do not forget that this is the Budget for the whole of Northern Ireland.

All that we have in that plan that refers to health is that 38% of the additional £432 million that has been identified should be given to the Health Department next year.

5.30 pm

As my party leader, the First Minister, pointed out, the cunning plan hit the buffers immediately because, of course, the £432 million to which the amendment refers is money that is available over four years. Thirty-eight per cent of it represents £164 million. In the first year, only £50 million-odd is available. Therefore, that party's cunning plan to save not only the Health Service budget but the entire Budget for Northern Ireland could not even meet the money that it wants to be available to fill the gap in the Health Service in the first year.

Mr McNarry goes on. I love this bit because it really shows the cowardice of the Ulster Unionist Party. The remaining 62% of those resources would be allocated to key public services. You would have thought that, since that party was keen to tell us what it would do with the first 38%, it might have been keen to tell us what to do with the other 62%. Of course, that would mean making decisions. It would mean telling us from whom it would take the money. It would mean telling us whose budget it would cut. It decided that it did not want to do that. Indeed, just in case it had to discuss it at the Executive before the election and it got caught out there, it decided to put it off until the new Executive are in place. Now, there is leadership for you. There is the party that leads the way and has a plan. There is the party that will show us how to balance the Budget. It is no wonder that Mr McNarry did not move the amendment with his usual bluster. I certainly would not have done so either.

Then, Mr McNarry talked about the DUP/Sinn Féin cuts. I do not know how many Ulster Unionist Party Members mentioned them. One thing that all of them said — every one of them — although they seemed not to see the inconsistency, is that, as part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has to bear that pain. It is a national problem. The result of that national problem is that we have to experience reductions in our Budget. Therefore, are those reductions the result of a national problem that has been handed down by the Government at Westminster, or are they DUP cuts?

Mr McNarry talked about the pain being necessary. Mr Empey talked about not living in isolation because we are part of the United Kingdom. Mr Elliott talked about being part of the United Kingdom and having to bear that as well, as did Mr Kinahan. All of them accept that that is part of the national picture, yet they throw out the slur that the cuts are somehow the fault of the DUP and Sinn Féin. They do not even count in the Alliance Party. I would be miffed if I were in that party. It seems to be a nonentity with regard to the Budget, even though it voted for it.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a wee moment or two. I just want to finish the point.

Therefore, as the First Minister pointed out, even though every one of them accepts that the cuts have come from Westminster, they say it is a Sinn Féin/DUP reduction.

We might have had a lesser reduction had there been a different policy in place for cuts. However, of course, during the election, the Ulster Unionist Party decided to ally itself to the party that wants to impose those cuts quickest and deepest and said, “Let us get the cuts done”. Therefore, it cannot divorce itself from the way in which the national Government responded to the problem. As a result, we have to bear the consequences, live with them and deal with the problem.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I just wonder about the point that he is making. I refer to paragraph 3.6 on page 13 of the Budget document, which states:

“The UK Government argues that it has prioritised the NHS, schools, early-years provision and capital investments...As a result Whitehall departmental budgets, other than health, education and overseas aid, will be reduced by an average of 19 per cent over the four year Spending Review period”.

Our argument with you, Minister, is based on the way in which those cuts were allocated. We argued, in the same way as it was argued by the Westminster Government, that the NHS should be prioritised because we think that it affects everybody. We are not seeking to deny the fact that cuts will have to be made; in fact, I have pointed out that they have to be made. All that we are saying is that we do not think that you prioritised the right things.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I find that response amazing. I will repeat the figures again, although I am getting sick and tired of repeating them. First, we are not simply a rubber stamp for Westminster. It is not a case of us merely making the same reductions as Westminster makes in its budgets. That is the whole point of having a devolved Assembly. We set our priorities. Secondly, let us come to the health issue. England was covered by the Conservative Party and the promise to protect the Health Service, but the National Health Service there will take a real reduction of 0.2%. In Northern Ireland, the Health Service will take a real increase of 0.1%. In Scotland, there will be a reduction of 2.3% and, in Wales, a reduction of 2.2%.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No. Let me finish this. The Member argues that it is not the cuts that he is against, though that is not the tenor of the debate that we have had from the Ulster Unionist Party. He argues that he is against the nature of those cuts. He says that we have cut one budget harder than has happened in other parts of the United Kingdom. The figures do not show that. They show that we have afforded health greater protection here than it received in England, Scotland and Wales. If that is the only reason why they are voting against the Budget, their argument has been wiped out. The Member wants in again, but I suspect that, since I have given him the figures time and again, I am not going to convince him. So, I am going to move from that issue.

Mr B McCrea: Will you not let me in?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am going to move from it.

This is the ultimate irony: the Ulster Unionist Party has asked that we allocate 38% of £432 million to the Health Service, and, as I said, that amounts to £164 million. As additional spending, we gave health £189 million. I am not so sure that even the party will want to support the amendment. If it does, it is, maybe, coming round to my way of thinking.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I want to move on to contributions from other Members. I want to move to the leader of the SDLP, and I want to start with an apology to the SDLP. In previous debates, I have, it seems, wrongly accused Mr McDevitt of writing speeches for the party leader. They were appalling speeches. I got a message from the SDLP in which I was told not to make those claims again, because Conall McDevitt does not write the leader's speeches. I do not know if that came from Mr McDevitt because he was embarrassed by it or from some of the people in the SDLP's research department who thought that the speeches were brilliant and wanted to take credit for them. Whatever it happens to be, I apologise for it. However, I have to say to whoever wrote today's speech that it was no better than the speeches that were written previously.

The Member reminded us of the infamous evening in the Assembly on 14 February — I would have been embarrassed; I would not have reminded anybody about this — when they made lots of proposals, including one that was rejected by the Assembly. On that occasion, she proposed that we cut £22.8 million and then gave us a list of things that would have cost about £600 million. I would have forgotten about that one if I was her, but she seemed quite proud of that.

Having made the mistake once, the SDLP is at it again. Today, out of the £80 million to be taken from the social investment fund — I will come to it in a moment — it wants to fund a list of eight items. Of course, Members have gone through it all. It includes significant public sector reform, increased investment and adequate funding. I think that Members have been very unkind, actually. Although it refers to significant interventions, increased investment and adequate allocation for the social protection fund, Members have accused the SDLP of not actually giving any figures for those. However, if you look at the SDLP document, you can see that there are figures there. The SDLP must have thought that the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 that it tried the other evening was very successful, because it is going to try the feeding of about 50,000 with this one. If you add up the figures that it has put for the eight items in its document, £800 million would not cover it, yet it has the audacity to bring that forward. No wonder — to use Mr McDevitt's term — the SDLP resorted to name-calling and petty point scoring instead of trying to explain its amendment in the Assembly today.

I want to have a little intervention here. I am going to diversify a wee bit. The one name-calling exercise that the SDLP seems to love is to say that those are the Tories — Sinn Féin Tories. I love that one. First of all, it seems a bit incredible, but, anyhow, as I read through the SDLP document, I wonder whether we have Maggie Ritchie or Maggie Thatcher as the leader of that party now. Maggie Thatcher did not privatise half the things that the SDLP wants to privatise, like the water service. I love this one: page 52 of the document states that the SDLP wants to outsource — it does not call it privatisation — a range of things, which means putting them into the private sector in education, health and everything else. The SDLP wants to privatise allotments, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive headquarters, the

forests, rate collection, the port, the agricultural college, car parks and MOT centres. They even want the Speaker's house — I hope it is the one down the hill and not the one he has in Londonderry, but you would not know, given the way the SDLP is going. I will come to the revenue raising in a moment. The SDLP has a bit of a cheek. I do not actually object to a lot of the things it is talking about, although I know Sinn Féin might, but the SDLP has a bit of a cheek, calling that crowd Tories when it has a document with that kind of stuff in it.

I have been told that we cannot be too light-hearted on all of this, but it comes down to this: really, the SDLP will hang on to any thread and make any argument to try to divorce itself from a Budget that it knows is the best stab that we could have made. The SDLP does not want to be identified with it. I am fairly sure that, when SDLP Members talk to their trade union friends, they do not mention allotments, the water service or outsourcing. I bet they keep that fairly low-key.

It was significant that, in Margaret Ritchie's speech, which was meant to be on the amendment — I said I would defend the Budget that we have — the leader of the SDLP hardly referred to her own amendment. She talked about the Budget and said we were taking a defeatist approach and were doing nothing. That is in spite of the fact that I have shown that we tried to raise additional revenue to fill the gap left by the reduction in the block grant.

5.45 pm

The Member also said that there was nothing in the Budget about job creation. Her sentiments are a bit like those expressed by Mr McCrea, and there are some synergies between the two parties. Indeed, when I look at the SDLP's document and its proposals for Invest NI, I see that it has joined the Mr McCrea wing of the Ulster Unionist Party, because, like him, it wants to cut Invest NI's budget to the tune of £95 million.

As I said, there are provisions in the Budget for job protection. We have also given the second and third biggest increases to DEL and DETI respectively, and giving that money to DETI will help to create 7,000 jobs over the four-year period of the Budget. Through the Budget we will also seek to reduce job losses in the Civil Service, reclassify money from current expenditure to capital expenditure to help the construction industry and provide money

for the green new deal. We will also provide money from the invest to save scheme for training and apprenticeship schemes, pay up to £2,000 for accredited training courses to help the unemployed get equipped and create a comprehensive package of assistance for those who want to consider self-employment. Therefore, the Budget has lots of opportunities for job creation, but Mrs Ritchie —

Ms Ritchie: Ms Ritchie.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Sorry, Ms Ritchie. Ms Ritchie seems to want to ignore all that.

The Member also spoke about the Budget being “unimaginative” when it comes to revenue raising. However, that is not a term that you could use about the SDLP's revenue-raising proposals. In fact, it takes a great deal of imagination to buy into what that party is suggesting — if not flights of fantasy. I do not want to go through all the proposals again, but it has proposed borrowing £690 million, which we are not allowed to undertake, and saving £250 million on cancelling trains that we have not ordered. It has also proposed — I like this one — raising £240 million by selling assets. I know that time changes things, but, when the SDLP did a report on the Budget, it referred to the failure of the central assets management unit, through which we wish to raise £100 million over four years, to raise any funds in the past four years and asked why we had included that figure in the Budget. The SDLP wants to raise £240 million, yet it condemns us for wanting to raise £100 million. As other Members have pointed out, it also wants to sell an airport that we do not own. This is the stuff that that party has proposed.

The SDLP also condemned us for proposing to take £20 million a year from the reserves of the housing associations, and it said that there was no ability for that money to be recouped from the housing associations. However, that idea came from its own document, which proposed that we should take £20 million a year from the housing associations for the first two years of the Budget.

I use those examples to illustrate that the SDLP has proposed ideas that sometimes go further than ours, but, because those ideas are included in the Budget and that party is looking for excuses to refuse to vote for the Budget, it rubbishes its own ideas. That is dishonest.

Mr O’Loan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think that your party leader is telling you not to speak, but I will give way anyway.

Mr O’Loan: I welcome the attention that the Minister gives to the SDLP document. I know that he will not admit it, but the attention and seriousness that he gives to it represents his inner view that that document represents the most serious challenge to the Budget that he is presenting.

I ask the Minister to consider this: two years ago, we proposed in an earlier document that the money available in Belfast port be looked at because there were public funds there that might be better used in the wider public interest. His colleague Edwin Poots, who is a Minister for whom I have some respect — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O’Loan: At least, I have some respect for him when I do not think of the fiasco of RPA and local government. When we made that proposal two years ago, the now Environment Minister said that it would not be wise to touch the resources of Belfast port. Now he is a member of an Executive who are doing that very thing. I give that as an example to the Finance Minister and say to him that, if, instead of denigrating and attempting to score points on the 57 proposals in our document, he was prepared to be silent and reflect for a while, he might find things of substance that would be of benefit to the whole Executive.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Remind me not to take any more interventions from that man.

Let us take the point about Belfast port. It really does not matter where the idea came from. The charge in this and in previous debates was that Sinn Féin and the DUP locked everyone else out and did not want to hear their views. The SDLP wants it both ways. That was another reason for rejecting the Budget: we kept them out of it. Now we are told that we stole one of their ideas. I do not care whether they think that we stole one of their ideas; I also made it clear that I do not care where ideas come from. I wanted to make sure that we had robust, accessible sources of revenue so that we would not be left with holes in the Budget. Mr O’Loan cannot

have it both ways. If he now claims that that was input from the SDLP, I hope that its Members will retract the allegation that they have been throwing around all afternoon that they were kept out of the Budget. That is another reason why they do not have an excuse not to vote for the Budget.

Health has dominated the debate. SDLP spokesperson after SDLP spokesperson said that we did not give health a fair deal and they could not support the Budget because health was so important and we were very sore on the Health Minister. Yet between the draft Budget and final Budget we found £189 million for health. Let us look at what the SDLP wanted us to give health. Its document, under the heading “Protecting Frontline Healthcare”, states that it would have given £10 million in year 1, £10 million in year 2, £5 million in year 3 and £5 million in year 4. It justified those figures by stating:

“the Party understands that reports of services nearing collapse in certain areas may be exaggerated”.

On one hand, it says that the Health Service is on the point of bankruptcy, but, in its document, when justifying why it proposed to give only £30 million, it said —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, I will not give way. You had your opportunity, and I have been generous in giving way. You had your opportunity to justify your stance, and you did not take it. You preached, patronised and pontificated —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Remarks should be made through the Chair.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: — but you did not actually enlighten us. I am enlightening Members on your ideas. Again, it shows that, when we really dig down at the foundations of the SDLP’s opposition to the Budget, we find that it is not because of health, as we have given more than the SDLP wanted; it is not because of jobs, as the SDLP was going to take money off Invest NI and we have put money into it; and it is not because of revenue-raising, as our revenue-raising proposals are more robust.

The social investment fund is the other reason that the SDLP gives for its opposition.

The SDLP's document proposes that we have programmes for disaffected youths in disadvantaged areas, that we spend money on people who are not in employment, training or at school and that we spend money on areas of disadvantage. That is exactly what the social investment fund is all about. Mr O'Loan gave the game away — this is important — when he said that it should be in the Department for Social Department. So, it is not about spending the money; for the SDLP, it is about who owns the money. If that is the SDLP's opposition to this proposal, I think the public will see that it is totally shoddy opposition.

I will turn to another point, although I may come back to some points about the SDLP. Mr McKay, the Chairperson of the Finance Committee, raised the issue of the PEDU work plan, especially around DE and DHSSPS. We have made it clear and we already have agreement that we will put a PEDU team into DHSSPS to look at savings that might be made and to try to push through the savings that, to date, the Health Minister has refused to countenance. As for DE, we have scoped out a number of areas.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a minute.

We benchmarked things like school transport, the school meals service and school support. The benchmarking shows great discrepancies between one area of Northern Ireland and another. The next step in PEDU's work will be to see how savings could be made in education on the basis of trying to get some equalisation in the costs across the service. That will be important.

Mr Wells: The Minister referred to PEDU and the Health Department. Is he aware that, by moving from branded to generic drugs, one GP surgery in Castlederg saved £311,000 in five weeks? The move to generic drugs had no impact on patient care whatsoever. The amount saved is enough to cover every heart bypass operation required in Castlederg this year. Is that not the sort of saving that can be made, without affecting front line care, that the Department refuses to implement?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If the Minister had listened to Michelle O'Neill and Mr Easton's speeches, he would have heard a range of things that members of the

Health Committee have identified as ways of achieving savings, and I congratulate the Health Committee on the work that it has done. I find it amazing that a Minister should say that his Department is likely to go bust within the first couple of weeks of the new financial year. I am not quite sure how that happens, especially with a budget of £4.3 billion.

When a Minister says that, and then sits on the recommendations of a report that indicates that there is £5 million to be saved every month — already, five months have passed and nothing has been done — we have to question how serious he is.

6.00 pm

Mr Frew talked about a number of things, including commercial rates assistance, which was a very important announcement and will help a lot of small retailers in town centres across Northern Ireland. It will double the amount of money that is available in rates relief; it will increase by about one third the number of premises that will be covered by that relief; and, in some cases, it will save small businesses up to about £2,000 in overheads. I, or whoever is the Minister in the new mandate, will be bringing further proposals to the Assembly on that. On top of that, we give help to the manufacturing industry through the rates cap, and there are also other rates reliefs available.

Mr Frew also talked about the capital budget and the construction sector. Again, we have sought to help. A lot of Members have talked about the negative comments from the likes of the CEF and others. I would not expect otherwise, but it miffs me a wee bit in so far as we have tried to do our best for the construction industry in Northern Ireland, and the criticism from some is unfair. We have switched £256 million from current expenditure to capital. We have identified £600 million of capital receipts, which will add to the capital budget. By the last year of the Budget, we will be spending £1.5 billion, which is about the same as the long-term trend, in capital expenditure. Do not forget that, at present, as a result of public spending, more than 50% of people in the construction industry have employment. That was a result of proactive decisions by the Executive to bring forward contracts to try to fill the gap.

However, at the end of the day, I have to say that the construction sector cannot become totally dependent on the public sector. That is not a

healthy or sustainable way forward. All that we can do is fill a gap until the private sector picks up and until the construction sector looks for other opportunities that may be available.

Mr Farry raised a number of points, particularly around the role that the Alliance Party played in the Budget process. He made a very important point: in a mature debate on this Budget, it has to be accepted that not every party got its way. There are things in the Budget that I would prefer not to be there; there are things that I am sure Sinn Féin would prefer not to be there; and there are things that Mr Farry's party would prefer not to be there. There are also things that we would all have liked to be there. However, we have to accept that, in any coalition, there has to be compromises. I point out that the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP had exactly the same opportunities to argue their case.

Mr Empey talked about how we failed to live up to a report that he and the leader of the SDLP produced. Throughout the whole Budget process, from June onwards, I have given parties' individual Ministers the opportunity to talk to me and my officials. We set up the Budget review group, which included all parties, and on which all parties had an equal say. When the draft Budget was published, I talked again to Ministers to hear their difficulties. During the consultation —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No; I am not going to give way.

We have sought to include people. I do not think that we could have done any more. The other thing that Mr Farry pointed out is that, when we spend money on health and social services, we spend less on something else. I know that I am going to be challenged on this at some point during the debate, but if we want to have a Health Service that is commensurate with the service in the rest of the United Kingdom, we cannot run away from the fact that, in other parts of the United Kingdom, the Health Service is partly funded by charges that are imposed on the people who use it.

People may say that that is perhaps not a wise thing to say before an election. However, if we are going to ask for parity, we have to accept that there are things that could be done. Mr Farry acknowledged that; he has at least always been honest in these debates. Indeed, let

us look at the deficit in the health budget. If the charges that are currently in place in the Health Service across the United Kingdom were imposed in Northern Ireland, the Health Minister would have an additional £120 million a year in his budget. He has chosen not to impose such charges, and that is fine, but he should not then complain about not being able to maintain the level of service that is available in Northern Ireland.

Mr Moutray highlighted that the consultation on the Budget was not wasted. It could be said that the Agriculture Minister either caved in on the issue of funding for young farmers' clubs or accepted that there had to be funding. She made a sensible decision on the matter, and that shows that the consultation process was worthwhile. The Minister responded, as other Ministers have responded.

Mr Moutray also mentioned the land parcel identification system, and I understand that the Agriculture Minister recently announced that new maps and guidance will be issued to farmers this summer. That should assist farmers to complete their 2011 claims more accurately. Most importantly, it will help to avoid the sorts of fines that we might get from Europe. That was a good example of where we used invest to save money.

Like a number of other Members, Mr McLaughlin pointed out that we still have a hole in the Budget as a result of the £4,000 million reduction. We have not filled it all, and we will continue to work at that. Despite the fact that there will be a bit of posturing on the vote, I hope that, once it is over, there will be proper engagement by the two parties that have dissented from the Budget so that we can look at ways to deal with the deficit that we still have.

Lord Empey reinforced a point that I have made on a number of occasions, which is that there is a national dimension to the Budget considerations that we face. He talked about the health budget and said that there was rising demand, that people outside were walking about with placards — I thought that he was talking about the Health Minister when he said that — and that we have to play our part nationally. If he believes that we have to play our part nationally, he is accepting that we will have less money available to us, not because of anything that we have done but because of what comes from London.

I have dealt with some of the points that Mr O'Loan raised, but I want to deal with two specific issues that he mentioned. He asked a reasonable question, and I think that an explanation is required, because a big part of the additional funding that we have made available in the Budget is the £240 million overcommitment over the next four years. As I have said time and again, I do not want to see figures in the Budget that we cannot stand over and that will cause problems.

The £240 overcommitment, which represents £30 million capital spending and £30 million current spending for each Budget year, was based on a number of factors and situations that have changed. First, EYF has been removed from us, so it is important that we spend all our money and do not give any back to the Treasury. Secondly, we looked at the historical situation, which showed that we were underspending every year. That is not the Executive's fault — in fact, it shows that there was very good financial management — but, still, we were spending between 99% and 99.5% of our Budget, which left an underspend of between £50 million and £100 million at the end of each year.

Therefore, it seemed sensible. Look at the experience of this year, where we did not have an overcommitment. As the Member rightly pointed out, I was keen that we should not have an overcommitment this year because we had, do not forget, reallocated £340 million at the start of this financial year. However, we really did have an overcommitment to deal with this year, in so far as we got a £127 million demand from the Treasury in June. We had the option of carrying that over until next year, but we decided that it was not wise to do that. Even though we took no money from health or education, we were still able to fund that £127 million demand.

Yes, the Departments of Health and Education were exempt from any slice of it: £30 million for health and £20-something million for education. We were still able to find the £127 million and carry over £23 million. On that basis, looking at how we had managed the Budget historically and at how we had managed what was basically an overcommitment imposed on us in the middle of this financial year, we believed that we could manage the Budget to carry the £240 million overcommitment safely. It is not slack management, as Mr O'Loan described it, but good management of the resource that

we had available, and we would be in a far, far worse situation had we found at the end of each year that we were handing money back to Westminster.

There was one other point that Mr O'Loan made that I have not dealt with. I know that he was scrambling around for reasons to oppose the Budget, and I noted what he said. He made a derisive, throwaway remark along the lines of, "We do not even find the word 'corporation tax' mentioned in the Budget."

Mr P Robinson: Two words.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not want to be pedantic, but the First Minister has already spotted the mistake: "corporation tax" is two words. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Loan is wrong about the number of words and he is also wrong to say that it is not mentioned in the Budget document. It is. It is not just the word that is mentioned; there are actually a couple of paragraphs on corporation tax. Of course, there is no figure for corporation tax because, first, there is not yet a figure that we know. Secondly, there is no point in putting it in figure until we know that it is going to be devolved.

He also displayed the kind of negative attitude that we have got from the SDLP when he asked what there is in the Budget for the people who responded to the consultation. He asked what the people who responded would say about it. Let me tell the Member what we did as far as the people who responded to the consultation are concerned. The arts community responded in very large numbers, and, as a result, we have given another £3.6 million to the arts. People affected by library closures responded, and, as a result — and Mr McElduff raised the issue — we have given £4.5 million of additional spending to DCAL for libraries.

People from the Health Service responded. I will use the figure again: £189 million extra for spending on health has been made available. The education sector responded, and, as a result, £154 million has gone to schools. Responses were received on the state of the roads and the water service, and, as a result, an additional £107 million has been given to DRD. There were responses about education and training in the higher and further education sector, and DEL got £51 million as a result. There were complaints about the lack of money

for a childcare strategy. As a result, we put £12 million into a childcare strategy. The Member talks about how we ignored the responses to the consultation. We did not ignore the responses; we actually tried to facilitate them within the budget that we had. In fact, 96% of the allocations that were made were made in direct response to the public consultation on the issue.

6.15 pm

Mr Neeson: In view of the fact that extra funding has been made available to DRD, does the Minister agree that the A2 scheme, which has been shelved, should go ahead as planned?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

The final decision will be for the Regional Development Minister, but money has been allocated to his budget. The A2 is far more heavily used than some of the other roads that are included in the Regional Development budget. I hope that the scheme will go ahead, especially given that £16 million has already been spent on it.

Lord Morrow raised a number of issues about the Department of Justice's budget and the additional £200 million that was secured to deal with the security situation. That is a good example of the point that I have been trying to make about Ministers working together. There was a problem in the Department of Justice. I will tell the House what the Justice Minister could have done: he could have gone on 'The Nolan Show' and spread all sorts of scare stories. He could have said that if he did not get the money, town centres would be blown up, people would get shot, we would go back to the bad old days — "I need this money; give me this money; I deserve this money; why am I not getting this money?". He did not do that.

I will tell Members what he did. He came to me and made the case. He then said that he wanted his officials, my officials, me, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to raise his case in London. He made a comprehensive case, and he got the money. That is how a responsible Minister deals with budgetary pressures. That is how to get results.

I make the point again: apart from the shroud-waving that we get from the Health Minister and all his supporters, we are still waiting for a comprehensive argument as to why he needs money, where he needs the money, what

is being done to find the money already and everything else. In the absence of that, we will never have a proper debate on the funding that is needed for the Health Service.

Lord Morrow also raised the issue of the severance scheme for prison officers. In line with a number of other Departments, the Department of Justice is considering an invest to save scenario. That was recently announced by the Justice Minister. He is looking for an exit package for prison officers, and he wants to create the right grade mix and flexibility and look for longer-term savings in that. After the consultation, a business case should come to DFP.

Mr Brady raised the issue of welfare reform. The Minister for Social Development and his officials are engaging with the Department for Work and Pensions on the introduction of the universal credit in Northern Ireland and what the implications might be. Of course, there are some implications for my Department in relation to housing benefit, and I have already spoken to Iain Duncan Smith, the Minister in London, about that to have the exact implications spelt out to us.

Mr Storey raised the issue of the PEDU review of education. I have already said where that work is at present. He also raised the request to reclassify £51 million from current to capital. Although a request was made for £41 million, the Executive agreed that £25 million could be switched.

Mr Basil McCrea asked how education could get more money and yet actually finish with less money in the capital budget for next year. One of the reasons for that is that education was allocated an extra £17 million, but there was a capital-to-current switch of £25 million. Therefore, the net figure went down by £8 million. That is where the difference arose.

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

Mr McCallister raised the issue of the McKinsey report and talked about how introducing its recommendations would lead to more charging in the Health Service. I have made it quite clear to him that there will be charging issues that we will have to look at. If he wants to compare Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom, and the budget for Northern Ireland with that in the rest of the United Kingdom, he has to accept that there are certain things

that occur in GB that will have to apply here in Northern Ireland.

The issue of Desertcreat was raised by a number of Members. I was surprised when Mr McCallister indicated that, even though the capital had been made available, that project could not go ahead because the Health Minister could not provide the revenue. I do not think that he could not provide the revenue so much as that he would not provide the revenue. If Mr McCallister had thought before he spoke, he might have seen how silly his remark was. We have the Fire and Rescue Service, and the people in that service have to be trained. The training facilities, some of which are not very good, have to be maintained and paid for. To think, somehow or other, that when Desertcreat college arrives on the scene, there will be a demand on the public safety budget to train Fire and Rescue Service personnel for the first time is so much nonsense. Indeed, one could argue that having all of the Fire and Rescue Service training on a purpose-built site, with all the economies of scale, might make savings in the budget. Is this all about being obstructionist again, rather than trying to be helpful?

It is a bit rich that a complaint was made about there not being enough joined-up thinking in the Budget — I think it was Mr McNarry who made it. Nevertheless, when we do try to have joined-up thinking and put the police college, the Fire and Rescue Service and other public service training facilities in one place to have better and cheaper facilities through economies of scale, the party that complains that we do not have enough joined-up thinking in the Budget does not want to do it. Is that a responsible way to deal with budgetary issues?

Mr Ramsey raised the issue of Altnagelvin radiotherapy unit. The capital has been provided for it. I had difficulty in getting from the Health Minister his priorities for capital spending. It seemed that the capital spending priority changed depending on where he was speaking. If he was speaking in Dundonald, it was a priority; if he was speaking in the Royal, it was a priority; and if he was speaking in Londonderry, it was a priority. I got no list of priorities. Nevertheless, as we knew what the issues were, the capital money for the radiotherapy unit was made available.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a moment or two.

It is up to the Minister to use his budget to fund the running costs of that. However, we know that, if the work is not done in Londonderry, it will have to be done somewhere else, so the running costs exist anyway.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister outline exactly what stage the business case for the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin is at?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The business case came to my Department, as the Member knows that it should. There were queries on it, and those queries have been sent back to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and have not yet been responded to. Of course, no decision can be made until that is done.

I come now to the contribution made by the First Minister, although he was speaking as leader of the DUP. He went through all the issues. I am not going to go through all the facts, such as what caused the situation; what reduction we have; is it our fault; how do we deal with it; and what information has been given to try to alleviate the problems. When people want money spent, have they said where it will come from? Of course we got no answers to any of that.

Mr Lunn had concerns about the Budget. He also asked about the cost of division, as did Mr Farry. I have made it clear already that, although the costs of division as the Alliance Party presents them are well overestimated, nevertheless there is a cost involved. Even if we were not in austere times, Departments that want to free up money to spend on other services really should be looking at how those costs can be reduced. Hopefully, that will be the case.

I like Mr Kinahan. He said that he was disappointed that the debate had been about half-truths — I do not know whether he was talking about speeches from his own party — point scoring, shouting at one another, and he was appalled. He then said that of course he would probably engage in that as well, which he promptly did. So we move on from it.

Mr Kinahan spoke of his support for the Health Minister. However, I was surprised. Usually, he is one of the more thoughtful contributors from the Ulster Unionist Party. He was asked from where more money to support the Health

Minister should come? He replied that that was my job. I expect a reply such as that from some other Members of the House. However, that is not Mr Kinahan's style. He may be embarrassed by it, because he knows that he is ducking his responsibility, but it is typical of a party that is electorally afraid to put up its hand for anything unpopular. It wants to point the finger at everyone else and hopes that they make the unpopular decisions. That is not very becoming. At the height of his embarrassment, Mr Kinahan said that maybe I would find £400 million under the bed. Can I tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that if there was £400 million under my bed, I would not be here tonight. *[Laughter.]* I would be away into the great blue yonder. There is no £400 million under my bed, under any other bed or under a hospital bed. A sum such as £400 million is not easily come by. We have to work at it. Rather than it being somebody else's job, it is all our jobs to try to find that money.

I want to come quickly to Mr Attwood's contribution. He has left the Chamber now. He talked about the Royal Exchange project, about which he was not only dishonest but downright wrong. He claimed that 1,000 jobs could be created over the next number of years had that money been kept in. I had a conversation with him, and I accept that I had not raised the issue with him. A proposal went to the Executive, at which he had every opportunity to have a say about it, and he had a say about it in the Assembly today. The £70 million for the Royal Exchange happened in the very last year of the Budget, and it was to vest the property only. The money would have been spent purely on buying up property, and no building work would have taken place in that year. Time and time again, this money had slipped. Had it not been for my intervention against his party leader, who was the then Social Development Minister, there would not have been any money for the Royal Exchange. I refer to a letter from her dated 7 October 2009. She asked me to bring the £70 million from the Budget year 2010-11 into the year 2009-2010. Was it money to spend on Belfast city centre and the Royal Exchange project? Not at all; it was money for her to build new houses. As I pointed out to her — her grasp of economics is sometimes poor — if money is spent on that, it cannot be spent on the Royal Exchange. The money for the important Royal Exchange project would not have been in the Budget had Mr Attwood's party leader had her way in October 2009. So it is totally dishonest

of Mr Attwood to come here and rail against his budget being pillaged and jobs being lost. Had we left — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Had we left that £70 million, knowing that it was unlikely to be spent, and then, in the last year of the Budget period, scrambled to find something to spend it on rather than putting it into a planned investment programme, it would not have been good value for money. I tell you — *[Interruption.]*

6.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has less than five minutes left in which to speak, so please may we have the best of order?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We have heard of 'His Master's Voice', he is "The Mistress's Voice": "I will give the explanation for you, Margaret, just in case you do not get it right."

The truth of the matter is this: any doubt now being cast on the Royal Exchange project is not as a result of a Budget decision that the Executive made, because we have actually made it clear that the money would have priority in the first two years of the next Budget cycle. The person who is spreading that doubt in his attempt to again find an excuse for not voting for this Budget regardless of the consequences for Belfast is the Minister for Social Development. So, I think that, before he starts complaining, he should bear that in mind.

He also raised the issue of support for the vulnerable and the fact that he was opposed to the social investment fund. That fund actually does meet some of the things set down by the SDLP —

Ms Ritchie: Misrepresentation.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not. I will put the letter in the Library, and Members can judge whether or not the then Minister for Social Development asked for that money to be switched from being spent on the Royal Exchange to housing. She can then explain how money can be spent on housing one year and on a shopping centre the next.

Mr Attwood also raised the issue of the social investment fund, the social protection fund and of protecting the vulnerable. All that I can

say is that there is £100 million in the social protection fund and the social investment fund. There is also £12 million for the childcare strategy, and, of course, much of the money that goes into the Health Service is used to protect the vulnerable.

In conclusion, this long and lengthy process has been necessary but painful, and I do not think that any of us really wanted to be in this position. I want to again emphasise that we have done this against a background of £4,000 million being taken out of our Budget. We had the debate about that, and we can blame whoever was responsible for it. However, the fact of the matter is that we had to deal with it. Against that background, some Members said that this is a poor Budget. However, let me just remind those Members that, despite all the problems caused by that background, we have a Budget that seeks to foster economic growth through enhancing skills and providing support for local business —

Mr McDevitt: Rubbish.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Well, you say “rubbish”, but I have given you the figures, and you still will not listen. At the same time, better protection has been given to the Health Service in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom. We also have innovative proposals in the form of the childcare strategy, the social investment fund and the social protection fund. We have given —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has one minute.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We have given a commitment to major capital projects and have switched resources from current to capital projects to support the construction industry. This has been a tough Budget, but I believe that it has been drawn up honestly by looking at the needs of Northern Ireland. We have made our best effort at it despite the sniping from the sidelines by those who have been partly responsible for the situation that we are in. I, therefore, commend the Budget to the Assembly.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the vote on the motion, whether or not amended, requires cross-community support. However, the votes

on the amendments are by simple majority only. Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that, if this amendment is made, amendment No 2 will fall, 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 32; Noes 67.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr PJ Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Callaghan, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Lord Empey, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O’Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCallister and Mr B McCrea.

NOES

Ms M Anderson, Mr S Anderson, Lord Bannside, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Doherty, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Ms Gildernew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McLaughlin and Mr Spratt.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 31; Noes 67.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr PJ Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Callaghan, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter,

Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Lord Empey, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Callaghan and Mr McDevitt.

NOES

Ms M Anderson, Mr S Anderson, Lord Bannside, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Doherty, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Ms Gildernew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McLaughlin and Mr Spratt.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I sense keen anticipation.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 67; Noes 31.

AYES

Nationalist:

Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr S Anderson, Lord Bannside, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan,

Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Other:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McLaughlin and Mr Spratt.

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Callaghan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Unionist:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Lord Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McNarry, Ms Purvis, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Kinahan.

Total votes	98	Total Ayes	67	[68.4%]
Nationalist Votes	39	Nationalist Ayes	25	[64.1%]
Unionist Votes	52	Unionist Ayes	35	[67.3%]
Other Votes	7	Other Ayes	7	[100.0%]

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2011-15 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 7 March 2011.

Private Members' Business

Local Government (Disqualification)

Bill: Final Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: A valid petition of concern was presented on Tuesday 8 March in relation to the Bill. Therefore, I remind Members that its effect is that any vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Ms Purvis: I beg to move

That the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill [NIA 7/09] do now pass.

I wonder whether it was something I said, or maybe something that I am about to say.

As Members are aware, the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill would disqualify any individual who is elected, appointed or otherwise selected as a local councillor while also holding the position of Member of the Assembly. As amended at Consideration Stage, the Bill states that disqualification would take place 60 days after an individual takes his or her seat as a Member of the Assembly. However, it is my sincere hope that, in practice, all resignations and co-options will be finalised well before that deadline so that there is no inappropriate burden on local councils or unnecessary delays in new councils beginning their work.

The Bill would come into effect at the next elections after Royal Assent. If it were not being derailed by the cowardly acts of one party in the Chamber — or one person at the minute — that would likely be the upcoming local elections in May. The Bill would still allow an individual to stand for two levels of office at the same time. I understand that that is disconcerting for some Members. I share some of that worry, but I also feel that creating any prohibitions on candidacy would be a worse choice. We will have to leave it to the voters to deliver any punitive measures that they see fit for those who are perceived to be pursuing multiple levels of public office out of self-interest.

7.15 pm

I am pleased to have reached this momentous day. It is one of the few times that a private Member's Bill has achieved Final Stage in the Assembly. I recognise all Members of the Assembly secretariat for their professional assistance as I attempted to navigate the

legislative process. I recognise the Committee for the Environment for its careful scrutiny of the legislation and the important matters that it raised and all of the Members of the Assembly who have played a key role in sharing and promoting the vision of the legislation. I also acknowledge and pay tribute to my senior policy adviser, Shannon O'Connell.

The vision of the legislation concerns the quality of our democracy. In the past 16 years, we have made great strides in establishing and embedding a truly democratic system of government in Northern Ireland. We are about to go to elections, having served the Assembly's first full term without suspension since 1998. Many Members have played key roles in those developments, and some have made their contributions while serving as MLAs and councillors. They are to be acknowledged and commended for that work.

However, democracy is not stagnant; it is a living, breathing entity that is malleable and shifting. Its preservation requires perpetual vigilance. Once established, the next step must be to examine its quality and the value of the representation and the participation that it offers to citizens. As I have noted already this evening and in previous debates on this topic, there are Members of this Chamber who served as councillors during extremely difficult times in this country. Many showed leadership and courage during our darkest days, and that has to be acknowledged.

I often think of my friend and mentor and former MLA and councillor David Ervine, who loved what he did as a councillor and as an MLA. He was very good at both jobs, but David also knew well the importance of participation and representation to our young democracy. He understood how vital it is that politics is inclusive rather than exclusive and that elections and political parties should be a means through which under-represented groups and individuals access decision-making. I think that it would have been as difficult for David as it is for others to pick one level of office to pursue, but I think that he would have seen the merits of doing so and of opening an opportunity for someone new to come in, for new ideas to find fertile ground and for the next generation to realise how essential their participation is.

The legislation really is about taking the next bold step in our democracy, ensuring that it is

of the best and highest quality that it can be. That means diversifying decision-making and promoting processes that bring people in rather than keep them out. It means preventing not only conflicts of interest but the very opportunity for those conflicts to occur. A conflict of interest is unambiguously defined as a situation in which someone in a position of trust has competing professional or personal interests that may make it difficult for that person to fulfil his or her duties impartially. A conflict of interest exists even if no unethical or improper act has taken place, and, by its very definition, a conflict of interest arises if a person is merely in a position to exploit a situation for personal or professional gain.

It is unavoidably true that Members of the Assembly make decisions that impact on local councils. Some of those involve remuneration and pay, some involve decision-making powers and authorities, and some involve additional responsibilities or professional opportunities for councillors, which can also include compensation. Transition committees, district policing partnerships, neighbourhood renewal partnerships, education and library boards, and even the planning powers that are currently under discussion in the Chamber are just a few examples of the areas in which the Assembly makes decisions that impact directly not only on councils but on councillors and often involve a degree of financial compensation. This situation cannot be allowed to continue; it is simply bad government.

On the subject of bad government, it seems that lightning does strike in the same place twice. The DUP had an opportunity to right a wrong from last year, but, unfortunately, it has chosen yet again to table a petition of concern against the Final Stage. That is a horrible misuse of the legislative process, and it sets a very dangerous precedent for this House. If parties and Members see fit from here on in to kill legislation at Final Stage with a petition of concern because they have lost all the votes during the stages at which the Bill could have been amended, essentially because the majority of the House voted against them, we are looking at very real problems for our democratic process. So much for their woolly words on wanting simple majority voting introduced to this House. If that happened, the Bill would pass.

It is one thing to disagree with this legislation, and the DUP and the Alliance Party have made

it very clear that they find the Bill distasteful; however, it is another thing entirely to kill the Bill at Final Stage, not with the majority of votes, but with a mechanism that is designed to prevent the representatives of any community riding roughshod over the other. It is essentially a safeguarding mechanism.

It is also an abuse of the electorate. The DUP is misusing a safeguard that is designed to protect citizens of this country from abuses of power by, ironically and tragically, abusing its power. The DUP's actions today are blasting big holes in the legislative process in this Assembly and in the public's confidence in that party's ability to lead. It is extremely worrying that the largest party in the Chamber is using a mechanism that is meant to safeguard the terms of a peace agreement to wreck legislation at Final Stage because it does not have the votes to defeat it properly or honourably.

I strongly urge the DUP to reconsider its actions, which can only be described as an abhorrent abuse of power. I question whether the DUP is capable of its leadership role. Leadership without vision or compromise is no leadership at all. The public mood on this issue is unequivocal. The electorate wants to see an end to double-jobbing and to all the loopholes in the system that allow a small number of people to have access to all the power and privileges that come with that power.

The question of fairness, which opponents of the Bill dismissed in earlier debates, is certainly undeniable at this point. With the Budget that we are facing over the next four years, and with some analysts projecting almost 40,000 job losses, there is no way to argue that it is acceptable for a single individual to hold more than one paid full-time position in office.

With that type of economic environment in front of us, we will also need all the talent and diverse decision-making in government that we can possibly get. Countless pieces of research that have been conducted since the onset of the recession have found that the more diverse and representative of the population a decision-making body is, both in the public and private sectors, the more sound financial and strategic decisions it makes. We will need new ideas, new voices and the perspectives of those who will be most affected by the spending cuts, which are about to hit with very severe consequences. Women, young people and the

most disadvantaged will be most affected, but very few of those individuals are genuinely represented in this House.

I cannot control what the political parties will do about candidate recruitment. Some of the choices that have been made over the past number of weeks have been astonishing, but I hope that all is not lost and that the move away from double-jobbing will breathe new life into our political system. I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I look forward to a positive and constructive debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Ms Purvis for moving the Final Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill. The Committee welcomes the Final Stage of the Bill, which is designed to eliminate the practice of individuals holding the office of councillor and being a Member of the Assembly at the same time. The Bill is very short, but it has led to very long debates in the Committee and in the Chamber.

The Bill was referred to the Committee on 9 March 2010, and Members conducted detailed scrutiny of it, making recommendations and prompting amendments where it deemed necessary. The Committee considered that the key issues relating to the Bill were conflict of interest; eligibility for election as a councillor; timing of implementation; expanding representation; public perception and confidence; and the context of the Bill in relation to local government reform. As the arguments on each of those issues have been well rehearsed at earlier stages, I will not go into any great detail on them now. The Committee outlined its recommendations for the Bill at Consideration Stage. However, I want to take the opportunity to highlight members' particular areas of concern.

The first concern is the timing of the implementation of the Bill. At Consideration Stage, the Committee tabled an amendment that would allow 60 days to elapse between an election taking place and disqualification taking effect. The Committee's intention was to ensure that there was time for all council seats to be filled before councils held their annual general meetings. Members recognised the importance of that and agreed that a 60-day period would allow the co-option process to be completed. An amendment was tabled at Further Consideration

Stage to reduce that period to 14 days. The Committee was concerned that that gave insufficient time for all council seats vacated by newly elected MLAs to be filled. I was glad that the House supported that view when it rejected that amendment.

The other main issue was eligibility for election as a councillor. The Committee recommended that an amendment should be made to ensure that it did not disqualify any person from standing for election, even if he or she were currently an MLA. The sponsor confirmed that that was not her intention. Subsequently, she agreed to amend clause 1 to clarify that disqualification would prevent an MLA only from being a councillor and not from standing for election. The Committee agreed to the sponsor's amendment to address that issue.

As I mentioned earlier, for such a small Bill, much debate has ensued. It is time for that debate to end and for the legislation to proceed and be implemented. Public perception is that power is in too few hands. The Bill will end that perception and will ensure that those who want to get involved in local politics will have an opportunity to do so.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to say a few words on the Bill on behalf of Sinn Féin. I thank the Bill's sponsor for the leadership that she has shown and the steps that she has taken in recent times. I commend her for that, and I am disappointed that we have come to this point. All this week, we talked about maturity and common sense. Obviously, common sense will not prevail in that respect. I want to point out why it is common sense. Clearly, no matter what anyone says, if we look to the future and the powers that will be transferred to local government, there is a potential conflict of interest. Yesterday, we spent all day discussing the Planning Bill. When we discussed the matter previously, Mr Weir said that when it comes to making decisions, a councillor — we were referring to the Minister at that time — could leave the decision-making process. If I were a member of the public who had voted for someone and had asked that person to represent me on council, I would want that person to be there.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. At present, that is the position. For example, last night — Stephen Farry can testify to this — I believe that he almost chased two members of

my council out the door when the Down-Armagh tourist partnership was raised, of which they are members. There was a conflict of interest, and they had to leave. Therefore, what exists at present is not anything particularly new. A situation in which there is a direct conflict of interest is adequately covered at present.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, we are creating legislation. In the implementation of that legislation, it could be perceived that there is a conflict of interest.

People sat here all day today debating the Budget, and it would be easy to skip over the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill and leave without commenting on it. However, it is good legislation, and a lot of work went into it. The Committee put as much work into the Bill as any other that we have worked on so far. I want to give it more time.

We must consider the issue of proper representation by councillors. Over the past couple of weeks, we have been here until a late hour on Mondays and Tuesdays. Being a former councillor, I know that most council meetings, particularly on planning issues, are held on Monday and Tuesday nights. If anyone says that those people who are double-jobbing as councillors at present are making a contribution to their councils and to the Chamber, my answer is that they cannot be in two places at once.

7.30 pm

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: No. I gave you an opportunity already.

I tried to do both jobs in the first two years of this mandate. Even if I left here at a normal time and tried to rush down to Armagh City and District Council to take a file into the council, it was difficult to contribute properly to the council meeting. I do not mean any disrespect to anybody, but there is a considerable amount of work involved.

Mr I McCrea: I am one of those so-called double-jobbers, and I am proud that the electorate elected me to both of the elected positions that I hold. I have one of the best records on my council for attendance and for the part that I play in anything that comes before

the council. I appreciate that the past couple of weeks have been more difficult, but if Ministers had not sat for a time on legislation and tried to rush it through the House at the last minute, I doubt if we would have been sitting here to all hours of the night.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: That is a fair point. I will not challenge the Member on his attendance. Good luck to him. However, a number of other MLAs were not at council meetings and maybe do not have your record. I have done it, and I know what it is like to drive back to Armagh to work on council business.

Mrs D Kelly: I listened carefully to what Ian McCrea said. His comments fall contrary to what Peter Robinson, the DUP leader, said last year, when he said that that party would end double-jobbing.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I agree.

The Bill is a positive piece of work that has been brought forward by a Member, so let us not demean it. Some good work has been done to bring it forward. It is disappointing that a petition of concern has been presented. I hope that the Member is returned to the House, because this is good groundwork, and it may be continued. I think this is how it will happen in the future, but, unfortunately, it is not happening now.

I want to speak about expanding representation and giving people an opportunity. At the present time, we are not giving people an opportunity. Ian McCrea said that he had a good record, and fair play to him, but maybe he is slightly concerned that it would be a wee bit difficult for him to challenge for the central Government seat if he were to give up his council role. I know through my time on a council that some members believe that council work is worthwhile groundwork. That is fine; it is good groundwork. I would recommend it to anybody who wants to get into politics. There is no doubt that the local council is a good place to start off. I will be going out and rapping the doors again and taking another opportunity to see if I can come back here.

Sinn Féin fully supports the Bill. We are disappointed for the House that the opportunity has not been taken to move the Bill forward. I may stand corrected on this in a couple of years' time, but I have some confidence that it

will be brought forward in the very near future. With that in mind, I will finish.

Mr Ross: I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the sponsor's proposal. I was out in the Great Hall, as we were letting the people of Northern Ireland know the great successes that we have had in the Budget, following a lengthy Budget debate in which many parties adopted positions of hypocrisy. It is almost a year since the Bill was brought to the House, and the debate on the Bill has been ongoing since then. We have had debates on many issues, but the debate on this issue alone exposes some of the rank hypocrisy that there is among other parties in the House.

I listened to the Ulster Unionist Party, which I know has been very vocal on this issue. Its Members say that this issue is a point of principle for them and that there should be no dual mandates. If it is a point of principle, I cannot help but ask why, over the past four years, it has not ended all dual mandates for its MLAs who are also councillors. I have raised that before in the House. If it is a point of principle, which is the message that it is trying to tell the people of Northern Ireland, it should have taken that action voluntarily. The fact remains that it has not done that.

Mr Dallat: I believe I can supply the answer to that. The legislation by which one could co-opt somebody only came into being on 1 April. I know that, because I resigned from Coleraine Borough Council on 1 April. If I had done it earlier, there would have been a by-election that my party could not have won.

Mr Ross: Of course, the logic of that argument would be that, once that legislation came in, we would see all of those with dual mandates stand down immediately because the legislation was there to allow them to do that. However, that is not what we saw; that is not what happened. If it was a point of principle and they were waiting for the legislation to be in place, the logic is that once that legislation was in place we would suddenly have seen that dual mandate ending. That is not the case.

The Member has brought the SDLP into the argument —

Mr Weir: Before the Member gets on to the SDLP and we leave the Ulster Unionists, I appreciate the point that was made; it certainly would have been available from

1 April. Whatever the explanation for past behaviour, how does that explain the fact that, in my constituency of North Down, there is an Ulster Unionist who will be seeking a new dual mandate? He is currently neither a member of the council nor a Member of the Assembly, but intends to serve in both. They are actually creating fresh dual mandates.

Mr Ross: That further exposes the hypocrisy that we have seen from other parties. It is a poor show when certain parties are trying to tell the public one thing but are actually doing another. That will be exposed.

I will move on to the SDLP, as it has been very vocal on dual mandates. I recall that, at the last stage of the Bill, I raised the fact that that party's entire House of Commons team were still Members of this House and had not acted on ending that dual mandate. At the time, Mr McGlone helpfully said that Mark Durkan would be stepping down from this House within a matter of hours, and he duly did so, but the fact remains that two thirds of that party's House of Commons team are still Members of the Assembly. I do not think that either Alasdair McDonnell MP or Margaret Ritchie MP have any intention of standing down from this House. Again, that highlights the hypocritical position that the SDLP has adopted on the issue of dual mandates.

We can look at the MPs that Sinn Féin has in the House of Commons. Again, there is no indication from Sinn Féin that they will be stepping down from the House of Commons. Whether they take their seats or not, they hold two mandates, and that is what the issue is. It is not about double-jobbing; it is about dual mandates, and Sinn Féin Members hold dual mandates. Again, I think that that is a hypocritical position from Sinn Féin. I wonder if the Member wants to make an intervention.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment:

Thank you very much. Sinn Féin members do not service two Parliaments at all in that respect. What we are talking about is this Assembly and local councils. I said the last day that I have freely stepped down from council, and we have co-opted. It is about giving people an opportunity. If people are afraid that they will not get re-elected on a council ticket or an MLA ticket, I say on behalf of my party that we will not be double-jobbing. We are going to change the system. I wish you would take on

board the piece of work that has been done. I suspect that it will happen anyway in the very near future.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, he highlights the fact that Sinn Féin MPs do not take their seats in the House of Commons, and I think that that is a shame.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think we have heard enough about MPs sitting in the House of Commons. This debate is about people's ability to stand for local government, not for the House of Commons, so please return to the subject at hand.

Mr Ross: Indeed it is, and the issue of dual mandates is particularly relevant, because if parties take a view on the dual mandate between local government and the Assembly, you would expect those parties to take the same view on dual mandates between the House of Commons and the Assembly. In relation to ending dual mandates, that is where I think our party is relevant. The Member for Upper Bann mentioned the pledge that the DUP has made. We did say that we would be ending dual mandates; we said that we would be phasing that out.

In fact, the two parties in the House that are sceptical of the legislation are the two parties that have acted on ending dual mandates. When the Alliance Party's Naomi Long won her seat in the House of Commons, the party immediately took action to co-opt Mr Lyttle. It did not need legislation to do that; it did it voluntarily, just as the Democratic Unionist Party has taken similar action on a voluntary basis. We have had Nigel Dodds, Ian Paisley Jnr, Jim Shannon, William McCrea, Jeffrey Donaldson and David Simpson all leaving this House to serve in the House of Commons. If we look at the dual mandate between local government —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This Bill is about local government, and the debate should be about local government and not the House of Commons. Please return to the subject matter of the debate.

Mr Ross: I was just putting the issue of dual mandates into context, and I will go on to discuss the issue of dual mandates between local government and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The fact remains that many Democratic Unionist MLAs have already stood down from local councils, and a number of others have indicated that they will not be standing for local government next time around. Again, we did not need legislation to do that. That was done on a voluntary basis, and a total of 25 dual mandates have been ended by this party.

Other myths have been brought up over the past year as the Bill has come to the House, in numerous guises. One of the first myths was that the Bill will bring more young people and women into the Chamber, but I do not accept that. I would like the Chamber to be representative of society, and having more young people and more women in the Chamber would be a good thing, as it would make it more representative of society. However, to suggest that ending dual mandates will achieve that is misleading. The whole selection process for candidates will remain the same. The electorate will also remain the same, and they will still have the choice to pick who they want to serve their local communities. Therefore, that is an argument that I have no sympathy with. There is no evidence that it would be the case.

The second myth that has been put forward about the issue is that the public are very angry about the issue of dual mandates and want them to be ended immediately. There are a number of things that could be said about that. First, fewer than 15 members of the public took the time to respond to the public consultation that the sponsor of the Bill did. If the issue was as big as the sponsor of the Bill has said, I would have expected many more members of the public to voice their concerns or opinions on it, but they did not do so. In addition, the evidence points to the fact that the electorate have not been put off from voting for Members who hold other mandates. If it was such a huge issue among the public, they would not vote for a candidate who either held another office or said openly that they wanted to stand for two offices. That is also worth bearing in mind.

There was also a media campaign about the dual mandate issue. More recently, the 'Belfast Telegraph' ran a campaign to keep Sammy Wilson in the Assembly because we need him as Finance Minister and do not want him to end his dual mandate, because we also need him to have a voice in the House of Commons. Therefore, even the media has changed its tune on the issue, and that same media expressed

concerns about many senior Members leaving the House as it could potentially leave a gap. Therefore, the public and media perception of things has changed dramatically.

I listened to the comments that were made by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment. He has left the Chamber at the moment, but he talked about not being able to be in two places at one time, and about how councillors wanted to be in their local councils giving their views and casting their votes on issues for their local communities. My colleague Ian McCrea talked about his own voting record at local council level, and it is worth putting on record the fact that the voting records of Members of this party who serve both on local councils and in the Assembly or elsewhere are favourable when compared to anybody else. Indeed, we have one of the best voting records of any of the parties. The greatest irony of all is that the sponsor of the Bill has one of the worst voting records in the House, and she does not hold another mandate. I think that that highlights the fact that the sponsor of the Bill —

Ms Purvis: You are talking about recorded votes, which, on many occasions, are on motions that are not binding. I do not vote on petty sectarian motions that tend to be tabled by your party simply to have a go at someone else on the other side of the Chamber.

Mr Ross: The Member should make that argument to the people of East Belfast. She should also explain why she does not bother to turn up to vote in the House, and I would be amazed if the people of East Belfast are —

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. Like me, the Member has listened to the excuse given by the Member from East Belfast about why she has such a poor voting record. Like me, the Member is in the Chamber on many occasions for votes whether or not they are petty, as the Member for East Belfast said, and he has eyes to see whether another Member is in the House —

7.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is all well and fine but has nothing whatsoever to do with the Bill. I ask Mr Ross to return to debating the Bill.

Mr Ross: I thank my colleague for that intervention, which highlights the fact that having a dual mandate is not impacting on a

Member's ability to be in the House and to vote on a number of issues. They are not all frivolous or silly, sectarian issues. Decisions on a number of issues may not be binding in the House and we may not have jurisdiction over certain issues, but there are still issues that the public want us to take a stand on, even if it is only to send a message to Westminster.

Mr Kinahan: Does the Member agree with me that voting records are not necessarily something to go by? Rather, it should be about how effective elected representatives are in their constituency. Similarly, we will learn from the forthcoming election what the public think about double-jobbing.

Mr Ross: The public will, of course, have their say. The Member is absolutely right that there are many roles in which MLAs must function. However, a primary role is that of a legislator, being in the Northern Ireland Assembly and being able to be here to cast their vote to represent the people in their community. The public bear that in mind at election time.

My party's position from the very beginning on the legislation has been that we want to end the practice of dual mandates. We have said that we will take the steps necessary to end dual mandates. We have already taken steps.

Mr Beggs: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Ross: I listen to comments from Councillor Beggs MLA, but he has not stood down voluntarily when he has been able to. That is a question that he will have to answer. If he makes such a big play of being opposed to dual mandates, why has he not ended his own?

We tabled amendments to try to find what we believed was a sensible compromise on the legislation. We said, first, that if people held a dual mandate between local government and the Northern Ireland Assembly, they would not receive their allowances and pay as a local councillor. The Assembly rejected that amendment. Our second amendment stated that we would end dual mandates by 2014. That would have allowed for a phased withdrawal of dual mandates, would have allowed new candidates to be identified and brought into local government, and would definitely — 100% — have ended dual mandates by 2014. The Assembly rejected that amendment also.

It was disappointing that a genuine, sensible approach from, and compromise by, this party was rejected by the Assembly. Therefore, that led us to the position where a petition —

Mr McFarland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will.

Mr McFarland: Does it not strike the Member as a most unfortunate misuse of the Committee system that if the DUP was going to kill this Bill, it would have been better to kill it stone dead at Second Stage? There is something slightly unfortunate about leading it through Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage to Final Stage, at which point, because it did not get its way with amendments, the DUP presented a petition of concern?

Does it also not concern him, and it certainly should the Members of his party who were here at the beginning of this process, that the petition of concern mechanism was set up specifically to deal with controversial community issues where one part of the community, unionist or nationalist, felt that the other was getting an advantage or pushing through something that it did not like? It was then possible to present a petition of concern to protect that community.

It was never, ever designed to protect narrow party interests so that individual Members would be able to use the power of their big hitters to get others in afterwards or to try to up their votes. That is not what the petition of concern was designed for, and this is the most awful misuse of that system. Does the Member not agree that the way in which this has developed is most unfortunate?

Mr Ross: I listened to an SDLP Member talk yesterday about their concern about the petition of concern. It was the Ulster Unionist Party, which Mr McFarland was a member of at that stage, and the SDLP that drafted the petition of concern Standing Order. It is a tool that can be used, and, therefore, it is being used.

The Member asked why we did not kill off the Bill at Second Stage. As I have outlined, this party tried to find a genuine, sensible compromise on the issue. We brought forward amendments, first, to take away the salaries of those holding dual mandates and, secondly, to end dual mandates through a phased approach by 2014. So, it was not a matter of killing off

the Bill at an early stage. We tried to make the Bill better. We tried to use amendments, as is the case in the legislative process for a range of Bills. Unfortunately, the House rejected those amendments. It rejected ending dual mandates by 2014 and removing the salaries. Therefore, we were left with little choice.

As regards abusing or misusing the petition of concern, it is not the case that it has been used only for constitutional issues or issues of great importance to one community or the other. The petition of concern was used on the issue of the Civic Forum. That is not a huge constitutional issue nor is it one that will impact on one community over the other, yet the petition of concern was used.

Ms Purvis: The Member gives a great example of the use of a petition of concern, particularly in relation to the DUP. The Civic Forum was part of the Good Friday Agreement and was designed to include in decision-making voices that are excluded from the Assembly. It was used as a mechanism to ensure that those marginalised voices and those communities and people were represented in here. So, the Member gave a really good example of how his party wanted to concentrate power again.

Mr Ross: I would have thought that the people in this House are the ones who represent the community because we are elected by it. I do not want to get into an argument about the Civic Forum, and I am not going to defend something that was set up under the Belfast Agreement, given that this party has been opposed to the Belfast Agreement since the very beginning. The example highlights the fact that it was not a constitutional issue or one that affected one community over the other, yet the petition of concern was used. So, I do not buy the Member's argument either.

I conclude by saying that it is a shame that the Assembly was not able to support the amendments that this party put forward and that we are left in this position. We remain committed to ending the practice of dual mandates, as we have said on the public record, and that will be done in a phased way. We have proven that we have taken steps to do that.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a local government councillor. As I have indicated, I will be seeking election to a single mandate in future. I will not be standing for local council elections in May.

Why is this Bill necessary? Stormont is changing. It appears stable. In the past, certainly in its first mandate, it was up and down, and then there was a large gap when it was not meeting at all. However, it has operated virtually continuously over the past four years, with the exception of the period when the Executive was blocked. I am sure that all Members are only too aware of the pressures on our time that recent change has brought, with real legislation going through the Assembly and the detailed scrutiny that that requires both at Committee and from Members individually. To read it carefully and to understand it is demanding on time. The number of Members' motions on what are, to a certain extent, wish lists, for which votes are not critical, has died away. There is huge pressure on Members' time, certainly over the past two months in the Assembly. It has been vital that Members have been active and have been here. I expect that to continue in the future with a working Assembly, provided that there are no more blockages in the Executive.

Changes are also occurring at a local government level. RPA was to have created a new super-council with new roles. Unfortunately, the DUP and Sinn Féin could not agree and finalise local government boundaries. It is hoped that reorganisation and the associated savings to the ratepayer will occur within the next four years; that is certainly what the present Environment Minister is indicating. Regardless of whether RPA happens, significant additional powers and responsibilities are being passed to councils as a result of recent legislation or legislation that is progressing through the Assembly.

I am thinking of legislation such as the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, which could mean that councillors have to spend more time taking decisions and improving actions in their neighbourhoods. Other examples are the High Hedges Bill and the Welfare of Animals Bill. So, a number of pieces of legislation, which will soon be passed, will require additional work by councils.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Not at the moment.

Perhaps the most significant change expected, and again the Minister hopes that this will happen within the life of the next council mandate, is the devolution of planning powers,

which will be very significant. A completely new raft of responsibilities will fall on councillors, who will be much more accountable to the local electorate in their decision-making. They will also have to know the planning system very well and ensure that they can stand over their decisions. I am aware that that additional workload will fall upon councillors at some point.

Mr Weir: I appreciate some of the points that the Member has made. He mentioned the High Hedges Bill, which will result in additional powers being given to councils and council officials going out and arbitrating. I am not quite sure how those additional powers will affect councillors. Will they be out cutting hedges? How will the extra responsibilities on councillors differ from general complaints that would come to an MLA's office on such issues? The extra responsibilities from the High Hedges Bill will not take council time; they will take council officials' time.

Mr Beggs: It may do, but those council officials, whether as a result of the High Hedges Bill or the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, will present recommendations to councils. Council officials may present reports and request that their councils take action. A responsible councillor will make sure that he or she is well briefed on the matter and will engage with the local community, where there will be arguments for and against certain issues. So, there will be extra time expected of councillors in the future.

Mr Kinahan: I heard recently that there are council members who are advising people to get their planning applications in, because they will have a say in the formulation of local development plans in the future. So, there are people on both sides. That is a definite example of the conflict of interest.

Mr Beggs: Conflict of interest is very difficult to manage for someone who is a councillor and an MLA. I have seen some MLAs who are also councillors behaving at Committees as though they have forgotten that their role in the Assembly is that of an MLA, because they appear to be acting solely in the interests of the other group that they represent. I have always endeavoured to take a balanced view on anything that I am presented with so that I can stand over my decisions and not be open to criticism.

The bottom line with dual mandates is that it is not possible to be in two places at the same time. New pressures, as I indicated, are emerging in councils and at the Assembly, and if someone is elected to two different bodies that happen to be meeting at the same time, he or she cannot be at both.

Would it not be better for new councillors to replace MLAs on councils at this election? That is what my party has decided to do. It is a responsible position for MLAs who are already elected to not stand for council. It will mean that new councillors will have an opportunity to learn the ropes before, as I indicated earlier, significant new planning powers are transferred. The choice is between doing that or keeping MLAs on councils with a dual mandate and at the end of the next term, just before the planning powers are devolved, drop the new people in. That will mean new councillors who are relatively inexperienced on planning issues having to start taking planning decisions.

Would it not be better for opportunities to be created today for fresh people to learn the ropes and get an understanding of the issues involved in planning so that, when councils are given the powers to take planning decisions, perhaps in two to four years, they have some experience and knowledge and are not coming to this issue cold and with all the associated difficulties?

8.00 pm

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a relevant point about trying to get people in to build up experience. Why then, when the co-option legislation was put in place last April, did he not stand down from his position as a councillor on Carrickfergus Borough Council and let someone else in to gain experience if he always intended to do that at this election anyway?

Mr Beggs: The Member is trying to use this as a smokescreen to protect his own position. Is it not honourable that if someone —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have given way. I have the Floor, and I wish to answer the question. Is it not honourable for someone to wish to complete the term to which they were elected? I was elected to serve a term on council, and I wish to complete that term. Is that not an honourable thing to do? I have said that I am not standing again. Is that

not an honourable thing for an MLA to do? Nevertheless, my decision is being questioned.

People with a dual mandate have an advantage over their political opposition; they get two bites at the cherry. They can talk about issues in the Assembly, and they can go back to their local community and talk about local issues that are raised in council. There is a political advantage in serving on two public bodies. When people are honourable and decide to stand down from a second body, they are giving an advantage to their opposition. That is what we are doing voluntarily. It is sad that others are not joining in, because it would bring better governance to everyone. It is sad that some appear to want to take the advantage and continue to serve, yet there are some very practical time difficulties in trying to serve on two bodies.

As I said, I suspect that the difficulties will increase. That is why I am happy that this is a good time for me to finish my local government experience. I value greatly my experience on local government; it has given me a direct input into taking local decisions about local services, and it has allowed me to try to improve the lives of ratepayers. Like others, I highly recommend it to anyone aspiring to higher political office. It is a wonderful starting point for getting to grips with local issues. I am fortunate to have been elected on two occasions to local government, and I appreciate that. I recognise the limitations on my time and ability to serve on both. Therefore, I am standing down at what I think is an appropriate time.

I hope that I have answered Mr Ross's question as to why I did not stand down earlier. Perhaps if I had stood down two years ago, he might be happier, and he might have a greater chance of getting elected because I would not have been representing the wishes of the local electorate. Perhaps that is why he is so keen for me to stand down. I have decided to stand down at this honourable point in time.

I understood that the petition of concern was introduced to enable the Assembly to be created in the first place, as some were reluctant to come in here in case there was dominance; it was to create confidence that one community would not be dominated by another. It was not brought in to give an individual grouping a blockage over every issue that it came across. That is clearly an abuse of the petition of concern. Members may criticise it, as, at

times, I do. However, we must all recognise that if it did not exist there would probably not be an Assembly, because the cross-community support that enabled the Assembly to work would not have been brought in. It is easy to criticise its creation, but if people examine why it is there, they will find that to be a reasonable explanation.

The DUP lost the argument on the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill on the Floor of the Assembly, in the Committee for the Environment, and again on a number of occasions on the Floor of the Assembly.

I find it incredible that, having lost the debate on the Floor of the Assembly on a number of occasions and in the Committee, the DUP chooses to abuse the petition of concern to try to block this Bill. It is a terrible abuse of the democratic process in the Assembly to use the petition of concern in a way that, clearly, it was not originally intended to be used.

What is worse is that this abuse is not in the community's interest but in the narrow self-interest of both the party and the individuals concerned. They are using and abusing the mechanisms for narrow party political gain over opponents. That is very unhealthy for this Assembly and in any democracy. They seem to want to continue as full-time MLAs, and let us remember that full-time MLAs have publicly funded offices. These Members want to continue as full-time public representatives with publicly funded offices, enjoying that advantage over other part-time local councillors and those who aspire to become councillors. There is, therefore, an undoubted advantage to becoming an MLA. Very few MLAs who stand for local councils do not get elected. If they do not, it is because of a major problem and they probably will not get elected to the Assembly subsequently.

That is another important reason why this legislation should be approved by the Assembly. It creates a level playing field at councils so that political power does not rest in the hands of a very few, power will go back to the community and the people, and there will be less likelihood of party political power brokers at council level. On some councils, the politics are largely local, but, particularly when follow-ons from activity in the Assembly are taken down to local council, it has a poor effect on them.

I think it disgraceful that the petition of concern has been used on this Bill. I am very worried about the abuse of the petition of concern. That abuse gives cover for political opponents in the future to use and abuse the petition of concern to block some other piece of legislation that perhaps 70% of the Assembly is in favour of. Others may decide to abuse the petition of concern.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. He will acknowledge that the position of my party is that we should move away from petitions of concern and the designation system, towards weighted majority voting, which gives that built-in safeguard. Does he acknowledge that my party's policy would be of benefit, and would he welcome it?

Mr Beggs: Most political parties would welcome such a move.

Ms Purvis: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will give way in a minute.

However, the practicalities are that this is here at the minute and the DUP chooses to use and abuse it. Regardless of where you aspire to go in the future, you choose to use and abuse the petition of concern for narrow party political self-interest, and for that, you should be ashamed.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he aware that, if Mr Ross's proposal were in place at the moment, the DUP would lose this vote and the Bill would pass anyway?

Mr Beggs: That is an interesting comment.

Let me move on to another area. Last year, as we are all aware, there was great concern as the public demanded higher standards from MPs and public representatives. I will quickly move on. With regard to double-jobbing, there are relevant issues in the DUP's 2010 manifesto. I quote:

"Following the Westminster election, successful DUP candidates" —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Nowhere in this Bill is there mention of Westminster or the House of Commons. The Bill is about the Northern Ireland Assembly and its relationship with local government. Please return to the subject matter.

Mr Beggs: Its 2010 manifesto indicates that it will end double-jobbing:

"We also believe double-jobbing on quangos should end."

Those appear to be shallow words that were not delivered on. DUP members are not only double-jobbing, but they are double-jobbing on quangos, and I have not heard of any action on that either. The DUP was keen to say things to get votes but not to deliver. Of course, the DUP's nominating officer could decide not to nominate MLAs going forward for council as candidates for both bodies, and its party leader could decide to change the position should he so chose.

Mr Weir: In that spirit, will the Member give an assurance that no Ulster Unionist candidate will be nominated for a council and the Assembly? Leaving aside the situation alluded to in North Down, others may be doing that as well. My understanding is that two MLA candidates for East Belfast are also sitting councillors and that they will presumably remain on those councils.

Mr Storey: North Antrim.

Mr Weir: Indeed, that is also the case in North Antrim and in other constituencies. There has to be consistency. If the Member is saying that the right thing to do is to bar any MLA from being a councillor, his party should take a lead on that as well.

Mr Beggs: First, my party supports the legislation. This is not a hypothetical situation.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will, but I want to finish this point. We support the Bill. This is not a hypothetical situation. Secondly, —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Beggs: As indicated, I will give way in a moment. As regards the hypothetical situation that the Member mentioned, I think that he is seeking even further political advantage, because he wants some councillors who aspire to be MLAs to stand down from their council position and perhaps not even be councillors in future. He wants even further advantage over political opponents from which he and his party can benefit. The Ulster Unionist Party has decided that none of its sitting MLAs will run for local government, because that is an honourable thing to do. However, is it realistic

to expect councillors to give up their council positions even though they cannot actually be certain that they will be elected to this House? What we are doing is reasonable, and if the legislation is passed we will honour and support it. The Member's party is seeking further political advantage for itself.

Mr McGlone: I thank Mr Beggs for giving way. Given that consistency seems to be the theme here, does the Member accept that if every party were consistent on this, we would not need legislation? The legislation has the objective of delivering consistency and bringing an end to the anomalies that exist in all parties. That is the aim of the legislation; that is why we are here this evening. I therefore thank the Member for introducing the Bill.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his contribution. The Ulster Unionist Party has decided voluntarily to honour the spirit of the Bill, whether it is passed or not.

It is important to demonstrate some of the practical difficulties for some Members who continue to double-job.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have given way quite a few times, and I wish to move on with my speech. I wish to give some practical examples that I, as an Assembly Member, have encountered with some other Members. During my time on the Public Accounts Committee, I remember one individual frequently leaving early to attend council planning meetings, and MLAs elected to Committees leave to attend planning sub-committees of councils. That happened in the life of this Assembly. Another example of the difficulty of being an MLA and a councillor is that their work depends on exactly when a council might meet and on what Committees they are on.

8.15 pm

I notice, interestingly, that Alderman Gregory Campbell MLA was frequently absent, or left early, from PAC meetings on the second Thursday of each month. It was drawn to my attention that he is a member of Derry City Council's policy and resources subcommittee, which, guess what, meets on the second Thursday of each month. Interestingly, that council meets on a Tuesday, when Members should be here, and on a Thursday. That particular public representative would also have difficulty serving on an Assembly

Committee that meets on a Wednesday, because it is on Wednesdays that he occasionally flies to London and goes to Westminster. There are some very practical difficulties in being a double- or treble-jobber, depending on which council Members serve on.

Is it honourable that a Member of this House frequently leaves Assembly Committees to which they are appointed to go elsewhere? Is that honourable? I ask other Members to address that when they take the Floor later.

Mr Humphrey: I do not think, and perhaps it is because you have not thought of another word to use —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please refer all your remarks through the Chair. The only “you” in this Chamber is the Deputy Speaker.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Member should choose his words carefully. I do not think that it is dishonourable to be a member of a council and I do not think that it is dishonourable to carry out your duties. The Member should use his words very, very carefully.

Mr Beggs: Is it honourable for someone whose council meetings conflict with meetings of this Assembly to sign a petition of concern that would potentially allow that conflict to continue? Is that honourable?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No, I have given way liberally.

Let me give Members the full picture of the Public Accounts Committee. The Public Accounts Committee meets on a Thursday, generally at 2.00 pm, and those meetings could go on until 5.00 pm. The policy and resources subcommittee meets at 4.00 pm in Londonderry. It has been pointed out to me that, on 11 November 2010, Mr Campbell joined the PAC meeting at 2.14 pm and, keeping up his present rating, was marked present. He left after 10 minutes at 2.24 pm. The following month, on the occasion when the two meetings possibly clashed, he sent his apologies. The month after that, he left the PAC meeting at 2.51 pm; he must be able to drive quite fast to other places. On 10 February 2011, he sent his apologies. Therefore, there is a very practical problem for some councils in attempting to have dual or treble representation.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have given way liberally.

It is obviously not possible for some councils to have dual or treble representation.

Mr Storey: The voters will make a decision.

Mr Beggs: Members are saying that the voters vote for them. Let us remember that individuals elected to the Assembly, or, for that matter, Westminster, are full-time politicians paid from the public purse. They also have ample office cost allowances for staff to back them up. Is it a surprise, with all that backup, that the public see those Members as higher profile and, in the past, have voted them for council?

We are about trying to move things on to bring about better governance, so that Members can be in their Committees here or elsewhere and, as was said earlier, have the time to carefully scrutinise legislation coming forward, the issues being discussed at Committee or the issues being discussed at council. There must be sufficient time for that. Believe you me, in travelling between three different locations, a big part of time is lost to travel or driving, never mind —

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Beggs referred to Mr Campbell's attendance at a Committee. I got no evidence from what he said that Mr Campbell left that Committee to go to the council in Londonderry; absolutely none.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, Mr Humphrey, but you have it on record.

Mr Beggs: I wish to congratulate Ms Purvis for her perseverance in carrying out the research for this Bill and bringing it through its various stages.

When the original Bill was debated, I complimented Ms Purvis on its brevity. However, it was necessary to amend that Bill, given the complexity of electoral law; a desire to avoid unnecessary by-elections being triggered by the very legislation that we are putting through; and the other changes to electoral law. The final shape of the Bill is not exactly as I would have wanted, but I recognise that it is a considerable improvement on what was in place in the past.

It would be possible to stand for both jobs, but there would be a 60-day window. I was concerned that that could be cynically abused.

People would vote for big hitters but, after 60 days, they would get Bs or others that they did not know they would get. There is the possibility of such abuse if individual parties choose to abuse it. It comes down to whether individual parties and public representatives choose to abuse it. Nevertheless, I recognise that the Bill would bring about improvements to our democracy by ending dual mandates relatively quickly.

I must express, once again, my disgust — I use the word “disgust” deliberately — at the DUP’s abuse of the petition of concern as it strives to axe the Bill. That party should bear in mind that it could come to regret that in a whole series of issues. It has created the precedent of the petition of concern being used for narrow, party political self-interest. Others may decide to abuse it in the same way in the future. The DUP has created the precedent. I support the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members that, since this debate is on legislation, every Member has an opportunity to speak on the Bill. I ask, therefore, that interventions are a lot shorter than they have been heretofore.

Mr Dallat: Where does one begin at this late hour? I will begin by extending my congratulations to Dawn Purvis for bringing this Bill forward. I understand why Dawn has done that. No one in the Chamber has worked harder to build democracy, particularly among people who, in a previous life, did not understand the value of democracy and, unfortunately, sought other ways to solve problems.

The law that allows co-option came into being on 1 April 2010. After 33 years on Coleraine Borough Council, I thought that I would avail myself of that law. That is the best decision that I have made, not because I wanted to give up my speedy journeys to Coleraine, but because I have created an opportunity for a younger person, a female, to take on the role of councillor. I am pleased that that person has performed extremely well. We are building a fledgling democracy. I was convinced that we had got there earlier today, when all the seats were filled with Members with so much to say. However, so many of those seats are empty now.

Mr Ross: One, two, three, four, five.

Mr Dallat: Sorry; I will take interventions from anyone, Peter. It is not a problem.

Mr Weir: I did not actually say anything. The Member will find that it was Mr Ross. He criticises the fact that there are empty Benches. However, given that only three Members from his own party have stayed, will he not take a little look around at his own party before he criticises others?

Mr Dallat: I am very happy to say that our party is in another room discussing the future of the Assembly — the Budget, largely, about which so much was said earlier.

The Bill refers to double-jobbing. There are Members of the Assembly — I suspect that one or two of them are across the Floor — who are treble-jobbing or quadruple-jobbing, if we take into account district policing partnerships, community partnerships and the committees that were set up for the reform of local government, which, of course, never happened after £20 million was squandered on it.

The Bill is important because there is a thin line between democracy and arrogance. What I have seen here tonight is the most extreme arrogance from people who have very short memories. It is not so long ago that it would have been impossible to even get people into this Building to peacefully discuss a political way forward. Now, the people on the opposite Benches want to stifle that opportunity for other people, who, I believe, are entitled to hold council posts for all sorts of reasons, but particularly because it builds and strengthens democracy.

I would hate to think that the day would ever come that I would feel so arrogant that I would refuse to believe that someone else could do my job on a local council. That is insulting. It is interesting that it is people in their own parties that those on the opposite Benches do not trust. I know that it is fashionable for politicians in the North to go around with a wing mirror on each shoulder, but I thought that we had got past that. Let any Member on the opposite Benches tell me that there are no people in their political party that could replace them on local councils.

Mr Weir: I am more than happy to acknowledge that there are plenty of people who could do Mr Dallat’s job just as well.

Mr Dallat: Arrogance and being flippant are two things that do not run well together. Members of the public are looking for encouragement to

engage in the democratic process. The Member might be a little bit concerned that, in some parts of the North, the turnout at elections is less than 20%.

I will finish by saying that I had the privilege of meeting Dawn Purvis many years ago at the reconciliation centre at Glencree in County Wicklow. I wonder how many Members on the opposite Benches have been there. I understand why the Bill is important to her. It is also very important to other people who have put their faith in democracy and want to see maximum engagement from people at all levels.

I will leave it there, except to say that the petition of concern is an absolute affront to democracy. It is a disgrace.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: I am about to finish, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I deny the Member the opportunity to intervene.

Mr B Wilson: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council in addition to my role as an MLA. I assure the House that I will not stand for election to the Assembly in May, but I hope to return to the council. In fact, I am in demob mode, and I am looking forward to leaving the Assembly. I first fought a Stormont election 45 years ago, when I was working for David Bleakley against Roy Bradford in the Victoria constituency, and I feel that I am entitled to a break.

The Bill is unnecessary and uses a sledgehammer to crack a nut. I cannot support it. Indeed, if it is acceptable that councillors in Scotland, England and Wales can serve as Members of the devolved Administrations or as MPs, why is it so wrong in Northern Ireland? In practice, few councillors in the rest of the UK decide to avail themselves of the dual mandate. I have no doubt that the same situation will follow here, particularly if there is no financial incentive to remain as a councillor. I support the previously outlined proposal that councillors who are MLAs and who stand for council should not be paid. Most MLAs have kept the dual mandate in order to retain job security and their political careers. Now, because the Assembly appears to have a stable future, the dual mandate will no longer be necessary and most MLAs will stand down from councils.

However, because the Bill is subject to a petition of concern, there is no point in me voting against it, because my vote will be irrelevant and will not be taken into account. That is a real injustice. My unwillingness to reinforce the divisions in our community, by designating as either unionist or nationalist, means that my vote on the dual mandate is ignored.

More importantly, the 3,000 North Down voters who elected me are also disenfranchised. Such discrimination against MLAs who refuse to designate cannot be justified in any democratic society.

8.30 pm

I must confess to Members that I have been guilty of double-jobbing for nearly 30 years. For the past four years, I have double-jobbed as an MLA, and, for the previous 25 years, I doubled as a full-time lecturer. Many of my council colleagues are also double-jobbing as teachers, doctors, social workers, electricians and care assistants. Indeed, throughout Northern Ireland, many hundreds of people are double-jobbing, with a full-time job through the day and a part-time job as a councillor in the evening. If the Bill is passed, only MLAs will be barred from being councillors, and even MPs could remain in council. Such discrimination is difficult to justify. Indeed, I believe that it could be challenged under human rights legislation.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that the Bill could not bar Members of Parliament from standing for council? That option was not open to the Member or to the Committee when we considered the Bill.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Member for his intervention, but that is not my point. I was trying to make the point that MLAs would be the only people who could not become councillors. Everybody else could, and that discriminates against MLAs.

Some people have argued that MLAs cannot do both jobs efficiently, but there is no evidence to support that. There is great public hostility to the principle of double-jobbing. A councillor's role is a part-time one, normally one night a week, so it does not impinge very much on a full-time job. If properly organised, a councillor can also have a full-time job, whether that is as a teacher or an MLA.

The public are against double-jobbing, but I have topped the poll in six successive council elections in Bangor West. That does not suggest that the electorate of Bangor West feel that I am not capable of doing both jobs. I also reflect on the recent Westminster elections, when 17 of the 18 MPs elected were serving MLAs. That is unacceptable. The roles of both MP and MLA are full time, and it would be more appropriate to ban that form of double-jobbing.

It has been argued that double-jobbing as councillor and MLA can lead to a conflict of interest and give an MLA too much power. I cannot think of any example of that happening. In fact, the lowly Back-Bench MLA has little power and is merely Lobby fodder for the Whips. The main role of a Back-Bench MLA is to promote the interests of his or her constituents, which is exactly the same as the role of a councillor. Perhaps, councillors who are also MLAs can provide a better service because they have more facilities. However, should the MLA achieve a post in the Assembly such as Minister or Chairperson of a Committee, both of which involve the exercise of power, he or she should resign from council. The holding of a ministerial post is totally incompatible with being a councillor. However, on a positive note, an MLA who is also a councillor has access to Ministers and the opportunity to put forward a case on behalf of either the council or the resident.

In-depth knowledge of council operations is beneficial in examining legislation. Over the past year or so, we have looked at a lot of legislation, including the Planning Bill, Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill and the High Hedges Bill. The expertise that we have gained as councillors is useful in considering that legislation. Not only do we know the legislative process, but we also know the practicalities of being involved day to day with people affected by that legislation. If councillors were no longer allowed to be MLAs, that expertise would be lost.

Many MLAs make an important contribution to local council business. Indeed, North Down Borough Council last night unanimously expressed regret that Dr Farry, having been a very successful chairperson of the council's finance committee over the past 10 years, is stepping down. His expertise on rates will be sorely missed, and he will not be replaced easily.

I do not believe that the public are against double-jobbing or dual mandates per se. Why would they continue to return the same politicians to multiple jobs if they felt so strongly about it? The public reaction is more against multiple salaries. If Members were limited to one salary, the public would lose that hostility and judge the Member on their effectiveness.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the pay issue as it relates to MLAs. I do not know whether the Member is aware that a public consultation from the DOE has gone out in the past couple of months on the issue of anyone who is serving. Indeed, one of the options is the complete removal of any salary from a councillor who is also an MLA.

Mr B Wilson: I am very much aware of that, and I certainly support it. It should be introduced.

There is no evidence to support the argument that the Bill would attract a large number of new people and new blood into the Assembly or perhaps councils. Three female Members have left the Assembly and have been replaced by males. If you want to increase the number of females involved in the political process, you have to change the political culture and the adversarial, aggressive nature of politics. I think that most women do not like that. I suggest that they would not tolerate sittings going on until 1.00 am. There would probably be better hours for the Assembly if we had more female Members. They would not be attracted by the practices in the Assembly.

The Bill is unnecessary. The problem of double-jobbing will resolve itself over the next few years. MLAs will follow their counterparts in Scotland and Wales and resign from councils. That is already happening. If the financial benefits of remaining a councillor are removed, I have no doubt that the vast majority of councillors will stand down voluntarily. I cannot support the Bill.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council. I wish that this House had the same rules as Craigavon Borough Council about the length of time that you are allowed to speak. If we were to apply those rules here, maybe we would get through the business a bit more quickly.

It is clear that the multiple mandates of some elected representatives is an issue in the community. Some Members, including me, sit on

local councils. This is an opportunity. This place has established itself. People who were involved in local councils for quite a number of years did not want to give up their position until they saw what happened here. We have to understand and realise that Stormont is here and will not go away. It is the place of the future. However, one of the things, Mr Mayor — sorry; Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]* The purpose of the Bill is to disqualify those who are elected to this House from holding office as a local councillor. People have been around long enough and are sensible enough to know what they want to do and what they cannot do. It is clear in everybody's mind that they cannot be in two places at the one time. Once they get over an initial period, they will soon decide for themselves where they want to be. However, there is strong support for the Bill in the community. Of the 16 substantive responses received, only two raised objections.

With that in mind, I am staggered that the Democratic Unionist Party has lodged a petition of concern on this matter. That flies in the face of public opinion. The DUP is good at that, and maybe other parties have not yet jumped on the bandwagon, so there is an opportunity there for other people to get —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Savage: No. I will not give way. I have listened to you long enough, and I want to get away home.

The record will show that there was an opportunity for many people to develop their political aspirations here and to move this thing forward. There is also a council system that allows us to gain office, move forward and be more professional. There are big opportunities there, and RPA is sitting on the sidelines. I am assured that, after the elections in a few weeks' time, RPA will probably move forward and there will be opportunities for people who want to be more deeply involved in councils.

In my time in local government, there have been great opportunities to get work done. Many people in this gathering here tonight have probably spent most of their political life in local government. It all comes down to which seat they would choose to give up. Mr Ross touched on many issues today that I could not disagree with him about. The opportunities are there for many people, but it comes down to the fact that you cannot be here and there at the one time; if you are, you do a disservice to your people.

Local planning is one of my big duties as a local councillor. If my constituents have a problem, it is nice for me to be able to come down here and speak to the Minister or put my hand on his shoulder to see if we can get that sorted out. That can be done, but — *[Interruption.]* Hold on a minute: that can be done if you go about it in the right fashion. I am not saying that I have an advantage over anybody else, but the opportunity is there, and not one of you is not doing it.

As we go forward, legislation will come about, and it cannot come about quickly enough. There are things that we would like to do but cannot do. Dawn, a Member for, I think, South Belfast —

Some Members: East.

Mr Savage: — has brought the Bill forward, and I congratulate her on the work that she has done. I only hope that she has a successful outcome to what she is trying to achieve.

I do not want to say anything more. Many people have put a lot of time and effort into their council and their work here. They have a choice to make. Sometimes that choice can be made for them, as happened in my case. However, no matter where we go, we go there to work for the electorate — the people who put us there — in whatever way we choose to serve. At the end of the day, they are the people who will decide where we go. Thank you very much, Dawn, for what you have done.

8.45 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber will be glad to hear that I will be brief, and I am not going to talk about being brief to elongate things either.

I especially thank Dawn. We have worked in Committee together on many other projects, so it is good to see recognition being given — even if it is stymied tonight — to the good work that she does. Indeed, I thank her for introducing this private Member's Bill. Members might recall that the last private Member's Bill that we discussed was so accelerated that I thought I was at the Isle of Man TT. In fact, it passed so quickly that it went into a bit of a whirl and changed utterly in shape, form and direction. That was my preamble, but I am glad to say that this Bill is consistent, so it is unfortunate that a petition of concern will block it. However, we are where we are.

When Mr Beggs was speaking, I briefly made a point about what this is about. Everyone in the Chamber can put up their hands and say that there are moles in our eyes. We can all point at the other side and other parties and say that they are not being consistent. However, the point of the Bill is to introduce consistent practices and to prevent situations that those of us who have been or are in local government have experienced, such as the Assembly's oversight of local government when developing policies or, indeed, practical measures, where it is so difficult. Hand on heart, I have to say that, until just over a year ago, I was a member of my local authority in Cookstown, so I know that it is extremely difficult to properly attend and devote time to Assembly business and then leave in time to get to a council meeting to deal with other issues, especially planning issues, which, as Mr Savage rightly said, are very important to rural councils.

On the subject of rolling out measures to bring an end to double-jobbing, being honest to myself and to my electorate, regardless of party obligations, I felt that leaving here early to go to a meeting in Cookstown meant that I was not giving the electorate an adequate service. I was being pulled in two directions by two masters. The Bill will regulate and introduce harmony and consistency to that situation and prevent potential conflicts of interest, allowing us to devote ourselves to one mistress — democracy — whether in local government or the Assembly.

As Assembly Members, we are well enough paid. God knows we went into the ramifications of the Budget earlier, when employment issues were raised, so we know that, compared to the people who come into our constituency offices to seek help, many of us are more than well paid. For the first time in their life, many of those people have to face the ravages of unemployment, and that is not a good place to be. Therefore, in seeking to nurture and protect democracy, we are more than amply compensated, although, for many of us, money is not a requirement. I am sure that those of us who have served for many years will recall nights in council when, as community activists, we sat there for little or no recompense, and it is important to put that on record.

Ms Purvis's legislation will harmonise the situation and bring consistency, ensuring that Members are not torn between two masters, are dedicated full time to their work and do not have

a conflict of interest along the way. My colleague Mr Dallat more than amply outlined my party's position, and we are more than happy to support the Bill in its present form. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for affording me the opportunity to speak. Indeed, I feel honoured to speak to the motion to pass legislation that, ultimately, will benefit democracy and resolve people's allegiances to local and regional government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I question the Member's definition of the word "brief".

Lord Empey: I give no such hostage to fortune. I may speak at great length; we will see how it goes.

In the past few years there has been a campaign, which my party and others have been involved in, to break up the political cartels that were accumulating huge resources from the number of jobs and income streams that they were receiving. At least one person was raking in over £500,000 in allowances and salaries, and another was raking in over £600,000 in allowances and salaries. Anybody can see that such a thing is not right, and the reason why it is not right has been recognised by the people who were involved. There are people sitting on these Benches today who would not be sitting on them were it not for the campaign against double-jobbing. They are the beneficiaries of it.

As Members have mentioned, the fact is that, at the beginning of devolution, when there was uncertainty about whether devolved politics would go or stay, local government was the only place in the democratic field that had worked for 20 or 30 years. There was nothing else, and there was nothing here. There was local government and MPs and nothing in between. It was perfectly natural that people would retain their positions in local government. Otherwise, if this place folded, they would be completely out. I fully understand that.

The salaries in local government are not the issue, although Mr Wilson drew attention to them. The issue is, fundamentally, the conflict. I do not care what anybody says; there is a conflict. Councils currently deal with a number of matters, let alone what they will deal with if RPA is implemented. Planning has already been mentioned, and I will come back to that. Waste management strategy is another obvious issue. We have issues concerning leisure, environment and heritage, and roads. We only have to think back to the bad weather at Christmas and the issue with Roads Service footpaths to see how

councils are involved. People may sit on the Regional Development Committee and deal with an issue there and sit on a council and deal with it there also. In that case, of course there is a conflict of interest. You do not need to be Einstein to see that. The most flagrant example of a conflict of interest was the situation where the former Environment Minister Sam Wilson sat on the planning committee of a council when he was in charge of the Department of the Environment. The officials at the other end of the table were answerable to him.

Mr Weir: When did the Member first notice that conflict of interest? Was it when he was sitting as an MLA? Or was it when he was sitting as a councillor? Or was it when he was a Minister in the Executive, both in the previous Executive and in this one? All those roles were simultaneous, yet the Member seems keen to lecture us on double-jobbing.

Lord Empey: I have recognised it for some time, and I said at the beginning that it was obvious at the early stages that people had a perfectly legitimate reason for staying on in here and in councils, because the future of this place was uncertain. If you have come to the conclusion that the future of this place is not uncertain, the rationale for remaining in councils diminishes. The obvious question of conflict of interest arises because, if you are in charge of a Department that makes decisions on an issue before a council — planning committees being merely advisory — and yet you are consulted by the Department you are in charge of as a member of the council, of course there is a conflict. That is blatantly obvious. It was recognised by previous Environment Ministers such as Sam Foster and Arlene Foster, who removed themselves from planning committees and local councils when they took that office. No argument can be advanced to say that that is right.

There is again a conflict when it comes to waste management and other things, where huge amounts of money are involved. In other parts of the United Kingdom, that is fully understood, and, as our local government hopefully becomes more powerful, the risk of conflict will rise. That is fairly obvious, and, as Mr Savage and other Members said, there is the burden and strain of trying to be in two places at once. If this place is mature and is here to stay, surely being a Member here is a full-time job. We are paid well and are given substantial office cost allowances,

travel allowances and other things. Of course, I accept that being a councillor is not a full-time job. There is a risk of conflict of interest. So why the big fuss? Why not accept that there will be national legislation to deal with these matters in any event?

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Lord Empey: Just a moment, please.

There will be national legislation, because there will be recalcitrant elements who will not bow to it. There will be those who feel that they can continue to hold the different mandates, and, ultimately, it will be resolved only by legislation.

Mr Humphrey: Is the Member aware that the Secretary of State said that he would legislate on membership of this House and the national Parliament at Westminster? When will that legislation come forward in line with the legislation that he has just mentioned on membership of this House and local councils? The Secretary of State has failed to deliver on the other legislation, so is there any certainty that he will deliver on that?

Lord Empey: We would be delivering on this if it were not for the petition of concern, so we could have ticked the box to say that at least we had done our bit. The Secretary of State will deal with his matters in his own time, and he has indicated that, perhaps, before 2013, he will introduce legislation. I hope that that is the case. We could deal with our own things. We are happy to say that we are so pleased to have this place because at least we can control our own affairs. On this issue, we can control our own affairs, but we have decided that we will not control them. We have decided that we will block the Bill on the basis that we want to continue with a practice that is unnecessary.

I love local government. It is a great institution, and it kept the democratic flag flying in this country when all other institutions had forsaken it. Many of the types of people who used to go into local government, whether from business or from other activities, went away at the beginning of the Troubles, and it was populated by people who tried to keep the flame of democracy alive in this country. I was privileged to be part of that, and I am a great believer in local government. I hope that RPA gets implemented and that local government is strengthened. I am not making any criticism of local government, but the point is that being in here is a full-time job.

There are risks of conflict of interest that do not have to be run, and there is no reason to run those risks. I refuse to believe that there are not a couple of dozen people out in the country who could fill the places occupied by MLAs. The argument was that we could not lose all of the expertise, but I do not think that people out there take that view. There would be no shortage of people to fill the places on local councils vacated by MLAs. Therefore, the sensible thing would have been to take a lead and pass the legislation so that, whatever the Secretary of State did, we could say that we had taken the lead and delivered. In those circumstances, we would add to and enhance the reputation of the House, because it would be populated by people who were devoted exclusively to the work that needs to be done in here, and, let us be honest, there will plenty of that in the years ahead.

9.00 pm

In the past few weeks, I have had the experience of going to the House of Lords in Westminster, and I have seen that it is impossible to do two jobs because you literally cannot be in two places at once. You are back and forward on a plane, and it is impossible to do two jobs properly. I think that it does a disservice to our constituents and to everybody else. Therefore, we should simply say that we are MLAs, we have full-time jobs, we have plenty to do, and we have no shortage of problems to resolve. What is the big driver to say that we must retain our role in local government?

It would have been preferable if we had all done the whole thing voluntarily, and, as Brian Wilson said, the issue resolved itself. However, it is perfectly obvious that that is not going to happen. Hopefully, if the legislation is brought forward to implement the review of public administration, perhaps Ms Purvis will have another opportunity, if she is returned, to bring another Bill forward, or somebody else will bring it forward, and it might be possible to deal with it at that stage.

Money is not the issue. The issue is whether there is a conflict between being a councillor and an MLA. I think that there is a potential conflict, and I believe that the back-up to that is that being an MLA is a full-time job. The job of a councillor is not a full-time one, and I readily accept that. It is a good thing to have people from different backgrounds and people who work

at different things involved in local government because they bring expertise. Some councillors are businesspeople, teachers or farmers, and it is good to have that mix. However, for the foreseeable future, this place will need the 100% attention of Members who will be returned here on 5 May. I do not think that it is good enough to operate at 75% capacity.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. There has been a lot of hypocrisy on this issue, and I could draw Members' attention to various things, but I will not go down that route. I expect that I would be chastised fairly quickly by the Deputy Speaker anyway. However, I will take one point that Lord Empey made about an MLA being a full-time job and it needing 100% of Members' attention. If we are to have legislation to make that the case, let us ban anyone from receiving any form of remuneration outside of this Chamber.

When I was elected in 1998, I became a non-practising barrister, and I have not taken a penny in that work subsequent to becoming a full-time MLA. I have to say that that practice has not necessarily been shared around the Chamber during those 13 years. I was perfectly prepared to have no safety net. If we cannot justify someone carrying out the fairly compatible roles of councillor and MLA, let us ban every other form of remuneration. Let us at least be consistent.

At Second Stage, I said that my guiding principle, which remains, is that democracy is about letting the people decide. We are told that there is an angry mob out there with pitchforks, and that they are ready to attack us over this issue. If it is such a key issue, it did not show up when there was public consultation on the issue, as we found at the Committee for the Environment. However, let us leave that aside. We are told that there is such anger, yet Mr Beggs said that if an MLA runs for council, they will get elected. Therefore, according to Mr Beggs, people are so stupid that, even though they are very angry about somebody being an MLA and a councillor, they will not vote them out of one of those roles when they are given the opportunity.

I have great faith in people. Let the people decide. Even if every party voluntarily ensured that not a single Member was performing more than one role, I still do not believe that it would be right to legislate for a ban. I believe that

parties should have the opportunity to select whomever they want, and the electorate should have the right to vote for whomever they want. That is the principle.

Reference was made to the fact that the petition of concern was not lodged at an earlier stage. Perhaps the Member who asked that did not realise that a petition of concern cannot be tabled at Further Consideration Stage. It is not allowed. Let us leave that aside.

This party was prepared to put some of the concerns that we had in connection with the issue. We did not divide the House at Second Stage, although we raised our concerns. We also raised concerns at Committee Stage. At Consideration Stage, we attempted to put down amendments, but they were ruled out. We put down amendments at Further Consideration Stage, and we offered a compromise of a phased withdrawal in 2014, which we felt that people could unite around. People rejected the opportunity for compromise, so they cannot complain to us.

Many of the parties or individuals who were responsible for tabling petitions of concern in the first place cannot complain when that parliamentary tool is used against them. We have no truck with that. To be fair, the other main opponents of the Bill, the Alliance Party, said consistently from day one that it is against petitions of concerns. Its position has been consistent. Members cannot use petitions of concern when it suits them and say that it is a terrible abuse at other times.

Mr McFarland: The Member was there at the time, so he knows perfectly well that petitions of concern were introduced in order to stop one side of the unionist/nationalist divide pushing through legislation against the wishes of the other. It was designed as a cross-community protection. It was not designed to protect DUP big hitters from being removed and trying to maximise their vote for party-political gain. That was not what it was for.

Mr Weir: I was there, and I am proud to say that I was the first person in Northern Ireland to say no to the Belfast Agreement, having read it, and I stick by that position. You cannot create a parliamentary tool and then complain when it is used against you. It was used very early on in respect of the Civic Forum. I do not believe that that is something that is cross-community.

The proposer of the motion castigated us for using a petition of concern, but I did not see the same concern at the use of a petition of concern when it was used to kill off the definition of victims in a particular Bill. There was silence then, was there not? There was no criticism then. I will not take any criticism of our use of the petition of concern.

I want to deal with other issues. I have served here for 13 years. I am in a relatively unusual position in that I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly before I was a councillor, so perhaps I see things from a slightly different perspective. Conflicts of interest have been talked about. I have not seen a great deal of conflicts of interest during my time, but I have seen complementarity of interest. I am perfectly happy to admit that I feel that I am a better MLA since I became a councillor in 2005. My work as a councillor has given me a perspective, which, perhaps, I did not have before 2005. Mr Farry, Brian Wilson, Mr Cree and Mr Easton brought something to North Down Borough Council, because of the perspective that they have gained as MLAs. There is merit in that, so I do not accept the argument about a conflict of interests.

We have been told about the unemployment figures in Northern Ireland. The unemployment situation is a terrible human tragedy. However, given the number of additional spaces that will be opened up for part-time jobs, our unemployment problems will not be solved by whatever we do on dual mandates.

There is an idea that power is concentrated in the hands of too few people. I think that we have 592 councillors in Northern Ireland, and about half our MLAs are not councillors now. We have about 650 representatives. Expanding that to 700 people will not make a major difference in the measure of success in that regard.

The issue of what happens when someone is removed from the Assembly, for instance, has been mentioned. All parties are guilty on this, and my party is as guilty as anybody else. Every co-option vacancy in the Assembly has been filled by a man. Therefore the idea that opening up additional spaces naturally leads to greater diversity is not borne out by the figures.

The one issue in which there is some merit is covered in the phrase that someone should not have more than one paid full-time job. I pay tribute to those who served in local government

quite a number of years ago. Local government has never been a full-time job; everyone in local government is doing another full-time job, unless they are retired.

Mr Beggs: The Member has said that he supports the concept that a person should not have more than one full-time job. Does he not accept that two of his party's Assembly team are full-time Assembly Members and, supposedly, full-time Members of Parliament, despite that party's 2010 manifesto promise to end that practice within weeks?

Mr Weir: I do not want to personalise it, but I will not accept criticism on broken manifesto pledges from members of that party. There appeared to be no conflict of interest for the Member during his time as councillor, or during the 18 years that his father served as both an MP and a councillor. There is rank hypocrisy in a lot of that.

The one thing that strikes me as being quite bizarre, which Mr Wilson also referred to, is that, as anybody will indicate, being a councillor is not a full-time job. It has a degree of complementarity. The most bizarre bit of the argument is the suggested evils of somebody who is a professional politician representing people on a council. Heaven forbid that we actually have professionals in local government; that would be a terrible crime. We can have any profession represented in a local council. We can have a solicitor, an architect, someone who has been a bin man or someone who is an estate agent, or whatever. We can have any profession under the sun, but, under the Bill, the one profession that would be barred from being a councillor is a politician: someone who is a full-time public representative. That strikes me as a bizarre piece of legislation.

As was indicated, my party has taken action to start to phase out dual mandates. Indeed, looking at the numbers, we have done more than any other party. I am not going to rehearse the arguments about the hypocrisy of a number of the parties here. We are committed to phasing out dual mandates completely by 2015, but it needs to be done in an orderly fashion.

Mr McQuillan: Does the Member agree that the party to my right has deselected one or two of its representatives, and so has started to end dual mandates?

Mr Weir: I am not going to risk commenting on that in light of who is sitting in the Deputy Speaker's position, but I note the issue. Removal of a mandate, which could happen to any of us, can either be voluntary or thrust upon us, but that is another thing.

There is an argument that people should not be paid twice for the same work. That is why, despite the fact that our amendment regarding payment of a councillor who is also an MLA was rejected by the House, our party has, through the Department of the Environment (DOE), put out a consultation on levels of remuneration and options relating to that, including the complete removal of any form of remuneration. That will be picked up by the next DOE Minister. That is the area in which there is proper public concern. With the best will in the world, there has not been overdue concern regarding dual mandates in recent years. The concern has been about the level of alleged abuse by parliamentarians, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly, of the expenses system. As such, dealing with the finance is the crucial issue.

Whatever we do today, we will soon all be going into an election. Various Members have referred to voting records and attendance records. My party leads the league table, both in attendance and voting records. My colleagues and I will be happy to put forward our record. Others should be more than happy to explain theirs.

Mr Kinahan: It concerns me that there is a holier-than-thou attitude, which I may be accused of at times. Many Members just go to Committees, click in and then disappear out the door having ticked the box. They may appear to have a good record, but whether they actually have a good record is for all of us to find out in due course.

Mr Weir: I take that point. However, the people who should make a judgment call on that are the electorate. They are sovereign in any democracy, and that is why we should be loath to put any impediment on who can and who cannot run in an election.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

9.15 pm

Mr Weir: I will give way in a second or two. I know that the Member is a conscientious Committee member and a conscientious Member of the House, but a team of wild horses could not have dragged his predecessor to a

Committee, and every Tuesday he disappeared off to London, not on parliamentary business, but on whatever business he was doing. Therefore, I do not know whether the record of the Ulster Unionist Party in South Antrim is necessarily squeaky clean in that regard. However, I suspect that we could all be accused of being holier than thou.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I heard clearly what the Member for South Antrim Mr Kinahan said about attendance at Committees and our party's attendance at Committees. He made that comment the last time the Bill was debated in the House, and, as someone who sits next to him on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am not going to take lectures. When the First Minister and the deputy First Minister addressed the Committee, neither he nor his party leader, the Chairman of the Committee, were in attendance. Indeed, when the Ulster Unionist Party's Armed Forces and Veterans Bill was down to be discussed, DUP Committee members forced it through when Sinn Féin opposed it, because Committee members from the Ulster Unionist Party were not there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That has absolutely no relevance to the subject matter.

Mr Weir: I take on board what has been said, and I will not get into private disputes. Ultimately, in six or seven weeks there will be an election, and the people will have opportunity to make their choice at council and MLA levels.

Mr Kinahan: I do not wish to go over this any longer, but the Member should know that we were at funerals that day, and I was actually supporting one of his party colleagues at one of them. He should be aware that Members are often not at Committee meetings for very good reasons, but there are those who are not.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member. As I said, it is not my place to comment on what individual Members attend. At least that is a better excuse than Members suggesting that they will not be in the Chamber to vote on petty motions. There can be legitimate reasons why Members are absent, but the bottom line is that whatever the position is, the electorate should be free to choose.

We did try to find some way that we believed the House could unite around. However, that was rejected, and some people are reaping what

they have sown. They had the opportunity to have something that we could all live with, even though it was not our ideal position. However, if Members will take absolutist positions, they may find that they get nothing.

For the sake of democracy, let us ensure that people have the opportunity to vote for whoever they want and parties have the right to put forward whoever they want. We have had a lot of lectures about democracy, but that lies at the heart of democracy, and that is why I oppose the Bill.

Dr Farry: I will try not to be too long, but that really depends on how many interventions I get as we go through things. I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, albeit an outgoing member. I am not quite sure whether that interest really applies; if the Bill is ever passed it will be a non-issue for me.

The Alliance Party will be opposing the Bill tonight. That reflects the consistent approach that we have taken throughout the process in terms of scepticism and opposition to the Bill as it has moved through its various stages. That said, the Alliance Party does not agree with or condone the use of a petition of concern as a device to kill the Bill. The party was happy to take its chances with the argument on the Floor of the Assembly, and to vote accordingly. The Alliance Party does see that there are limited circumstances in which a petition of concern can be viewed as a legitimate device, but I am concerned at the frequency with which it has been used in recent weeks. That is something that we, as an Assembly, are going to have to reflect on as we look to the new mandate. We will go through the No Lobby based on our judgement, and whatever will be will be.

To be slightly fair to the DUP, it could have killed the Bill off at an earlier stage if it was minded to do so. However, opportunities for a compromise were missed, parties stuck to a particular line the whole way through and there was no real shift. Unfortunate as it is, and however much I disagree with the device, there is, perhaps, an inevitability about what is about to happen given earlier indications.

From my party's perspective, a real conflict of interest lies in someone being a Minister and a councillor. With all due respect to the now Lord Empey, he was a Minister when he was on Belfast City Council, and was still on Belfast City Council after 1 April 2010. He did not take

the earliest opportunity to remove the perceived conflict of interest that he outlined today.

A problem also exists with the MP/MLA dual mandate. Those are two full-time elected posts. Naomi Long addressed that issue shortly after being elected as MP for East Belfast. It is greatly regrettable that parties continue with MP/MLA dual mandates. Although that might not be germane to the debate, it is part of the wider perspective in which the councillor/MLA issue has to be seen. We are addressing what may be viewed as the lesser of all evils, if one's perspective is that this is an evil, whereas the bigger evil goes unaddressed. Parties prepared to put their hands up to ban this today have the opportunity to address a dual mandate that exists elsewhere but stubbornly refuse to do so. Indeed, there are Members who are MPs and are intent on going forward for re-election as MLAs in a few weeks' time. However, it is for them to explain to the electorate the consistency of their approach.

My other point about attitude, complexity and contradictions is that I am aware, as are others with regard to the Ulster Unionist Party first of all, that there are councillors here who did not avail themselves of the opportunity to step down. If that is a problem today and will be a problem tomorrow and after the election, it is still a problem today. The legal opportunity exists to step down.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member not agree that it is peculiar, given that they refer to some sort of voluntary opportunities, that they are putting forward candidates who are running for council and the Assembly in the next term?

Dr Farry: Yes indeed. That is to be the case in my constituency of North Down. I am not sure what the situation is elsewhere in Northern Ireland, but I find that bizarre, because, if you believe in the spirit of this Bill, even if it does not become law, and you think that it is wrong and are prepared to go through the Lobby because of that, the only logical conclusion that you can reach as an individual and a party is to voluntarily stop people from having a dual mandate.

That opportunity can be availed of today with utter surety because there is a guaranteed replacement through the party nominating officer. There will still be that surety after the election. I am not sure why anyone would be standing for two posts if that is the view of the party.

Mr T Clarke: I missed part of an intervention earlier when Mr Beggs indicated that he had not left because, I think he said, of the honourable reason that he was elected. How will that stack up in the next mandate when they are putting a candidate up for a council, the Assembly and suggesting that they will possibly stand down their councillor and replace them then but cannot replace them now?

Dr Farry: I agree with Mr Clarke. If people are going to run for the Assembly and council in the election in May, I would like to think that they are genuine about wishing to serve in the respective roles.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: In just a second. I would like to think that if they are elected to both, they will fulfil those roles. The most cynical thing that anyone could do is put their name forward to the electorate, and for people to honestly and in good faith put their faith in them as their choice of public representative, bearing in mind that people still vote for individuals on ballot papers and not just party labels, and then step down for someone else who was not on the ballot paper to come in. That is quite cynical. I appreciate that there might be circumstances when Members, sadly, die or circumstances change so dramatically that they have to step down from those posts. However, if people are going into an election mindful of stepping down shortly thereafter, that is wrong. I give way to Councillor Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: I am no longer Councillor Kelly. Mrs Kelly stood down from Craigavon Borough Council on 31 December and has been very ably replaced by Joe Nelson.

Mr Farry, based on what you have said and, indeed, the interventions by —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please refer all remarks through the Chair.

Mrs D Kelly: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. Based on what Mr Farry has said and the comments from Members across the way in relation to the cynical cheating of the electorate, if you like, if people are going to run for two positions but not step down, is it safe to assume that those DUP Members who are currently MLAs and are going to stand again for council will run the four-year term?

Dr Farry: I am not entirely sure how I, as an Alliance representative, could possibly answer

on behalf of the DUP. Maybe Mrs Kelly should have intervened when a DUP Member was speaking. I am happy to facilitate a dialogue across the Chamber if necessary. All that I can say from my party's perspective is that, if people are running for election to two posts in May, they should be serious about both posts. I apologise for referring to Mrs Kelly as Councillor Kelly. I have to say that, if she only stepped down on 31 January, I am disappointed because she did not step down on 1 April, which was the earliest opportunity to do so. I am not sure why she would hang on for a further eight or nine months, but we will allow people to draw their own conclusions from that.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, if a councillor is in an area where their party does not have an MLA, it would be unhealthy if that local councillor could not at least aspire to become an MLA or try to do so? In your scenario, they would have to give up all representation with perhaps not a high probability of being elected. Would it not be unhelpful in any democratic society if a local councillor could not aspire to be a second candidate or even to be the first candidate for their party to qualify to be part of the Assembly? If they wished to try, they would have to give up the council seat that they may have held for some time and cherished. The distinguishing issue is that those who aspire to get to a higher body should have that opportunity, but existing Members should not.

Dr Farry: I have to say that I tend to agree with Councillor Beggs. He has set out a wonderful argument. However, the slight flaw in his approach is that that would be an argument against the Bill, as opposed to an argument for it.

Mr Beggs: If you read the Bill, you will see that that approach does not breach anything in it. The only issue is an undertaking, which we would get from any candidate who is not an MLA and is wishing to stand and we have already got from candidates, that they would maintain only one seat if elected.

Dr Farry: In that case, they would be stepping down a matter of weeks after being elected to the council post or as an MLA. I think that that is the height of cynicism. To my mind and from my party's point of view, it is possible for people to serve as both a councillor and a Back-Bench — I stress the words Back-Bench — MLA.

I will move on to briefly summarise my party's perspective on the Bill. I do not want to detain the House too long at this late hour. I have served in local government for 18 years. I am stepping down this year with considerable regret —

Mrs D Kelly: Reluctantly.

Dr Farry: And, indeed, with great reluctance; thank you, Mrs Kelly. I am doing that for several reasons. It is my own choice in terms of how I manage my work/life balance, what I want to do in the Chamber and looking to the future. It is also a reflection of my assessment of the strength of my local association, where I have an excellent young candidate coming through, Michael Bower, who will hopefully succeed in my electoral area when I step down. That is my personal choice based on my own assessment of what is in the best interests of me, my party and my electorate.

I will not stand here and preach and dictate to others about their judgement on the best way forward. Ultimately, the electorate will have their say on the judgements that people make about whether they stand in one election or two elections and whether they are taking the correct approach.

9.30 pm

I will not labour the point, but the job of councillor has always been understood to be part-time. Even if we implement the RPA, there is no suggestion that being a councillor will be anything other than a part-time job. We need to be careful about trying to give the impression that the situation is different. It is not just the case that the legislation will end up squeezing out other full-time elected representatives in paid posts; it will send out the message that anyone who works in any profession — in business, on a farm or in a school, for example — is not welcome in local government, because councillors have to have loads of time on their hands. Therefore, apart from students, we are essentially talking about people who are retired. That will mean that there is not a balanced representation among the pool of people in local government. Like others, I find it bizarre that we are saying that the only people who cannot serve as councillors are elected representatives in full-time positions elsewhere. I am not sure about the logic of that.

There is an argument about a conflict of interest for someone who is a councillor and an MLA. I

accept that for councillors who are Ministers. That is fairly clear, and I regret that, from a number of party perspectives, that was not addressed as quickly as it should have been. Frankly, those parties could have addressed that issue safely.

For a Back-Bencher, an overlap between the two roles does not create a conflict due to any personal benefit that may accrue. The approach that I have taken, as I am sure others have, is that I serve my community. If an issue comes up, I will try to work it in whatever way I can. An MLA has access to the Assembly and Ministers to work an issue. I would not go as far as Mr Savage, who suggested that he raises individual planning applications with the Environment Minister. I have never done that, although I am not sure whether I am alone and have been missing out on something over the past four years. I would like to think that, if I tried to do something like that, I would be given short shrift by the Environment Minister and that his officials would feel miffed that the proper processes were not followed. If that did happen, the integrity of our planning process would be drawn into question. However, MLAs can use the Floor of the Assembly and their ability to influence Ministers to work a local issue. Equally, being on a council gives you access and a greater understanding of local issues. Of course, the argument could be made that that could be done by someone else and through party colleagues working with one another. However, sometimes it is more efficient for someone to be well briefed at both angles. If that is what someone wants to do, subject to the electorate granting them the respective mandates, I do not see the harm in it.

In my 18 years as a councillor, including the past four as an MLA, I have rarely come across a situation, either here or in the council, where I have felt any discomfort or any conflict of interest because I serve in both chambers. There have been situations where I have had to declare an interest and where I have seen councillors declaring an interest.

Mr Humphrey: I am not comfortable with the point about conflicts of interest. Surely Members should behave properly and know when they could be exposed to a conflict of interest and either withdraw from the situation or declare the interest.

Dr Farry: Absolutely. Those interests can be many and varied. For example, if I am sitting on the council and receive a consultation document from a Department, it is not a conflict of interest. I will simply give a view on it as a councillor in the same way as I might give a view on an issue as an MLA on the Floor. It is just saying the same thing in two different bodies.

I do not think that we have had an instance in the Chamber where the interests of local government have run roughshod over the interests of central government. It is not true that there is greater localism in Northern Ireland than would otherwise have been the case if we did not have so many people with dual mandates. That has not come across. If anything during the past few years, there has been a growing tension in this place between central government and local government, notwithstanding the fact that we have people holding dual mandates, on issues such as the allocation of resources and the tensions between the two when new powers have come along. Perhaps we may be able to pour some oil on troubled waters, given some people's dual role. However, the point is slightly exaggerated.

The only point that I genuinely recognise as being legitimate, worth merit and worth engaging with is the diversity of representatives. It is important that we reflect on who we are bringing through and give people an opportunity to serve. However, going down the legislative route at this stage is not necessarily the right way to crack that problem, although I accept that there is a problem for all parties in ensuring diversity. I may be proud of some of the things that my party has done — promoting women, promoting ethnic minorities and promoting people of different sexual orientations, as well as its balance of religious background — but I am not prepared to pat myself on the back. There is much more that my party can do. However, the first challenge and where we should leave things at this stage is to ask the parties to do that sort of thing. I was reflecting on that issue earlier, and I cannot think of an example in my party of people from different backgrounds being denied opportunities to run for office. If anything, the opposite is true. The issue for all of us is to ensure that we bring through that diversity and encourage people. Parties do not have a blocking mechanism for that diversity, and we are all conscious of the need to promote it. That is the Alliance Party's perspective, and I will leave it there.

Ms Purvis: It has been a long day and a long debate, and I appreciate it that Members stayed to take part. I recognise and understand that there are some in the Chamber who would like to delay implementation of the legislation, as it creates real inconvenience for them. However, democracy and democratic processes are not meant to advantage one group over another; they are meant to be fair and equitable. Therefore, we will all have to meet the challenge of broadening our support and recruiting new members and candidates either in preparation for the May elections or the ones that will follow. Some parties have already made great strides in that direction, and others have not.

I will refer to some Members' comments. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Cathal Boylan, referred to the Committee process and its detailed scrutiny of the Bill. I thank the Committee for that, and I thank him for his encouragement. He pointed out that there is clearly a conflict of interest between being an MLA and being a councillor. It is important to point out that the petition of concern was submitted with 35 names from the DUP, and 31 of those names have a dual mandate. They not only have a dual mandate but have many other positions afforded to them by their membership of council: Sydney Anderson, councillor, Craigavon Borough Council, chairman of the development committee, member of Craigavon District Policing Partnership and so on; Jonathan Bell, councillor, Ards Borough Council, Committee of the Regions, EU working group, member of the South Eastern Education and Library Board; Allan Bresland, MLA and councillor —

Mr Spratt: Will the Member give way?

Ms Purvis: No, I am not giving way.

Allan Bresland, MLA and councillor, member of Strabane District Policing Partnership — *[Interruption.]* Sorry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Purvis: Thomas Buchanan, MLA and councillor; Gregory Campbell, MLA, MP and councillor; Trevor Clarke, MLA, MP — sorry, MLA and councillor *[Interruption.]* You were getting promoted; maybe you are running again. Jonathan Craig, MLA and councillor; Alex Easton, MLA and councillor; Arlene Foster, MLA, was a councillor; Paul Frew, MLA and councillor; Paul Girvan, MLA and councillor; Paul Givan,

MLA and councillor; Simon Hamilton, MLA and councillor — *[Interruption.]* He did not change his entry on the Register of Members' Interests, and it is his responsibility to do so. David Hilditch, MLA and councillor; William Humphrey, councillor, MLA and deputy lord mayor; William Irwin, councillor and MLA; Nelson McCausland, councillor and MLA —

Mr McCausland: No.

Ms Purvis: It has not been changed.

Ian McCrea, councillor and MLA; Michelle McIlveen, councillor and MLA — *[Interruption.]* This information is from the Register of Members' Interests as of today, and it is the responsibility of Members to change the register.

Adrian McQuillan, councillor and MLA; Lord Morrow, councillor, MLA and Member of the House of Lords; Stephen Moutray, councillor and MLA; Robin Newton, councillor and MLA; Edwin Poots, councillor and MLA; George Robinson, councillor and MLA — *[Interruption.]* The register was not changed.

The First Minister is still down on the register as an MP, so he has got that wrong too; Alastair Ross; Jimmy Spratt, councillor and MLA; Mervyn Storey, councillor and MLA; Peter Weir, councillor and MLA. What a list of things Mr Weir just gave up in November. Had he not given them up in November, there would have been five wage packets on top of his MLA salary. Jim Wells, councillor and MLA; and Sammy Wilson, who gave up his council seat, MLA and Member of Parliament.

Thirty five names —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Purvis: I am speaking. Of the 35 Members named on a petition of concern submitted at the Final Stage of a Bill about local government, 31 have a dual mandate, and the majority of them, all but two or three, are councillors. Only one Member of the party opposite declared an interest in this debate. It is absolutely shameful. There is a clear conflict of interest. We are debating a Bill that will end dual mandates for the Assembly and councils, and it is all councillors who have signed the petition of concern to stop the Bill. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Purvis: No, I am not giving way.

I make my point again: that is the clear conflict of interest. A group of Members can vote against a Bill or table a petition of concern to kill at Final Stage a Bill that has gone through every democratic process in this Chamber and in Committee. That party could have killed the Bill at Second Stage. Earlier, Mr Weir referred to the Victims and Survivors (Disqualification) Bill, which was killed at Second Stage because there were Members opposed to the principles of the Bill. That is why it was killed at Second Stage. *[Interruption.]* The DUP was opposed to this Bill from day one, but it did not kill it at Second Stage. *[Interruption.]* It waited until Final Stage, when the majority of Members and a majority on a cross-community basis support the Bill. It is an abuse of power and of the petition of concern mechanism by the DUP. It is an absolute abuse.

The petition of concern is a mechanism from the Good Friday Agreement that was designed — *[Interruption.]* You can laugh all you want, but you have worked every structure of the Belfast Agreement; you have enjoyed all the privileges of the Belfast Agreement; and you are sitting here because of the Belfast Agreement. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members continue to ask for the Member speaking to give way, but she has indicated on a number of occasions that she is not willing to give way, so the Floor is the Member's, and she will retain it.

Ms Purvis: The DUP has killed this Bill because it did not get its way. The majority, through the democratic processes of the House, voted against its amendments.

9.45 pm

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Purvis: Yes, I will. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Beggs: We will see if they are still laughing in a minute. The Member clearly indicated that many of those who signed the petition of concern intend to stand again for local government. They have a direct financial interest in scuppering the Bill. Is the Member concerned about the failure of those Members to declare an interest and about the fact that they will be financially and personally better off if they

scupper the Bill? Does she think that that needs to be referred elsewhere?

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention. He makes the point very well. I do not think that some Members in the Chamber really get what a conflict of interest it, so it is worth repeating: a conflict of interest is unambiguously defined as a situation in which someone in a position of trust has competing professional or personal interests that may make it difficult for that person to fulfil his or her duties impartially. A conflict of interest exists even if no unethical or improper act has taken place, and, by definition, a conflict of interest arises if a person is merely in a position to exploit a situation for personal or professional gain. Signing a petition of concern is, therefore, exploiting a position for personal and professional gain, just as Mr Beggs pointed out.

It is important to address some of the issues that were raised during the debate. Mr Alastair Ross said that his party had led the way and done most to end dual mandates. That is absolutely right, and here is why: it ended most dual mandates because it held most in the first place. In fact, it holds most dual, triple and quadruple mandates, and that is why it had the most to do. If it is ending such mandates, it obviously thinks that it is right to do so. During the debate, the Member defended his decision not to support the Bill. However, his party must think that it is right to end dual mandates because it has made strides to do so. As I said, it has ended most dual mandates because it had most to end, and yet it does not support the legislation.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. Our position has been absolutely consistent throughout every stage of the Bill. We said that we favoured a voluntary, phased approach. The steps that my party has taken are totally in line with that position. Indeed, the amendments that we tabled at earlier stages of the Bill were in line with that. So the Member is totally wrong to say that there was any inconsistency in my party's position.

Ms Purvis: Actually, I think that there is a bit of inconsistency in that message. Last Friday, Gregory Campbell said on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' that the DUP was in favour of legislation to end dual mandates in order to ensure that no party had an unfair advantage. How is that consistent with "We are phasing it out"? By the

way, this Bill would ensure that no party had an unfair advantage. So, where is the consistency in that? It is a case of —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Ms Purvis: No, I have already given way.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Purvis: The Member is pointing out the inconsistency of the DUP's approach. He talks about phasing out dual mandates, yet one of his party's senior triple-jobbers talks about supporting legislation. Here is legislation that will ensure consistency right across the board, with no unfair advantage. Gregory Campbell was in support of legislation being introduced this year: 2011. This legislation is to be introduced this year — May 2011 — and the DUP has not supported it. There is no consistency.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Ms Purvis: No, I am not giving way.

There is no consistency in the DUP's approach. The DUP referred to the electorate and to public voting. That point has been long rehearsed in all the debates that we have had on the issue. The public do not choose candidates; the political parties choose candidates. If Members want to move to primaries, in which the public select candidates, let us have a discussion about that. Let us see who the public would choose to be their candidates.

Alastair Ross raised my record on recorded votes. I need to repeat this —

Mr Weir: Your attendance.

Ms Purvis: No. It is not attendance; it is recorded votes.

Mr T Clarke: It is the same thing.

Ms Purvis: It is not the same thing.

Mr T Clarke: You are never here.

Ms Purvis: You would know, Trevor. You would know.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please refer all remarks through the Chair. We do not want a tennis match between one Member and another. Throughout the entire debate, after Ms Purvis made her opening speech, she did not interrupt anybody else. I ask that Members give Ms

Purvis the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on this debate.

Ms Purvis: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I repeat that Alastair Ross referred to my recorded voting record. That is all that it is: a recorded voting record. I do not vote on the petty sectarian debates that take place in this Chamber. I have much more important issues to deal with for my constituents on a daily basis. I work hard for my constituents of East Belfast and represent them very well. I will not take part in any sectarian pettiness that comes from the other side of the House.

The amendments put forward by the DUP were not designed for compromise. If they had been, the DUP would have reached agreement with the other parties in the Chamber. The amendments were designed to kick the legislation into never-never land. They were designed to kick the legislation into touch. However, they were rejected outright by the majority of Members. That is the democratic process.

Mr Weir: Let us have majority rule then, Dawn.

Ms Purvis: I am happy to give way.

Mr Weir: I know that we have been looking to remove the ugly scaffolding of the Belfast Agreement. I wonder whether the Member has become a convert to believing that it should simply be majority rule in this place. That seems to be what she is advocating.

Ms Purvis: I made no mention of the ugly scaffolding of the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The scaffolding — ugly, beautiful or otherwise — has nothing whatever to do with this debate. I ask Ms Purvis to return to the subject of the debate.

Ms Purvis: I referred to the use of the petition of concern, which, as I outlined, comes from the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement that the DUP worked and has worked ever since quite well.

Roy Beggs talked about the changes in the Assembly and in local government. In particular, he talked about the additional powers that are going to local councils. He highlighted the conflict of interest, and I do not need to run through the Register of Members' Interests again. He talked also about the use of the petition of concern. He said that the DUP had lost the vote and abused its power in narrow

self-interest. He also pointed out, as did many Members throughout the debate, that being an MLA is a full-time job. Full-time. End of. Period. Full stop. It is not extra full-time, and it is not bigger full-time. It is a full-time job. Full stop. The point is not that being a councillor is a part-time job; it is that being an MLA is a full-time job. The public — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Purvis: The public deserve full-time representation from Members of the Assembly. Roy Beggs pointed out Gregory Campbell's attendance at meetings. Of course, as we know, you only have to show up at the start, middle or end of a Committee meeting to be marked present.

Mr P Robinson: The Member has spent some time emphasising that being in the Assembly is a full-time job. Should Margaret Ritchie resign from either the Assembly or Westminster? Should Alasdair McDonnell resign from the Assembly or Westminster? Should Martin McGuinness resign from the Assembly or Westminster? Will I go on? Is it just the DUP?

Ms Purvis: Should Sammy Wilson resign from Westminster? Should Gregory Campbell resign from Westminster? Yes, they should. Being an MLA —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Membership of the House of Commons is not relevant to the debate. I ask the Member to return to the subject of the debate.

Ms Purvis: The First Minister raised it.

John Dallat stepped down from Coleraine Borough Council after 33 years. I am sure that he will be missed, but I also welcome the fact that a young woman was co-opted in his place. He referred to the many other offices that a councillor holds and said that it was extreme arrogance to exclude others and stifle voices. He thinks that DUP Members have wing mirrors on their shoulders and probably fear their own colleagues.

Brian Wilson declared an interest and said that he would not stand as an MLA again. He asked why, if double mandates are acceptable in other regions of the United Kingdom, they are not acceptable here. He got a bit confused. He said that he does not support the legislation and then insisted that MLAs should follow

their counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom and resign from councils.

George Savage also declared an interest. He said that there is an issue with the public. He understands why, at one time, people wanted to hold on to two positions but said that that time and this place have changed. He said that there was strong support for the Bill in the community and that it was an opportunity to move forward. Patsy McGlone said that it was a good private Member's Bill that would introduce consistency to prevent situations in which conflicts of interest may occur and allow us to devote ourselves to one office. He also referred to how well remunerated we are for that office.

Lord Empey paid tribute to all those who served in local government. I, too, recognised them in my opening remarks. He said that, in the past few years, there has been a campaign to break up political cartels. He said that it is not right, that it is recognised that it is not right and, indeed, that many of those present on the DUP Back Benches have benefited from the recognition that dual mandates are wrong, as many of them are here because they were co-opted. *[Interruption.]* Lord Empey said that it is fundamentally a conflict of interest and that being an Assembly Member is a full-time job. He said that national legislation will come forward very soon and that the DUP wants to continue a practice that he believes is unnecessary. He said that there was no shortage of people who want to fill vacancies on local councils. He is probably right, but they just do not want to fill DUP seats.

Peter Weir declared an interest. He said that there was an awful lot of hypocrisy in the debate and that he found his roles as MLA and councillor compatible. He said that the people should decide. They will. Peter also said that his amendments were a form of compromise, but he did not work with other parties to reach a compromise on them. His amendments were defeated by the majority of Members. He lost in the democratic process and has refused to accept the will of the House. Peter said that he does not accept that there is a conflict of interest. He mentioned job losses but failed to recognise that he seeks to protect dual mandates in dire economic times, which is outrageous.

There is a concentration of power. I referred to the petition of concern. If you need any more

evidence of a concentration of power, you just need to look at it. You said that you had done most to phase out dual mandates. Again, that is because you had most double-jobbers.

10.00 pm

Mr I McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to continually refer to another Member as "You"? You have asked Members on a number of occasions to speak through the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member is continually referring to Mr Weir as "You", and I presume that that is not in order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are quite correct: it is not in order for a Member to refer to another Member as "You". However, I recall, on a number of occasions, the accuser being guilty of the very same thing.

Ms Purvis: I will make a few comments about Mr Farry. He declared an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, from which he is going to step down. He said that he was opposed to the Bill and that his party's opposition to it is consistent. I got a bit lost when he mentioned consistency versus absolutism, because I did not really know what he was talking about. He went on to criticise the DUP without naming them but was happy to name the UUP when he was accusing them. He said that the real conflict of interest was between being a Minister, a councillor, an MP and an MLA. During the consultation on the Bill, not everyone in his party agreed with his stated position. In fact, many of the councillors are opposed to dual mandates, and that may be why he is stepping down.

This is not the first country to ban dual mandates in regional and local government, and it will certainly not be the last. More countries, including the Republic of Ireland, are taking that step. Although there will be a few inconveniences now for parties, there will be benefits in the future. The Committee on Standards in Public Life's 2009 report, which looked into the controversy over MPs' expenses, noted that double-jobbing is

"unusually ingrained in the political culture"

of Northern Ireland. It is telling that an investigation into failures in government and the abuse of privilege by elected officials incorporated an assessment of dual mandates in Northern Ireland. It is so endemic that,

frequently, I find that local journalists assume that I am a councillor when, in fact, I am not, nor have I ever been. The Committee on Standards in Public Life recommended that the Government ban multiple mandates in Westminster and the devolved Assemblies as of the 2011 Assembly elections. Do the same reasons not make it inappropriate for an MLA to be a councillor? I think that they do. Being an MLA is a full-time job, full stop.

I cannot control the choices that political parties make. I can only seek to influence them through the Bill. I hope that they will see that the Bill creates opportunities for growth and renewal for themselves. That, by its very nature, will force the incorporation of new voices. Those of you who have already been out canvassing and meeting voters cannot tell me that you do not detect a strong degree of scepticism and disconnect among the electorate. Levels of voter registration and turnout are down, and we are slowly failing to inspire the people of this country to feel that we have an important and compelling role in their life. That is a mistake that we cannot afford to make. I commend the Bill to the House, and I hope that we can continue to work together to ensure that we offer the people of Northern Ireland the best possible form of government.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Who is entitled to vote on this issue? In the past, I have been given advice that Members should not vote on an issue from which they will personally financially benefit. *[Interruption.]* This is a serious point. It is clear to me that, if a Member has indicated that he or she is seeking to stand as an MLA and as a councillor, they will financially benefit from voting against the Bill. Will you clarify, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether such a vote would be against the code of conduct? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I thank the Member for that point of order. Members have declared any interests in the Register of Members' Interests. The motion before us is before the House, and all Members elected to this House are entitled to vote.

Mr Beggs: Further to that point of order, I have been given advice, when other issues were coming forward, that, if there were direct financial benefits to an individual, that individual should not take part in the vote. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Beggs, you asked the question; please listen to the answer. The advice that you have received is incorrect. Members' interests are included in the Register, and all Members are entitled to vote. *[Interruption.]* Order. After three hours of debate and nearly 12 hours in the Chamber, I remind those Members who retain the will to live that the vote on the Final Stage will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 17; Noes 32.

AYES

Nationalist:

Mr PJ Bradley, Mr Dallat, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McGlone, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms S Ramsey.

Unionist:

Mr Beggs, Lord Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McFarland, Ms Purvis.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs D Kelly and Mr McFarland.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr S Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Other:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Ross and Mr Weir.

Total votes	49	Total Ayes	17	[34.7%]
Nationalist Votes	10	Nationalist Ayes	10	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	36	Unionist Ayes	7	[19.4%]
Other Votes	3	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Adjourned at 10.17 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Social Development

Social Security Agency: Customer First Evaluation Decision and Commencement of Roll-out

Published at 4.00pm on Wednesday 9 March 2011

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I wish to update the Assembly on the outcome of the Social Security Agency's Customer First Pilot in North District, Evaluation and commencement of roll-out.

Members will recall that the Customer First initiative had been brought forward by my predecessor, Margaret Ritchie and that a pilot of the proposed changes has been operational in a number of SSA local offices for almost 12 months now. During that time a robust evaluation has been carried out. I have given the outcomes of this careful consideration and today I can confirm and report to the Assembly that the evaluation report has concluded that from an Equality perspective no differential impacts for any of the S75 groupings have been identified for either customers or staff as a result of the new service delivery arrangements. Indeed, it is my view that this initiative is proven to deliver service improvements.

Therefore today, I am agreeing with the positive Evaluation report and have accepted the Agency's recommendation to proceed with roll-out commencing with the Agency's Belfast West and Lisburn District. The implementation arrangements for these offices and rollout to other areas will now be an operational matter for the Agency and further details will be available from them shortly.

Full details of the outcomes of the Evaluation can be found in the Customer First Evaluation Report (the report can be accessed at: <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/ssa/sbr/sbr-publications.htm>).

I am grateful to all who contributed to the success of this initiative.



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