

FIREARMS

Ms McWilliams: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum calls for the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of hand-guns to be extended to Northern Ireland.

We welcome the opportunity to debate this subject in the Forum. We are aware that it has been debated and that, indeed, the legislation has been passed at Westminster, but people in Northern Ireland have not had the opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of that legislation, and it is in that spirit that we bring the motion forward today.

We are very much committed to a weapon-free Northern Ireland. We have also argued for decommissioning at the negotiations in Stormont. This is not an "either or" debate. We see it as "both and". We said in that debate that we wanted all weapons taken out of Northern Ireland — off the streets and from the homes. We are aware that this debate does not extend to the security forces, and before we start debating we would like to make it clear that we are not talking about guns held by the Army or police officers in Northern Ireland; we are talking about guns held by civilians. Obviously, we look forward to the day in Northern Ireland when we can return to normality and when the police force no longer finds it necessary to carry weapons. We would like to see the police force in Northern Ireland act in the same way as police forces elsewhere, but that is not what this debate is about. It is not even about shotguns or long-guns that are held for sporting purposes. It is about small guns. It is about guns that can be concealed. It is about guns that hold a risk to human life.

Few would dispute that the mere presence of guns increases the risk of death or serious injury by firearms. It does and in the debate I will show you how it does. Opponents of greater gun control argue that the benefits of allowing civilians legal access to guns, provided that certain safeguards are in place, outweigh the risks. One such argument is that hand-guns can play a positive role in personal protection and can, indeed, save lives. However, we would like to draw the Forum's attention to a number of issues which challenge those arguments, and there are a number of points we would like to make.

First, it may be the case that an assailant will be deterred when faced by someone who has a licence to hold a gun — at least you would think that that would be the case. However, from the research that is available, we have found that it is rare for the person who is faced with an assailant presenting a gun with the intention of shooting or endangering his life to be able to get to his weapon in time. American statistics suggest that victims, when faced with assailants, only get to their guns in 1% of cases. This makes sense when we remember that guns are only useful if individuals have them at the ready. Even when a victim is armed, the attacker is always the person who initiates the encounter. Therefore, it makes it very difficult, or practically impossible, for the victim to be able to use his gun.

Even among trained professionals the presence of a gun is no guarantee of safety or success. FBI figures for the 1980s show that 20% of police officers who were killed in the line of duty in the United States were actually killed by their own weapons. I repeat for those who were not present at the time that we are not talking about guns held by police officers;

we are talking about guns held by civilians. Although these guns are held for personal-protection purposes, they are not, in fact, useful for personal-protection purposes.

So this is only marginal, and there is another paradox in the protection argument. Common sense tells us that having guns in the house increases the likelihood of accidental injury or death — for example, as we know in Northern Ireland, by the children who find the guns, play with the guns and end up using the guns. There are, of course, many safety measures that can be taken to prevent this, but the paradox is that if the gun is kept unloaded and the bullets are stored separately from it, defeats the purpose of having the gun in the first place. Safety measures diminish the possibility for self-protection because they increase the time and effort required for the owner to get to his gun. When an assailant comes to a house, most of these guns, which are there for immediate use, are actually unloaded, and if they are loaded, they are going to pose a huge risk to the individuals in that home.

We understand why people want to defend their families and why they want to defend themselves, particularly in the situation in which we live. However, we look forward to the day when we can live in a culture where the gun is not seen as being a defensive weapon. In other societies they have technology that can raise the alarm before an assailant gets to the stage of presenting an enormous risk, and other people who have felt at risk have chosen not to have a gun but a dog for protection purposes. That is the kind of society we would like to look forward to.

There were 17 accidental deaths in Northern Ireland between 1991 and 1996, and that is to say nothing of the non-fatal injuries. There were 17 deaths outside domestic homicide that could have been prevented and which were the result of the use of small guns. Again, with regard to this protection argument, it must be noted that a high proportion of homicides involve people known to one another. Most of the people killed by hand-guns are killed by someone known to them in their own homes.

When I was doing research on domestic violence, commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Services back in 1992, that was the kind of information that I wanted, but it was not available. I asked the RUC chief statistician how many deaths had been caused as a result of the use of guns in domestic violence and if the homicide rate was higher here than elsewhere. I took statistics from Devon and Cornwall, Yorkshire, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and I compared the homicide rates in all four places. What came out of that research was that Northern Ireland had a much higher domestic-homicide rate than elsewhere. I also realized that the availability of these guns was endangering women and children and, in turn, some men whom the women ended up using the gun on as a way of protecting their own lives, and we know this from the court cases that I trawled as well. Northern Ireland has the highest domestic-homicide rate in the British Isles. In fact, it is much higher than 13 of the provinces of Canada. So we have to start asking ourselves —

Mr Poots: Could the Member clarify what types of weapons were used in these domestic killings and homicides? Was it hand-guns or knives? What weapons were used?

Ms McWilliams: I asked for details of the types of weapon and the means of the homicides. They went through all the lists and what they were able to point to where knives, strangulation and hand-guns, but what was creating the higher domestic-homicide rate in

Northern Ireland were guns. Most of the deaths were still caused by knives and strangulation, but the figure for Northern Ireland was increased by the availability of small guns.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: In order to make sense of the point about the particular weapons used, I would like to know if the statistics showed whether hand-guns were personal-protection weapons or guns owned by sportsmen. It is a very important point and I am sure if the Member has read the legislation, she will understand why.

Ms McWilliams: The RUC statistician could not break down the figures like that, but both types were used. The personal-protection weapons were causing a higher risk, but hand-guns used for sporting purposes were also used.

What is also important about this is that not all those guns caused deaths. Many of them caused injuries but, more importantly, they caused enormous mental trauma for the women. When I started this research I did not expect weapons to be a big issue. I thought that I was going to be looking at domestic violence in the same way as one would look at it anywhere else in the world and that most of what I would be confronting would be physical abuse such as beatings and pushings that caused injuries that required attention at an accident-and-emergency department, or mental trauma. I did not expect to uncover, to the extent that I did, the amount of abuse caused by the use of legally-held weapons. This is what one woman had to say "It was both mental and physical. I am just thinking of the times that he would put the gun to my head and play Russian roulette with it. I never knew whether there was a bullet in it or not. I often wished there had been; many times I wished that he had killed me." But no physical harm was done and, as a result of that, that woman had trouble making anyone believe her. When I asked refuge workers if they had problems with the use of weapons in domestic-violence incidents, they said that women often would not talk about it, that they were too frightened to talk about it in refuges but that they could tell from the marks on their necks that guns had been used.

Over and over again, this was coming up, and it is a point that we should be aware of and raise. We do not want Northern Ireland to stand out as having one of the higher domestic-homicide rates in the United Kingdom or a higher rate than that in the Republic of Ireland. I acknowledge also that the rate in the Republic of Ireland has gone up enormously in the last four years. We need to be aware too that it is in the home that the most danger is often presented, not out in the streets, and that it is the presence of guns that compounds that danger.

The argument is made that personal-protection weapons are beneficial, even if they cannot be shown to be very effective, because they increase their owners' sense of security. But, again, as I have highlighted, this increased sense of security may be at the expense of or cause insecurity in others. We need to keep asking if firearms should exist at all costs or at whose cost. It is like the old debate we used to have about keeping the family together at all costs. Then people started uncovering child abuse and domestic violence and asked the question "At whose cost?" Again, I am simply posing the question: at what cost do we keep licensed, small guns in our homes in Northern Ireland?

The argument will also be made that all licensed guns are tested for ballistics so that if any crime is committed the gun can be traced. However, higher rates of gun ownership in a

society directly correlate with greater criminal access to guns. I have received, as many other Members may have, something from one of the lobbyists against the implementation of this legislation. This is someone who is interested in ensuring continued access to small guns in Northern Ireland — and he is aware that we are talking about small guns here. He makes the point that they do not increase the likelihood of crime. However, most guns in our society — and it is no different in any other society — can make their way into criminal hands. They can be stolen or end up being exchanged and produced elsewhere for other purposes. That these guns can be traced is cold comfort to anyone who loses a friend or a family member through shooting.

The availability of guns is also linked to the rate of successful suicides, particularly among young people in Northern Ireland. That is not to say that the availability of lethal means is the sole determinant of a suicide rate. But the availability of such weapons makes it easier to ensure the success of a suicide bid unlike the taking of tablets or, indeed, an attempt to kill oneself with a knife. More often than not, it does ensure the success of a bid. A 1991 study compared suicide rates in the United States and Canada, and it showed that for 15- to 24-year olds, the rate in the United States was 40% higher than in Canada. According to the researchers, the difference was entirely attributable to the greater presence of hand-guns in the United States. In Northern Ireland, between 1992 and 1994 there were 68 suicides caused by firearms, and the majority of the people who died were under the age of 25. For young men in particular, firearms are among the most common means of committing suicide, and gunshots are the second most common means. Men are 100 times more likely to commit suicide by using a gun than women are.

11.45 am

Why do men choose a gun to end their lives while women choose other means, and what does that tell us? I am not putting it to you that there is something gender-specific about this, but if you were to tease that argument out, it could be extended right across the board. Why is it that men feel more comfortable using guns than women do?

Mr Hussey: Can the Member categorize the suicides into those committed with hand-guns and those with sporting-guns such as shotguns?

Ms McWilliams: I was not looking at suicides in particular, but I went through a number of coroners' reports and found that shotguns were used in domestic homicide cases, mainly outside the home, but that in the suicide cases, a small gun was used. Shotguns and long-guns were used in some suicides but a small gun was used in a higher proportion of them. So, the argument is that we could save lives — although not all of them. I am not proposing for one minute that by extending this legislation, we will prevent all suicides because I know that other means are used, but I am saying that some lives could be saved if guns were broken down into long-guns and small guns.

The intention behind gun ownership may be defence, but other people may feel insecure and threatened even though the person who holds the gun is known to them. There have been as many incidents in Northern Ireland's recent history in which legally-held guns have been used and have been perceived as being threatening as there have been cases of their being used for defence purposes. Hand-guns, in particular, can seem threatening because

they can be concealed; that is a problem with them; no one can begin to see the smoke signals emerging until it is too late.

We must look at the aggregate, social effects of widespread gun ownership. The number of guns in society — legally- or illegally-held — has to be addressed. In other post-conflict situations, weapons, both legal and illegal, were moved into criminal circulation and used to support organized crime. We do not want to minimize, in any way, the problems caused by illegal weapons. We want illegal weapons removed but we cannot agree with the DUP amendment. We support decommissioning; we want it to happen, but we do not see it as an “either or”; we see it as a “both and”.

We also note that Northern Ireland has too many sanctioned weapons — there are 134,086 licensed firearms. Members are probably going to tell me that not all of them are small guns and that a high proportion of them could be taken away as a result of this legislation.

The gun culture and the kind of attitudes that it leads us to have, need to be stopped; these guns must be decommissioned. We believe that the moral argument of those who call for the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons would be far stronger if they also demonstrated a willingness to give up their weapons and make a practical move towards a gun-free society. It is a complex and very emotional issue, and we do not want to be seen to be manipulating it for anybody's purposes. We want to look at it dispassionately and feel able to say to you “Look at the costs to see if they outweigh the benefits.”

Opponents of gun control say that it is not guns that kill, it is people, but we want to point out that guns do not die — it is people who die — and it is in that spirit that we are moving this motion today.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words after “Forum” and insert

“believes that instead of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of legal hand-guns being extended to Northern Ireland that the Government's priority must be to insist upon immediate and actual disarmament of illegal weapons.”

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today; it is a very important one. As ever, I am amazed at the mentality of the Women's Coalition in bringing such an issue to the Forum. If my party had tried to bring forward such a motion, we would have been accused of politicizing the debates here. It is quite clear that this motion is about one particular thing — decommissioning — and if my party had put forward a motion on decommissioning, and, indeed, if you had allowed such a motion, Mr Chairman, I am sure the Women's Coalition would have protested. So I welcome the fact that the Women's Coalition have opened up this debate and that they are now realizing the valuable function that the Forum can perform.

The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 which was passed in Great Britain and which restricts the use and ownership of hand-guns is an example of the worst possible sort of legislation. Let us not look at the specifics of that piece of legislation, let us look at the principle upon which it was brought on to the Statute-Book. It is what can only be described

as knee-jerk legislation. It is reactionary and emotionally-based, and that is no sound basis upon which to legislate. Unfortunately, however, we had a Government and, indeed, and Opposition who thought that they could make some sort of point, that they could respond to the gallery and tune in to the mood of public opinion by having this piece of legislation.

I am sorry to say that this legislation will do none of the things that Ms McWilliams thinks it should. This legislation will fail, and it will fail miserably because it has nothing whatsoever to do with combating suicide and the reasons for it — that is not its aim and neither is it its aim to combat the gun culture.

Last Saturday, I had the opportunity of driving through the village of Dunblane, and I took a moment to stop my car and have a look at the tributes that had been laid there. What happened at Dunblane was very sad — an appalling occurrence — but this legislation will not stop another Dunblane from happening. This legislation will never stop that happening because it is reactionary and emotionally-charged. We have to be very careful if we are to propose the extension of an Act that currently applies in Great Britain to Northern Ireland and claim that it will do all manner of things when, quite clearly, it will not.

In proposing her motion, Ms McWilliams made numerous comparisons between the situation in the United States of America and that in Canada. I found those comparisons very interesting but they mean very little in Northern Ireland because the legislation governing the ownership of weapons here is completely different to that currently in force in the United States.

In the United States there is a gun culture; in the United States people have a fundamental human right to own a gun, but people in Northern Ireland do not. Nowhere in the United Kingdom do people have a fundamental human right to possess a lethal weapon — there is very strict legislation governing the ownership of weapons here. Ms McWilliams claimed that this legislation would help combat suicide. It may prevent someone from using a particular weapon to commit suicide, but it will not actually stop the suicide.

I asked Ms McWilliams a question and her answer was very clear. She said she could not give me a precise breakdown of the types of weapons used to commit the suicides that would show whether or not personal-protection weapons were used. The reason I asked that question is that I know for a fact that the weapons used in a lot of suicides in Northern Ireland are personal-protection weapons, and this legislation does not cover personal-protection weapons. In fact, there are something like 120,000 pieces of weaponry in Northern Ireland that this legislation would not cover — all the hand-guns in the possession of Her Majesty's Forces here. If this legislation were to be brought in tomorrow, 98% of the weapons currently owned here would not be covered by it. So those weapons would still be in the possession of people who have had to go through a very strict vetting process — who own guns only because of a very particular set of circumstances.

For instance, farmers own weapons; indeed, a lot of suicides that are committed in Northern Ireland are committed by farmers or by people who have access to a farmer's gun, but this legislation will not affect those who have access to a farmer's gun. *[Interruption]*

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I know that Ms McWilliams did. That is why I cannot believe that she made the point about suicide, because the issue of suicide is so important.

There is a high suicide rate in the agricultural community, and people who have access to those weapons use them, but this legislation, sadly, will not stop that. It is worth making the point that fewer than 2,000 weapons would be affected, and these are in the hands of the people who have been vetted by both Special Branch and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Those people, in order to possess a weapon in the first place, have had to go through a very particular vetting process which people in the mainland do not.

This legislation was intended to deal with people having access to guns when they just wanted to own a weapon, or who were, maybe, engaged in sporting activities, and we have seen — and we will see in the next Olympics — the implications that the legislation will have for them. People who were once very good at using their weapons to shoot at targets and bells will, maybe, not be able to enter the Olympics because they will no longer be proficient in that sport. That is one of the kickbacks.

It is also very important to note that the Act will enable people to own gas-powered air pistols and rifles without the need for a license. The legislation will make it possible for people who have never possessed weapons before to go into a corner shop, purchase a gas-powered hand-pistol or a gas-powered rifle and use that weapon. That is a point which Ms McWilliams had before her, and I thought she would have taken the opportunity to challenge it, but she did not. She ought to have done so because in many instances this legislation opens up access that did not exist previously to the use of weapons.

Looking at the issues which Ms McWilliams raised about the decommissioning of illegally-held weapons, I have to say that there is some hypocrisy there. She, and her party are prepared to sit down in negotiations and talks with people who possess illegal weapons, and yet she is not prepared to make the same sort of fuss about people who have a proven track record and who, if they used their weapons, would immediately be amenable to the law. It is unfortunate that Ms McWilliams does not realize the hypocrisy that she has been engaged in this morning. She is saying that it is all right for terrorists to keep their guns — it is all right for terrorists in a thieves' kitchen to decide when they will, in parallel, decommission, if they ever decide to do that — but that is not all right for people who have proved themselves to have guns, whether for personal protection, sporting purposes or farming. These people will have to become the targets — the victims — whereas the people who create those victims will get away scott-free.

There is a political agenda behind this motion, despite the very nice way in which Ms McWilliams said there was not. There is a political agenda, and that must be recognized. It would not be right to condemn only the Women's Coalition and leave it at that; let us condemn the people who brought this legislation on to the Statute-Book — the Government — because they, more than anyone else, are the real hypocrites here. They are prepared to say to the people of Northern Ireland "We will shunt away the issue of decommissioning; we will move away from that debate altogether. We will not put the spotlight on the terrorists, but we will put the spotlight on legally-held weapons." Indeed, you could face an enormous fine of something like £5,000 if you were found guilty of breaking this legislation in Great Britain; you could also face up to 10 years in prison.

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12.00

Mrs Robinson asked the Secretary of State this morning about whether or not she was contemplating paying terrorists to give up their guns. I know the Secretary of State kicked it into touch, but the issue is still live. In fact, in South Africa they had the audacity to offer money for Kalashnikovs and other rifles, and I have no doubt that if the Secretary of State thought she could get away with it, she would pay the terrorists up front for some of their weapons in order to appease another political agenda.

I have great pleasure in moving our amendment because it says that we are opposed to the extension of this Act and that the Government's priority must be to insist upon the immediate and actual disarmament of illegal weapons. That is the Government's duty: no more smoke-screens on issues which will not save another life; no more smoke-screens on the preservation of a right which people have had and which people should have: rather let us get to the real issue. I call on the Government today to make decommissioning a priority and stop this charade of asking an international body to deal with this issue when it is quite clear that in the months that that body has been in operation it has not made one inch of progress. It has not moved forward one point whatsoever.

In conclusion, I hope that the House will unite with my party in supporting this amendment and bring down what is a foolish motion that misses the point.

Mr King: I rise to support the amendment proposed by Mr Paisley.

I do not think that the Women's Coalition have actually thought through this motion, but in light of what Ms McWilliams said this morning, they should rethink it. They are actually calling for the removal of all firearms from this society, and the Act which they are talking about will patently fail to do that. This Act is a knee-jerk reaction which will fail to remove guns from our society just as it will fail to do so in Great Britain.

Ms McWilliams referred to some of the lobby material which we got this morning. I would like to take the opportunity to put some of that on the record. There are some 120,000 licensed firearms in Northern Ireland. The legislation which Ms McWilliams proposes extending to Northern Ireland would leave 98.4% of those weapons intact. The weapons that would be affected by this legislation, as Ms McWilliams pointed out, are ballistic-tested, and the RUC can confirm that since 1971 none of the weapons that would be affected by this Act have been involved in crimes in Northern Ireland.

I have to oppose the motion. I do not want to oppose it on the grounds of our special situation in Northern Ireland, but purely because the law which they wish to extend to Northern Ireland is bad law. As Mr Paisley said, it was drafted and enacted as a knee-jerk reaction to ill-informed public opinion following the tragedy of Dunblane. Those of us in the House can cast our minds back to the events surrounding the aftermath of the Dunblane massacre. There was a real feeling in the country that something had to be done. Unfortunately, as time passed, quite cynically, the Government and Opposition parties

latched onto this feeling that something had to be done, and the result was a piece of legislation that ranks with the Dangerous Dogs Act and the War Crimes Act as among the most impotent, useless and shameful pieces of legislation ever enacted by the Westminster Parliament.

It is no surprise or coincidence that the Government that introduced this legislation has a hefty proportion of Scottish members and was heavily influenced by Scottish Members of Parliament. It is no surprise that this legislation was enacted very early in the new Government's session. We note, just this week, that pledges to remove tobacco sponsorship from Formula One and fox-hunting from the countryside — pledges that were given in a similar knee-jerk reaction, in a similar vain desire for popularity — have, as soon as the Government have got used to governing, been put on the back burner. It is just unfortunate that Mr Blair and his Administration did not take the time to get used to Government — they might have seen the error of this piece of legislation.

One cannot doubt or fault that the prime motivation behind the Act is to prevent future Thomas Hamiltons from killing children, but will that indeed be the effect? Hamilton was a sad and squalid figure, totally outside society's norms. Would he have handed over his weapons in fear of the prospect of a £5,000 fine or a 10-year prison sentence? I suggest that nobody in the House can seriously believe that this piece of legislation would have prevented Dunblane.

In Northern Ireland, we have a section of the community who are armed, vetted and are responsible — they are the sports shooters. They are a group of people who are known to the police, who are vetted by the police and who hold their firearms, not as a right but as a privilege — a privilege which they have earned because of their conduct over the years. To suddenly, at a stroke, destroy a sport and remove a people's privilege to hold firearms in order to appease the Snowdrop Campaign and embrace a piece of knee-jerk legislation strikes at principle and at the very heart of a free and fair society. That is wrong in the latter part of the 20th century, and it is wrong in principle. Who here really believes that abolishing sport shooting will prevent murder? Who here believes that abolishing the right of people to hold firearms in very strictly controlled circumstances will prevent future tragedies? Nobody can do that. We are being asked to curtail the rights of law-abiding citizens in order to appease the something-has-to-be-done brigade, and that in principle is wrong.

It is frightening just how easy it is to get hold of illegal weaponry in other parts of the United Kingdom; there is an old joke floating around parts of south-east London that an AK47 is so-called because it costs £47 to buy one. We live in western Europe where the majority of European Union countries are Schengen countries; the majority of European countries have no frontier checks between them. It is frightening to think of the glut of former eastern-bloc weaponry that is available in western European society.

I travelled extensively in central and eastern Europe in the early 1990s and during my travels I came across an Army-surplus-stock shop in the eastern sector of Berlin, about 500 yards from the Reichstag building. And in that shop former Soviet soldiers were selling military kit per the kilo. It did not matter what you wanted: you just put the items on the scales and paid for them in Deutschmark per kilo. There are no border checks from Berlin to Calais. Once you get on the ferry at Calais for Dover, or you get on the Eurostar, there are

only cursory baggage checks by border officials. The route for illegal weaponry to come into the United Kingdom is open, and this legislation will do nothing to affect that trade. This legislation will not prevent armed robberies and it will not prevent gangs from getting their hands on illegal weaponry. This legislation will not, for one instant, reduce the rate of crimes involving firearms in the United Kingdom. It is bad legislation. It is knee-jerk legislation. It is politically motivated legislation.

I suppose I am a libertarian at heart, and I find most forms of prohibition flawed in principle. One only has to look at the attempts to prohibit previously lawful activities in other countries to see what happens — it does not work. You cannot make a lawful activity illegal by a sweep of a Secretary of State's pen without there being a movement to push that activity underground. Some sport shooters in Great Britain already want to come to Northern Ireland to use our shooting facilities in order to escape from the clutches of this Act. And that has to be welcomed as a boost for our tourist potential. But if this legislation is passed in Northern Ireland, they will go to the Irish Republic, France or Holland, and that will do nothing to assuage gun culture, gun ownership or gun use. This legislation is bad, it is wrong, and it will fail.

While Northern Ireland is still exempt from this legislation — we all know that Great Britain is unfortunately not — may I suggest that shooting clubs in Scotland get themselves a political wing. May I suggest that gun clubs across the water nurture a grievance culture. May I suggest that gun clubs across the water embark upon 30 years of terrorism against the institutions of state. That way as the Northern Ireland example shows, far from being asked to decommission, they will be feted at every turn by Governments at home and abroad. They will be offered money, perhaps, to hand over their weapons — if they want to. And they certainly will not be asked to decommission in the face of the full rigour of the law.

I oppose the motion, but I am quite happy to support Mr Paisley and the DUP's amendment.

Mr Neeson: I just want to intervene briefly on the motion before us. It is of course a very sensitive issue, and, undoubtedly, the events at Dunblane did have a major impact on those who drew up this legislation.

During my years on the Police Authority, I was very much aware of the work that Ms McWilliams was doing on domestic violence, and I am pleased that she has raised the profile of this very important issue in the Forum this morning. She also raised the issue of suicides in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, I have walked behind the coffins of quite a number of people who committed suicide — policemen who committed suicide. But they committed suicide with their personal protection weapons. I have walked behind other funerals of those who committed suicide — but they used shotguns. That is why the issue before us is not as straightforward as one might imagine.

It is important that the issue of harmonizing legislation — which I suppose is part of the thrust behind this — is looked at very carefully. I see great dangers in that because many issues — for example, the one that is now raising its head is the question of the abortion legislation's being extended to Northern Ireland — are part of that process. We must be very careful, and the real solution to the matter of legislation for Northern Ireland lies with the

establishment of a Northern Ireland Assembly with legislative and executive powers, and it is important to bear this in mind when dealing with such issues.

I am not surprised that the DUP have brought forward their amendment and extended it to take in decommissioning; I would have been very disappointed if they had not done so. But the reality of the situation is this: through the talks process, the decommissioning commission, under the chairmanship of General de Chastelain, have already started their work on the decommissioning process. In fact, their first report has already been submitted to the two Governments, and the follow-on from that is to meet with the political parties to discuss it. This will be the first of a number of reports, and my party looks forward to discussing with the general and his team their main findings. If the DUP wanted to find out what is in that report, they would be in Castle Buildings as well and I would like the Secretary of State, wholeheartedly, to encourage them to become involved in the process at Castle Buildings.

My party has problems, not only with the original motion from the Women's Coalition — though I appreciate their bringing it forward — but also with the DUP amendment. A process for decommissioning has already been set up, and in those circumstances we will be unable to support either the motion or the amendment.

12.15 pm

Mr Casey: I rise to speak to both the motion and the amendment, rather than to either one — I do not know whether that makes good sense or not.

The Chairman: It is unusual, but it is possible.

Mr Casey: It might become clearer as I go along.

We must be very cautious when we react to tragedies such as Dunblane; we must ensure that we do not react in a knee-jerk fashion. It is vitally important that we stand back and assess the facts objectively — and not politicize them — to try to protect society, as far as we can, from this sort of tragedy happening again. In saying that, we must consider those who were killed in Dunblane and in other similar incidents, and our heartfelt commiserations go out to their relatives whose lives have been devastated.

What end do we hope to achieve by restricting the use or ownership of hand-guns in Northern Ireland? That there will never be another Dunblane? Unfortunately, that could never be guaranteed through legislation — rather than flush out a very small minority, it would punish the vast majority of law-abiding citizens. Men who commit these atrocities — like Thomas Hamilton and Michael Ryan — are hell-bent on carrying out their evil deeds, and they can simply obtain weapons illegally or use substitutes.

Would it not be more sensible to introduce more vigorous and strictly regulated systems, rather than punish the thousands of law-abiding citizens who hold these weapons, mostly for sporting purposes? This was one of the areas highlighted by the inquiry into Dunblane: a more vigorous investigation of Thomas Hamilton would have revealed the man's unstable background and the local people's expressed concerns about him.

Legislation restricting the use and ownership of hand-guns would not have prevented Thomas Hamilton or Michael Ryan from carrying out their actions, nor will it prevent further such atrocities. One example is the recent case of Garnett Bell who sought to perpetrate a massacre at Sullivan Upper School using means other than firearms — he used an improvised flame-thrower. On another occasion we had the machete attack on schoolchildren and teachers in England — another dastardly act by means other than guns.

The current “676 Campaign” in Washington State is pushing for state legislation to provide for stricter safety measures on the use of hand-guns — over one million hand-guns are registered in Washington State. Indeed, it is contrary to the American Constitution to ban the freedom of people to hold hand-guns. Campaigners believe that restricting their use would not result in a decrease in crime figures. Thus, they are campaigning for a range of stricter safety and control measures to be introduced in order to prevent, among other things, accidental shootings.

In order to respond factually and objectively to this issue, we contacted the RUC, and we found that statistical information on the number of people killed by legally-held firearms — excluding suicides — over the last three years is not readily available. They did recollect one instance where a member of the RIR shot dead two people and then turned the gun on himself.

These figures are in the context of the number of legally-held firearms which were in circulation during the last three years. The Chief Constable’s Report (1996) stated

“As at 31 December 1996, 87,017 Firearms Certificates were on issue in the Province, authorizing the possession of 134,086 firearms.

There were 2,764 new certificates issued, 8,125 variations made and 29,682 renewals granted. 514 applications were refused and 133 certificates were revoked.”

Those statistics prove that the RUC do carry out investigations into the people who hold these weapons. If 133 certificates were revoked and 514 applications were refused, some sort of strict control is being applied by the RUC. The report further states

“211 appeals were made to the Secretary of State regarding refusals and revocations, 20 of which were successful.

The continued existence of 46 Firearms Clubs was authorized by the Secretary of State Certificates of Safety were issued in respect of 56 firing ranges.”

Clearly, these figures do not suggest that restricting the use of hand-guns would necessarily save lives. It must be further emphasized that decent, law-abiding people who do hold firearms certificates and licences would be penalized, while the far more frightening threat and reality of illegal weapons held by terrorists were still in circulation.

The number of fatalities connected with the number of legally-held weapons is very small. Therefore, extending The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 to Northern Ireland would be of little value in attempting to save lives. There is also a case to be made for an individual’s right to hold a legal weapon. As we know all too well, individual rights are

important, not only in light of the talks process, but also in Europe and the United States of America.

Restricting the use of hand-guns would obviously have a huge impact on the existing 46 gun clubs and 56 firing ranges, the number of whose members would automatically decrease. The right to follow one's chosen sport would be severely restricted and significantly diminished. The industry would lose out financially and, as a direct result, jobs would be lost. The cost of collecting these weapons, their disposal, and the eventual compensation of individuals, must also be considered. What we believe to be a spurious argument in terms of human life must be weighed against the supposed success of extending this Amendment to Northern Ireland.

Restricting the use of hand-guns is only a first step. What would be next? A Black and Decker drill could be called a weapon as it can cause death. We could even include kitchen knives and hammers because people have been killed by them.

As the political talks progress and reach fruition — and this is where I deviate from the amendment put forward by the DUP who have called for the "immediate and actual disarming of illegal weapons" — there will be disarmament going hand-in-hand with the talks — *[Laughter]*

Some Members can laugh. But they have run away from the issue. The laugh might be on the other side of their faces by the time May comes.

In light of these arguments we advocate that there should be an even stricter and more vigorous screening process for the issuing of firearms certificates, and greater resources for the real issue of getting illegal weapons out of circulation.

The Chairman: I am sure that when we come to the vote you will have decided which side you are on.

Mr Peter Robinson: The starting point of this debate must be the incident at Dunblane — that was the cause of the Government's moving in this direction. Everybody in the House would accept that it was a very tragic incident, but I have to agree with Mr King: it was an incident which would still have happened even if this legislation had been in force at that time.

There is no reason to believe that someone so sick, so mentally disturbed and so depraved would have taken any notice of the legislation and handed over his weapons. With the degree of inefficiency there was, and the firearms certificates that he had, it is abundantly clear that probably nobody would have noticed that he was still holding on to those weapons. So, there is no reason to believe that the legislation would have affected the kind of madness that we saw at Dunblane.

Nonetheless, I welcome the fact that the Women's Coalition have raised this issue. It is an important issue. There is a case for restrictions on the use of weapons: restrictions on who is entitled to have these weapons; the kinds of weapon various people can have; how many weapons they can have; and how those weapons should be kept. But there should not

be a blanket ban on the use of weapons — the security forces, the Government, and anyone in authority knows that, to all intents and purposes, those weapons are going to be used for perfectly proper purposes.

The Women's Coalition, when introducing their motion, called for a weapons-free Northern Ireland. They asked that all weapons be taken out of existence. But Mr Casey made a very proper and pertinent point: weapons do not simply include guns. In our troubles in Northern Ireland weapons have included knives, breeze-blocks and baseball bats.

One could also provide a very long list of weapons which have been used outside of the security difficulties in Northern Ireland. It could extend down to the kitchen knife. Would that not be a nice one: the Women's Coalition calling for the banning of the kitchen knife? It seems strange to me. Shoestrings — we would not be able to have our boots laced if we were to include everything that has been used to take life in Northern Ireland. We must start from a credible position, rather than suggest that we have a weapons-free Northern Ireland when everyday utilities can be used as weapons. Then there is the motorcar, in which a person could be suffocated by the fumes. I could go on forever. We would end up going back to the caves, and then we would need to make sure that we did not have any spare rocks about because they might be used as weapons as well. If we are to talk about a weapons-free Northern Ireland, we need to define what that means, and think a bit more about what have been used as weapons in Northern Ireland.

The legislation that presently applies to Great Britain has probably affected sportsmen and women the most. The competitiveness of our shooters is really going to suffer, and not just in Great Britain, but in Northern Ireland also. As the longest-serving member of the Northern Ireland Sports Council, I can say that Northern Ireland has a very high attainment level in shooting. However, that is already being affected. Even though the Act does not apply to Northern Ireland, the blight is already here. I do not know whether Members know this, but our gun shops are having very great difficulty in getting ammunition at the present time because of the law in Great Britain. The need to carry the weapons and ammunition across means that people cannot do it in Great Britain. So there are great difficulties in their getting and supplying ammunition.

Indeed, one case was brought to my attention, in which someone who was thought to require a personal-protection weapon, and was entitled to one, could not get it as it cannot be brought over to Northern Ireland because of the restrictions that exist in Great Britain. Such is the folly of the present situation.

I recently led a delegation of gun dealers and gun club owners in Northern Ireland to meet the Minister who has responsibility here for this issue. And although I do not want it, the one thing that we do need to know is whether the Government are going to introduce that legislation into Northern Ireland or not. The present blight has led to the worst set of circumstances for everybody. People cannot do business and they cannot get compensation. They are in the worst of all positions.

12.30 pm

The gun club people inform me that while their counterparts in Britain are entitled to compensation, they cannot get it in Northern Ireland, even though their businesses are moving towards liquidation — indeed, some are already closing. They are closing because people are not coming to their clubs. One man on the delegation with me had been offered £200,000 for his club a week or two before the issue of new legislation came out. The offer is now off the table — he could not even give the club away in present circumstances — and that is the livelihood of that man and his family.

That can be multiplied right across the province and it affects people from both traditions, because the shooting fraternity is not a sport exclusive to the Protestant/Loyalist/Unionist tradition. It goes right across the board. Indeed, I know some priests who have their own gun clubs and are very much to the forefront in the sport of shooting.

They also inform me that they wrote to the Prime Minister asking for this uncertainty to be lifted; they asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister and they received this communication from 10 Downing Street which I will paraphrase for the sake of time. It said simply that the Prime Minister was not prepared to meet them. On the very week they received that letter, the Prime Minister came to Northern Ireland to shake hands with Gerry Adams whom he allows to be in talks while he still holds on to the whole weaponry of the Provisional IRA. And that hypocrisy does not seem to penetrate into this Government — the hypocrisy that has them making no immediate requirement for those who are involved in negotiating the future of Northern Ireland actually to decommission while saying that they want the legally held guns of people throughout the United Kingdom. It is such a travesty of justice that one would think they would not have the face to put forward such a proposition.

Those people whom I took to see the Minister were asking him “When are we going to know what the position is going to be? When are you going to give us an answer?” And the Minister told them “I have made my recommendations. My report is completed and it is with the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State, of course, has the power to make changes to it before it is published.” That seemed a reasonable position for the Minister to take, and it therefore seemed as if it would be a very short time before we could expect to see what the position was to be in Northern Ireland. I let a week or two pass and I rang the Secretary of State’s office and asked her Private Secretary whether the Secretary of State had reached the stage where she could allow publication of that consultative document. The answer was that they had not received it. After the Minister told the gun club owners and the shop owners that the recommendations of his Department were with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of State’s Office are saying that they have not seen it and that, in fact, more papers have been sent to the Minister on this issue. So it now looks as if it is not going to be decided immediately. Meanwhile, the livelihoods of these people who are in the trade go further and further down the plughole.

Finally, Ms McWilliams mentioned statistics, and I have to say that they were very imprecise — indeed, I cannot recall any statistic actually being given. Instead, papers were just simply waved in front of our noses to give us a sniff, but no actual statistics were provided about the great ills. I am now having a wee book waved at me but it has not been

opened up and the figures have not been given to me. Perhaps in the Member's closing remarks she will provide statistics that we will be able to peruse in detail.

But if you were to look at those statistics you would find that this piece of legislation would not have stopped any of those deaths and suicide is the greatest red herring that could have been brought into this debate. If someone's mind has reached the stage where he has decided to commit suicide, he will provide himself with the weapon that in the quickest and most painless way will give him the solution, as he sees it. A gun may well do that under present circumstances, but if the gun is not there, it does not mean that the suicide will not take place. If it is not the gun, it will be the knife, or drugs or something else. So do not simply say that we have had all these suicides as a result of guns and that, therefore, these people would have been alive if there had been no guns. That does not follow at all.

I will conclude by making reference to the illegal weapons. Everyone in Northern Ireland has seen the death and destruction that has been caused by the illegally-held weaponry. More people in Northern Ireland have died as a result of the use of illegal guns than as a result of legal firearms. I am sorry that the Women's Coalition have not found the time to put forward a motion in the House calling for the removal of the weapons that are causing the greatest number of deaths in Northern Ireland — the illegal terrorist weapons.

Mr McFarland: A hand-gun is a piece of metal that, using an explosive charge, sends another piece of metal a few hundred yards. It is just metal. If I had a hand-gun here and put it down, it would sit there. It is not going to do anything on its own. The point I am making is that it requires intent to turn such a piece of metal into a life-threatening weapon.

Guns have been in society since the advent of gunpowder hundreds of years ago. We are not talking about tanks or artillery or machine guns here. In Great Britain up until 1988 you could buy an assault rifle — for example, an AK 47 — and keep it at home. In that same year my wife was travelling through Hungerford and escaped, by a matter of minutes, the attentions of Michael Ryan when he went on his murderous rampage. That brings it home to you. You will all know that as a result of the Hungerford incident, assault rifles were banned, and rightly so.

Hand-guns fall into three categories: the first one is personal-protection weapons — PPWs. They are issued to members of the security forces for protection against terrorist attack, but also as a deterrent. If a terrorist knows that you are carrying a weapon, he is less likely to attack you than if he knows you are unarmed. That is a fact and a reality.

Ms McWilliams has raised the use of such firearms in domestic disputes, and we have a fair number of those here. But it comes down to responsibility, both of the individual and of the police station or whatever authority issues a weapon. I have no problem with the psychological profiling of people who want to hold PPWs. If a policeman or a soldier has a propensity to be a danger to himself or his family through mental instability or alcohol abuse, he should have the weapon removed from him. It is fairly simple. If he cannot be responsible, he does not deserve to have a PPW. Thankfully, the vast majority have no problem with this. It is only a tiny number who go off the rails and use their personal-protection weapons in such a way.

The second type of weapons are those held for sporting purposes: target and competition shooting. Since the advent of gunpowder these have been valid sports; indeed competitions are held at world and Olympic level in sports shooting. Traditionally there has been a debate over whether such weapons should be held at home or at the shooting range. And the debate, essentially, is that if you have it at home, there is a danger that it will be involved in domestic disputes. On the other hand, if you locate them collectively at the range, they are an easy target for terrorists or criminals to break in and steal. And that has been an ongoing debate for many years. I have no difficulty with such weapons being held in a guarded armoury at a shooting range. If folk want to take this measure as a way round the problem of the security of weapons and so remove the threat of their being stolen or removed, that is the way it should be.

The appalling tragedy at Dunblane however has overwhelmed reasoned debate on the issue, and in Great Britain, as you know, hand-guns have been banned. This move has effectively destroyed sports shooting over there, and it will do the same to Northern Ireland if the law is extended here.

Again, access to such weapons should involve detailed psychological and lifestyle checks. It is the intention to kill rather than the weapon that is the problem. Members will be aware — and it has been mentioned already here today — of a recent machete attack against school children in England. Should we have a nationwide ban on sharp implements that might be used to harm others?

The third category are the illegal hand-guns: the terrorist and criminal arsenal. It is interesting to compare the new Great Britain legislation, under which withholding a firearm after an amnesty will incur the penalty of a 10-year goal sentence, with the Government's lack of enthusiasm for decommissioning here and the often light sentences for storing terrorist weapons. Hand-guns have become an emotive issue, and a cool head is needed when considering the introduction of legislation which will destroy the ancient sports-shooting tradition in Northern Ireland.

I support the amendment.

Mr Poots: I welcome the Women's Coalition's moving their motion today — their second motion in almost a year and a half.

The motion says that

"This Forum calls for the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of hand-guns to be extended to Northern Ireland."

They obviously think that that Act has been successful. In fact, it was probably one of the worst and most ill-thought-out Acts ever passed in the history of Parliament. Their reasons for bringing it forward may well be genuine reasons; one was that of domestic violence and the other reason was suicide. Unfortunately, I do not believe that doing away with these hand-guns would seriously address the problems of either domestic violence or suicide.

As we know, the greatest reason for domestic violence is alcohol, and if Ms McWilliams had looked through her reports and produced statistics on what role alcohol had to play in each of the cases, I guarantee she would have found that it was a bigger contributor to deaths as a result of domestic violence than handguns. What are you going to do about that?

Of course we have the problem of suicide as well and, coming from the country, I know that farmers, in particular, have committed suicide on a more regular basis than any other group. But people wishing to commit suicide have several means to do so — for example, poison or hanging — and hand-guns are just one method. People's minds are insecure when they commit suicide, and it is not the hand-gun as such which is crucial, but the person who pulls the trigger.

What I regret about this motion is that I sat with the Women's Coalition a few months ago in a bilateral at Castle Buildings along with Gregory Campbell and Nigel Dodds to discuss decommissioning, and the Women's Coalition said that we should go into talks with IRA/Sinn Fein without decommissioning. I think back to the incidents of Bloody Friday and those at Tullyvallen, Greysteel, Kingsmill, Loughinisland, Mountain Lodge, Warrenpoint, Newry, Teebane, Lisburn, the Shankill and, of course, 10 years ago, Enniskillen — just some of the horrific incidents where those weapons have been used. If we had had this same level of violence on the mainland there would have been, pro rata, over 100,000 deaths.

The Women's Coalition are raising a problem which has perhaps caused between 100 and 500 deaths in the United Kingdom. But there is a greater problem — a problem 200 times the size of that of legal weapons — which they are not addressing and which they do not want to be addressed. When I think of the baby Terri White who was shot on the Donegall Road, of the 19-year-old girl Gillian Johnstone who was murdered in Fermanagh, and Const Tracey Doake who was murdered in Newry, I am reminded of the death and destruction caused by terrorist weapons.

More restrictions should have been applied in the United Kingdom. Dunblane was a disaster and that man should never have been allowed to hold four of those weapons. Hungerford was another disaster, but that could have been handled better. As Mr McFarland has said, that somewhere secure could be set aside to hold these guns.

One of the gold medals that the United Kingdom won at the last Olympics — and we only won three gold medals — was for shooting. But if the Olympics were to come to the United Kingdom would we now be able to have the shooting competition? Will this legislation affect any plans there may be to hold the Olympics in the United Kingdom?

12.45 pm

The Women's Coalition have actually fallen into the Sinn Fein trap. Sinn Fein wants us to address the issue of legal weapons; they do not want to address the issue of the illegal weapons, and the Women's Coalition — whether inadvertently or not — have fallen into the Sinn Fein trap and are now following their agenda. I regret the terms of the motion they have moved.

I support my party's amendment. Hand-gun shooting is a good sport, in which many people have participated over the years without causing offence to anyone, and this motion will do nothing to address what the Women's Coalition want addressed — domestic violence.

Mr Hussey: I rise to support the amendment and, indeed, to urge the Women's Coalition to drop their proposal and support the amendment.

The point has been well made that one of the major problems — particularly with Dunblane — was the vetting process. If the vetting process that exists in Northern Ireland, via the good offices of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, had been in existence on mainland United Kingdom, perhaps some of these tragedies would have been avoided.

Ms McWilliams made a point about the availability of weapons leading to suicide. I should like to relate the very personal case of my brother. As a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, he had access to a weapon, but he did not choose to use it in his suicide. That would indicate that it is not the availability of a weapon that puts into somebody's head the idea of taking his own life.

I move to look at the amendment very briefly, and I accept the genuine input of the Women's Coalition and their concerns about the availability of weapons. It has been pointed out that there are many weapons in this country, the vast majority of which are PPWs. But I feel certain that those of us who, because of our politics and because of where we live, have been advised by the Royal Ulster Constabulary to carry personal-protection weapons would feel a lot easier if we did not have to do so. And therein lies my appeal to the Women's Coalition to support the amendment. If they are truly genuine about trying to remove as many weapons from public possession as possible, the obvious thing to do is support the amendment's demand for the decommissioning of illegal weapons. And if the illegal weapons disappeared, there would be no need for personal-protection weapons. In that way the vast majority of weapons would be removed and the Women's Coalition would achieve their stated aim. If they are genuine about wishing to achieve that aim, they must support the amendment.

Mr Dodds: I am glad to have the opportunity to say a few words before lunch. I promise to be brief, and I am sure that you will keep me to that.

I fully support the amendment that was so ably moved by Mr Paisley, and I welcome the widespread agreement that there has been on it. I also welcome the fact that the Women's Coalition have proposed a motion on this issue. I do not accept the terms of the motion, but the issue of arms and weapons in our society is a very important one.

It is good for us actually to debate this issue here in the Forum, precisely where this sort of issue should be debated. I was very concerned a number of weeks ago to hear the line that the Women's Coalition were taking when they questioned the sort of issues that the Forum should debate. Today's motion shows that the Forum really is the place — the home of the elected representatives of Northern Ireland — for this sort of important issue to be debated and discussed.

This debate has been very constructive. A lot of very important points have been made, and I hope that the Secretary of State will continue to do what she claims she has been doing and read the report before she takes any decision on whether or not to implement the legislation in Northern Ireland. If she does she will be aware of the many very sound arguments against extending the legislation which has been passed in Great Britain to Northern Ireland — it would be bad law and wrong.

I listened carefully to the points that Ms McWilliams put forward and I agree — as does every Member in the Chamber — that none of us wants to see weaponry of any kind being used to bring about death, whether by suicide, homicide or any other means. But the question is this: is this piece of legislation the way to tackle these issues? I do not believe for one moment, and I do not want to rehearse all the arguments again, that this legislation will have the effect that Ms McWilliams and all the rest of us want to see. I do not believe that that is what it is going to do. In practical terms, as has been pointed out, if the legislation is extended to Northern Ireland, it will only cover a tiny percentage of the legally-held weapons that are in circulation in any case. So there is the question of practicality, never mind anything else.

Comparison has been made with the United States, and if many of us were living there, we would be calling for greater control on the availability of arms. But that is not the situation in Northern Ireland which has a very rigid and rigorous process to which people have to submit themselves if they wish to possess a personal weapon, shotgun or anything like that. So I do not think the comparison is a valid one.

Police forces elsewhere were mentioned by Ms McWilliams. I came through Heathrow airport the other day, and police officers there were carrying sub-machine guns. So it is not unique to Northern Ireland that members of the law-enforcement agency have to carry weaponry; this is quite common throughout the world, and we all know that. Sadly, and unfortunately, there are people who are prepared to take the law into their own hands, and our security forces must, at all times, be able to combat that.

I want to deal primarily with the terms of the amendment because it is important that the issue of the disarmament of illegal terrorist organizations should be a priority of the Government. And I am glad that Mr Neeson — he has gone, but I am sure his Colleagues will relay this back to him — has got the message that the DUP is determined to focus on this issue and not let it go. We are not running away from the issue of decommissioning, and I am glad that he is not surprised that the DUP has moved this amendment today because this is an issue that we will continue to highlight. We will continue to ensure that we bring to the attention of the people of Northern Ireland just exactly what is going on with the decommissioning of illegal weaponry.

And what is going on? The reality is, of course, that nothing is going on as far as illegal weaponry is concerned, and the importance of dealing with that issue has been highlighted by the activities of organizations such as the Continuity IRA, so-called, and their use of Semtex and other weaponry, clearly with aid and assistance from members of the Provisional IRA. Dealing with these munitions and weaponry is absolutely vital. It has got to be tackled. It is not simply a matter of saying, as Mr Neeson tried to maintain "Well, there is going to be a report on it which is going to be tabled next week or in two weeks' time."

Believe it or not, that will not be the end of the story. There will be another report after that and then another. Well, we will wait with bated breath for these reports from the international commission, but we know that the reality is, of course, that this commission has no teeth whatsoever.

Indeed, I would rehearse the argument put by the Ulster Unionists along with ourselves: when this was first proposed, it was dismissed as being meaningless because we knew that it could talk, come up with proposals and debate the issues until it was blue in the face, but that unless actual sanctions were applied and the Provisional IRA made to decommission their weaponry, nothing would come of it. It would just be hot air. And that is unfortunately just what we are getting on the issue of decommissioning.

The Secretary of State and others maintain that they support the argument for decommissioning illegal weaponry and say "Yes, we are for this. We are for getting the illegal weapons out of the hands of the terrorist organizations." We want to see progress on that, but they say "There is nothing we can do. There is nothing we can do to force these people into handing over the weapons." Well, let me deal with that argument very clearly and very simply. The reality is that we as politicians (and the Secretary of State more than anybody) do have a sanction which I believed was going to be applied by the entire Unionist community — sadly one section has moved away from that sanction. And the sanction is to say "Unless you give up your illegal weaponry, unless you give up your terrorist arsenal, you will not be permitted entry into political negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland. You will not be permitted to sit around the table to discuss, as democrats, and with democratic politicians, the future of Northern Ireland on that basis." That is the sanction. That is what you say to terrorists who still hold on to their weapons. You say "You can hold on to your weaponry, but you cannot have it both ways. You cannot have your weapons and at the same time expect to be treated as constitutional, democratic politicians." But what has happened in Northern Ireland is that the Government have said "Come to the table. Come to the negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland, and you can have your weapons at the same time."

Unfortunately, and regrettably, the Ulster Unionist Party which once maintained that position with us, and indeed the position of the previous Government, although watered down, have gone as well. They too have agreed to sit round a table with the IRA/Sinn Féin movement, fully armed, knowing, as they themselves have admitted, and as we have said, and as everybody knows, that they will go back to their violence when they see that things are not going their way.

Mr Trimble, this morning, asked the Secretary of State about the mechanics of the decommissioning process in relation to the talks. He said he wanted to see progress in that. But I remember Mr Trimble making it clear in the House of Commons, and at the talks when we were round the table, that he would not be satisfied unless the timetable for the actual handing over of weapons was in place; the actual handing over of weaponry had to begin with the beginning of talks; it had to continue during the talks; and it had to end with the end of talks. Where has all that gone now? He is reduced to asking about what progress has been made, about the reports that the international commission, anonymous and unaccountable, are bringing forward, when we all know, do we not, that the IRA has no intention of handing over one bullet or one ounce of Semtex.

Our priority — and I close with this because I know my time has gone — must be to remain focused on the issue of decommissioning, the handing over of illegal weaponry. And that would be far more easily achieved if all of us in the House, including those who once held it, were to return to the view that we do have a sanction. We have an effective sanction, and that is to say to the terrorists “Hold on to your weapons and you will be pursued by the full weight of the law. But you can never expect entry to the table of democracy or to sit around that table with constitutional, democratic politicians.”

The meeting was suspended at 1.00 pm and resumed at 2.03 pm.

Mr Shannon: On 30 September 1997 we saw the end of what many would describe as the long-established and honourable sport of pistol shooting on the mainland. It was the victim of a weak Conservative Government, desperate to bolster its crumbling position among the populace with a populist policy that took no account of the rights or the wrongs of the matter. In light of that and in light of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition’s motion, the Democratic Unionist Party has moved its amendment.

The amendment has been put forward for the right reasons. It addresses the real issues that we should be considering rather than backing up a piece of legislation across the water that was not thought out. The legislation passed in Great Britain is reactionary, ill-considered and undemocratic, and it should not be inflicted upon the law-abiding citizens of Northern Ireland.

If we look at those who possess hand-guns in Northern Ireland, we see at present we have a large number of citizens who hold personal-protection weapons, primarily because there is a threat to their lives. This comes directly from IRA and Republican terrorists intent upon killing people with illegal weapons, unlike those who are trying to protect themselves and their families with hand-guns held with a licence.

Let us look at the legislation passed on the mainland. It surpassed the recommendations put forward by Lord Cullen in his report, which were subsequently ignored by the Government. Lord Cullen recommended changes in the legislation which he thought would be correct, would be appropriate and would help the situation. Instead of that, the Government reacted, as I said before, by trying to win the approval of the people — and that turned out to be a bad move for them.

In Northern Ireland we have the toughest firearms legislation in the whole of Europe. Other countries would be doing well to catch up on our firearms legislation, yet certain parties — on this occasion, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition — wish to disarm law-abiding citizens yet do not mention anything about decommissioning terrorist weapons.

Central storage of arms, as discussed across the water, may be suitable there, but in Northern Ireland it would be completely unacceptable because of the terrorist problem. Quite simply, it would be difficult or impossible to ensure adequate bulk storage. The whole thrust of the argument for banning hand-guns was based on public safety. Is this valid in Northern Ireland where the number of hand-guns held for personal protection far exceeds those for sporting purposes? Personal weapons are carried and loaded every day. How many instances

have there been of misuse? Very few. The club shooter in Northern Ireland must transport a firearm in an unloaded condition. He must store it in an RUC-approved gun safe when it is not in use. Those are conditions that we have in Northern Ireland, and that in itself is a safeguard for the public. Holders of firearms certificates for hand-guns have safety instilled in them from the very first lesson. They adhere to a very strict discipline which ensures that he or she is able to handle firearms safely.

Target shooting has been recognized as one of the safest of the top sports in Northern Ireland — this is confirmed by publicized Government statistics. In the last two Olympics the only gold medals which came to Northern Ireland were won by club shooters. There is a tradition in our province of pistol shooting, and our success is evidence of that.

Owners of legally-held firearms are probably the most law-abiding citizens in the community. Their firearms are not the ones used in crime or terrorist activity. Further evidence shows that sport in Northern Ireland is enjoyed, as Members have already said, by people of all social backgrounds, of all religious persuasions and of all ages, including those who are physically disabled. These people are responsible members of the community, and I put it to you that this motion from the NIWC is ill-thought out and ill-conceived. Is it right that law-abiding citizens should be blamed for the horrendous actions of a madman? If that madman had lived in Northern Ireland, he would have got nowhere near any legally-held firearm. We recall the flame-throwing incident at Holywood — that weapon was home-made but lethal. Legislation in itself cannot prevent such people from carrying out actions like that.

What about the effects upon businesses? There will be job losses. Firearms dealers, security-cabinet manufacturers and so on will all lose out. What about loss of revenue through import tax, VAT and income tax? That must all be taken into account in this ill-thought-out motion from the NIWC.

Any person legally holding a firearm who demonstrates any indication of violent tendencies has his or her weapon or weapons removed immediately by the RUC. That must be emphasized. That is the law in Northern Ireland. Had the police in Dunblane acted as quickly as the RUC, it is unlikely that such an event as Dunblane would have happened.

Earlier on there was much talk about the statistics. Let us look at one statistic. Each year almost 200 young people lose their lives by using and abusing solvent and butane gas. Do we say that because of that we must ban all these items — butane gas, glue, Tippex, gas-lighter fuel — which people use and which cause 200 deaths every year?

Mr King: On a point of information. Standing Committee C, the Health Committee, is currently conducting an investigation into men's health. As part of that investigation we are examining the alarming rate of suicide among young men. Over the past fortnight, witnesses giving evidence to the Committee have raised the matter of suicide by firearms in relation to members of the security forces. Every professional witness has told us that access to firearms is not a significant factor in those deaths. The sad truth is that men are more inclined to use violent means to take their lives. If they did not use firearms, they would use something else. The entire ambit of this is being looked into, and I hope that we will have the report ready for the Forum in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Some people may have congratulated themselves on having reduced the number of people killed on the roads in the United Kingdom to 3,500 per annum. We have reduced it to 3,500 per annum, and we think we have done well. But 3,500 people have died. So what are we saying? Do we take this a stage further? Do we outlaw cars? Where does it end? If we want to do something really drastic, we should do something about the 3,500 people who die on the roads. We have to look at the whole matter sensibly and responsibly.

Is it right that terrorist groups should hold on to their arsenals of destruction which have brought murder and destruction and led to the deaths of some 3,000 people in the province? Terrorists' weapons cannot be allowed to remain in our society. That is what people are telling us. They are an impediment to future progress and to a stable society where true peace reigns. As long as the IRA terrorists hold on to their weapons of murder and destruction, no real settlement can be brought about. The silence from the Government and the Northern Ireland Office on this issue and on the decommissioning of IRA weapons is in itself deadly.

Law-abiding citizens must be looked after by the Government. Their rights must be protected. There is no need for this legislation to be brought into Northern Ireland. Also, the Government must take all illegal weapons out of circulation. They have to protect their citizens. It is their duty and their responsibility. Bureaucracy and restriction for their own sake help nobody and will do nothing to prevent another Hungerford or another Dunblane.

The arguments put forward by the Member who moved the original motion were spurious and incorrect — facts to back them up were very thin on the ground. We were told that legal weapons could become illegal weapons. Where is the proof of that? I would like to know. Why use statistics from Devon and Cornwall which is a seaside, holiday area? Why not take statistics from the Greater London area or from the Home Counties? Could it be that those figures would not back up the arguments that the Women's Coalition are trying to make? What about the arguments put forward for suicides? Would the non-ownership of hand-guns have stopped the suicides? The answer is no. A piece of tubing in the exhaust of a car can do the same thing adequately. In many cases that is the method that people have used. Jumping off a bridge is another example. People will use whatever method they can and the one that is available at the time. That is a fact. It is not necessarily because the guns are there. The statistics prove conclusively that legislation alone will not stop atrocities.

The Women's Coalition would do better to get their heads out of the sand and face the real issue: IRA terrorists must hand over their weapons. They would be better addressing that issue; that is what the majority of people want.

I support the DUP amendment.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: Before addressing the motion, there are two things I want to say.

The Chairman: Will they be relevant to the motion?

Rev Trevor Kirkland: They are relevant to points that have been made previously. Surely one is entitled, when speaking to a motion, to bring up other points that have been made.

The Chairman: If they are relevant.

Mr Eric Smyth: On a point of information. I think the Chairman has something against the two of us because we are reverends. *[Laughter]*

The Chairman: I have not got anything against you two at all. You told me you were going to mention two points. I just wanted to be sure that they were relevant.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: I draw your attention, Mr Chairman, to remarks made by Ms Sagar a couple of weeks ago. On the basis of the rationale behind those remarks, the Women's Coalition's motion today would not be possible, which is exactly the point that you made on this matter. So we can see some of the absurdity that we get here from some people.

I also want to draw attention to something which is not directly relevant to this, but which is, however, a valid point. A question was asked earlier of the Secretary of State about getting more women elected to Parliament. Over 100 women were elected to Parliament yet for the debate on breast cancer the other day, only seven women turned up. Of the seven who turned up, only two spoke, and one did not even address the issue.

With regard to the motion —

The Chairman: Now we are getting there.

2.15 pm

The context of the motion is, as we are all aware, Dunblane. When understrained depravity shot up a primary school, the answer was to penalize the responsible. So a law was passed which said that owning guns is wrong. And on what basis was this ideology put forward? The basis was that if a criminal can take a gun and shoot people, the responsible and the victims should be made to pay for the deeds of that criminal. That is the rationale behind this motion and behind this law that has been introduced — make the responsible and the victims pay for the deeds of the criminal.

Everybody is to be penalized because of something someone else has done. This, of course, is not the principle that Christians subscribe to which is that every person should pay for his or her own criminal activities. The rationale underpinning this law means that the responsible and the victims pay — everybody pays for the deeds of the criminal — and it was this ideology, of course, that gave us our prison system. Capital punishment was said to be wrong, so the Government said to the responsible and the victims "We will put up your taxes in order to house, feed, guard, clothe and keep the criminal." It was the same ideology that gave us the plea of insanity in the McNaughton trial in 1843 — the Government came to the responsible and the victims and said "We are going to put up your taxes in order to feed, house and clothe all these people who are, supposedly, not responsible for their criminal activities."

Mr Hugh Smyth: Hang them all and take their houses from them.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: There are some people to whom that, perhaps, ought to happen. It was this same principle that suggested we should turn our prisons — those barbaric institutions — into correction facilities, so the Government came to the responsible and the victims and said “We are going to put up your taxes so that we can have an educated criminal class.” It is this same principle of penalizing the responsible and the victims that is now setting about disarming the responsible and the victims just in case they turn round and say that our whole society is being corrupted by a criminal class. The state is unwilling and seems unable to apprehend the criminal class and make them pay for their crimes, so what do they do? They will disarm the responsible in case they want to take the law into their own hands. One historian made the point that when Stalin came to power, he disarmed the proletariat and then murdered five million to keep them in their place.

Criminals, murderers and terrorists are sitting in our council chambers; they are also part of the talks process at Stormont, discussing how to govern the lives of the responsible and the victims. That is the rationale behind this motion — disarming the responsible and the victims.

And just to make sure that the responsible and the victims know who is in charge, the Prime Minister of this Kingdom was brought over here to get into the sewers to shake hands with the criminal class — that is sure to remind the responsible and the victim that the criminal class are the ones who are making the decisions.

We even had the Secretary of State telling us today that it is quite possible for the commission to give cash to the criminals in exchange for their weapons. Where is that cash going to come from? It is going to come from the taxes of the responsible and the victims — it is they who will be paying the criminals for their guns and Semtex.

I say to Ms McWilliams look at those elected to Stormont. Would this legislation have stopped any one of those terrorists who are part of the peace process from killing our kith and kin? This motion would not have stopped any of that. Would it have stopped the Belfast version of a Charlie Haughey bringing guns in for the terrorists? It would not have stopped that.

Ms McWilliams mentioned the emotive issue of domestic violence; this motion will have absolutely no effect on that. The cure for domestic violence and domestic homicide is not to take the guns from the responsible and the victims but to return to the historic principles of a doctrine of humanity and life — that is the cure for those activities. The problem in Ulster is not guns; it is corruption and depravity. As one writer has put it, what has increased in our Kingdom is criminality. When a society subsidizes the criminal and taxes the injured to pay up, that will, in the end, increase violence and lawlessness.

This piece of legislation does not address any issue; it panders to the popular perception and misconception of reality by penalizing the responsible and the victims because that appears to satisfy some of those who have a knee-jerk, emotional reaction to events.

There is a fundamental principle enshrined in another land, and that is the right of citizens to carry and bear arms, but in our do-gooder age, people who have a humanistic and naturalistic philosophy seem to think that to allow the responsible to have guns is a terrible thing. They seem to be telling us that this is awful. On what basis? On the basis of their own thinking — it is not based on anything else. We have also had quoted to us something about statistics and research. Looking at the medical field, the one thing that we learn from research is that there is innuendo, misstatement and a massaging of statistics in order to get certain pieces of research published, to get certain medicines approved by other people and to make the people doing the research more popular. The only thing that research proves are the conclusions of the people doing it — nothing else.

Returning to the Women's Coalition motion and the absurdity of the principle of making the responsible pay for the deeds of the criminal, let us take another area that is unconnected. Take, for example, rape. Do we say "Let us ban sex because some people are getting raped."? Of course not — the whole rationale underpinning this motion is absurd.

In putting forward this motion, the Women's Coalition want to penalize the responsible in society, but at no time do they take up the cause of disarming the criminal class. They may express an emotion by saying "We would love to see the criminal class disarmed", but emotion and passion will not disarm one criminal. All the laws in the land that are passed to disarm the responsible will never disarm one criminal, and that is why the DUP has, correctly, put down an amendment. The concentration of law and order and of those to whom we pay our taxes should be directed towards the criminal class, not towards the responsible and the victims who pay their taxes in order to have some security and safeguard in their lives and for their well-being.

I reject the absurdity of the Women's Coalition motion, but I support the amendment proposed by the DUP.

Mr Eric Smyth: That is a hard to act to follow, but I will do my best.

Many of those who have hand-guns use them for sport. Think about boxing; think about how two men or two women — they have now taken up the sport — can knock the brains out of each other. People have died in boxing matches; do we ban boxing altogether because two eejits want to go into a ring and knock the brains out of each other? *[Interruption]* Right enough, they get well paid for it — that is true.

Should we stop those who take part in motor racing because of the speed at which they drive and the fact that people on motor bikes and in cars have been killed? Should we also forget about all the good people who take part in these sports for their own pleasure and in their own time and do not do any harm to anyone? It is wrong for a Government to be pressurized by people who, sad to say, have gone through a difficult time, but we can all agree that in this life we cannot stop those who crack up, go mad, or whatever, and break the law — and God's law by killing people in different walks of life. Many more people are killed taking part in other sports than are killed by hand-guns, and as some other Members have said, the statistics show that more people die by other means than by hand-guns. Stopping people using guns for pleasure and enjoyment will not solve the crime problem or the problem of people committing suicide.

Can we really take the Women's Coalition seriously? They are up there in the talks process, and they did everything they could to let the gunmen and the terrorists keep their guns, but when the Democratic Unionist Party raised this and fought it in the Forum, the Women's Coalition violently opposed us on every issue. Yet here they are trying to tell us that they want to take legally-held sports guns from people who are using them for the right reasons and for enjoyment. By their silence, in many cases, they are willing to sit down with those who have murdered, maimed and taken people out and shot them. God only knows that in eternity all they have done will be revealed, and everything which the British Government have covered up will one day, all come out in the wash. They may escape the judgement of man, but there is one thing they will never escape, and that is the judgement of God. On that Great Day, if they have not repented, they will face their Maker on this issue.

I support the DUP amendment, and I certainly endorse all that has been said in its support today.

Mr Morrow: I too rise to support the DUP amendment.

I find it novel to listen to the Women's Coalition and to read their motion. At the Forum meeting about two weeks ago, Pearl Sagar stormed out of the Chamber because she said that the DUP was abusing the Forum trying to address issues here that should be addressed at Stormont. I understood that the talks at Stormont were addressing the guns issue, and yet the Women's Coalition found that they would rather address it here. Maybe Mrs Sagar has seen the light or has changed her attitude — she is certainly not storming out today, which is a welcome change.

I had a telephone call yesterday from someone who read in one of the daily papers that the Forum was going to be debating this issue today. This person thought that he should ring me up and give me his views on it. He is a member of a club; he has a firearm for target shooting and he said that after reading the Women's Coalition motion he felt as if he was being criminalized and being put into the same category as those who use illegal weapons. It is significant that the same Women's Coalition tell us that this party lacks courage by virtue of the fact that we are not prepared to go and sit down and talk with Gerry and Martin who, perhaps, control quite a consignment of illegal weapons. They are quite happy to sit down, shake hands and talk about and discuss all the issues of the day, yet they want to take away legally-held guns.

We have fallen into a trap in this country. Over the last 28 years, we have had to endure one of the most vicious murderous campaign that any people could ever have been asked to endure. At the height of the bombing campaigns that any people could ever have been asked to endure. At the height of the bombing campaign, whenever a bomb went off in a prominent street in one of our towns and villages, what did the Secretary of State of the day do? Nine times out of ten, this is what he did; he insisted on closing off our towns to inconvenience the law-abiding — he was certainly not going to inconvenience the law-breaker. He took away liberty from those of us who sought to uphold the law; he closed our towns off; you could not get in without having your vehicle searched and you could not leave your car unattended. It never dawned upon his benighted soul that there might have been a different way — that maybe he should have pursued the terrorist. But to do that would

not have been politically-expedient, so what he did was pursue the law-abiding and inconvenience him or her, as the case may be.

The Women's Coalition want to do the same today. They want to take away the legally-held guns, but they do not seem to have the same problem with the illegally-held ones. They seem to be able to endure that all right — I find that hard to balance. Perhaps the Women's Coalition would like to address that when they are winding up.

2.30 pm

The Women's Coalition have made much of the fact that guns have been used in suicide. There is no dispute about that — it is a fact. But if you ask insurance companies what the most common method used in suicides is, they will tell you that it is the motor car. That is an indisputable fact. You know that you can put something into the exhaust, put it through the window of your car, rev up your engine and that it will not be as painful as putting a gun to your head and blowing your brains out. Therefore, it is quite wrong for the Women's Coalition to come into the Forum today and tell us that the gun is one of the most used means in suicide attempts. There is no evidence to sustain that.

As Mr Peter Robinson asked, where do we draw the line? People are afflicted in different ways. Someone mentioned alcohol. Do we ban alcohol? I would be happy enough to ban it, but do we ban it because people suffer from alcoholism? Do we ban air flights because terrorists see them as a good way of getting their point of view over? If terrorists seize an aeroplane and blow everybody into oblivion, do we ban all flights? Do we ban the common bread knife because a wife takes it and plunges it into her husband's heart and he is no more? You could take this to ludicrous lengths.

I have no problem with the Women's Coalition's bringing this motion forward, but they should be careful when pointing the finger at the rest of us because there are three pointing back at them. They are sitting up in the Stormont talks with the greatest bunch of hoods and thugs and corner boys. Maybe sometime when they are up there they will tell them to hand over their weaponry, instead of telling us all the time that we do not have the courage of our convictions. We have made it a condition that we are not going to sit down with terrorists — those who hold illegal weapons. Therefore, I have no hesitation whatsoever in supporting the DUP amendment.

Mr Ken Maginnis: Mr Chairman, may I, first of all, apologize to you and Colleagues in the Chamber for my absence during the first part of the debate. I have listened very carefully to what has been said subsequently and I have got some flavour of the way in which the Women's Coalition has addressed this motion. I know you will call me to order if I cover ground that has previously been covered, but I do want, very briefly, at least to list some of the issues that are pertinent to the matter.

It was a very sad and tragic time when the young children were murdered at Dunblane, and one's heart went out to the parents and to the teachers who had to try to pick up the pieces. But when one considers the knock-on effect of that and the way in which guns have been banned in Great Britain, one has to ask if it is going to ensure that the same thing cannot happen again, and the answer, quite simply, is that it is not. It does not make that sort of occurrence less likely. The demented man with the machete who ran through a school

hacking people and, locally, the demented young man with an improvised flame-thrower who attempted to burn students to death are examples of what can happen.

There is certainly the possibility — and one hopes it never happens — of people using other firearms such as shotguns. A five-shot, automatic shotgun could do tremendous damage if someone took it into a classroom — it is a lethal weapon. But we are not going to find, I hope, that the next thing the Women's Coalition will be demanding is that shotguns be removed. They have been used from time immemorial by farmers to protect their livestock and deal with vermin. One has only to look at the reluctance of some people to use shotguns to deal with vermin on the land in the way they did 30 years ago. They do not go out as much now as they used to, quite simply because of the danger of being mistaken for a terrorist. Now we see other much less discriminating forms of dealing with vermin being used on our farmland. The point I am trying to make is that if you remove shotguns — and I know that is not being debated today — or hand-guns from responsible people, you are doing nothing to deal with irresponsible people. Moreover, there is always the difficulty of those who are demented, whether it be temporarily or over the long term. The question of suicides has been addressed. Mr Morrow dealt with it very effectively: he knows from his own business that people who use guns in suicides, in fact, are a small minority.

It needs to be acknowledged that in Northern Ireland we have the tightest and, I believe, the best regulations that exist anywhere in the United Kingdom, Europe and probably farther afield for dealing with licensed weapons. I read of a case recently of a young motorist in America who had \$600 wheel discs on his car. Some hood came along to steal these discs, and he pulled out a gun and shot him. That is not actually permitted under the law in this country. You can use a gun which is designated as a personal-protection weapon to defend yourself or your family if you have a genuine reason to believe that your life is in danger. But you cannot shoot somebody because he wants to take part your car. You would be guilty of a crime if you did so. If they had had as good and as firm a legislation in Scotland as we have had in Northern Ireland for many years, Mr Hamilton would not have been permitted to hold the gun that he held legally at the time he committed that awful atrocity at Dunblane.

The other point that needs to be considered is one, again, that has been touched on and that is the problem of legal guns being stolen and becoming illegal guns. It is part of the regulations that guns are meant to be secure, and comparatively few guns are stolen in Northern Ireland. But even if a few are stolen, compare that with the 300 tonnes of weapons that were imported illegally from the Gaddafi regime through the Irish Republic. They were landed in Wicklow, boatload after boatload, dispersed throughout the length and breadth of Ireland in dumps and used against the civilian population, the civil power and our military in Northern Ireland. Those pose a much greater danger, and those are the guns that preoccupy us.

The DUP in the amendment, which this party will support, have called for the immediate disarmament of illegal weapons. If nothing has succeeded, so far, in the talks process, at least General de Chastelain, Ambassador Johnson and Brigadier Nieminen have done a very good job in putting together, for the world to understand the importance to us of the issue, a scheme that has been presented to the Governments. I hope that we will soon see this scheme and that it will address the issue of terrorist weapons. Everyone around this table

should welcome that and concentrate on trying to ensure that the world at large knows what is going on, and where the real danger lies in our society in Northern Ireland, and understands our situation, so that every possible pressure is brought to bear on those who insist that they will never decommission a single bullet.

There is no comparison between legal and illegal weapons. Let me personalize this. Many of us, over the years, have been threatened by illegal weapons, and the one thing that has reassured us is the knowledge that if we found ourselves in a sticky situation, we would at least have some ability to retaliate. Are the Women's Coalition suggesting that we, while we have no certainty of an end to terrorist violence, should be stripped of our means of defending ourselves and our families? If that is what they are suggesting, then the Forum will reject the motion today.

As far as sporting activity and traditional field activity — that is the farmers' need for weapons — is concerned, I think a greater understanding will be shown than has been indicated by the Women's Coalition's motion here today.

Ms McWilliams: I can see that we have a great deal of support for this motion.

The Chairman: I do not think that that ever seems to worry you.

Ms McWilliams: Historical precedent.

We believe in bringing motions to the Forum, particularly when the subject matter has been debated in Westminster. We like to see them debated here because that is one of the functions of the Forum. We did take a different view, because of the legislation, in relation to the negotiations and the Forum. That is why we said what we said a few weeks ago. We felt that it was a violation of the spirit of the legislation, rather than the legislation *per se*.

I am glad we have had the opportunity to debate this today, but there is one question I would like to ask: why do we feel it necessary to introduce the legislation in the first place?

2.45 pm

There are a variety of reasons for doing so, and one of these is policy. The Government decide that changes in policy are needed, so they introduce legislation accordingly. Secondly, in spite of what Mr Kirkland had to say, it can also be as a result of good, sound, empirical research — if people do not believe in such a thing, I suppose we should close all universities today. It can also be as a result of campaigns. It can be through the will of the people that things happen; the country decides and then Parliament takes the view that they have to reflect the mood of the people — that why this legislation was introduced.

I have to say that the Conservative Government probably realized that they — pardon the pun — had shot themselves in the foot. They did not support the spirit behind the legislation, whereas the Labour Government made it quite clear that they would introduce it. I do not think they did that as a knee-jerk reaction. They took soundings; they listened to

people; they had focus groups; and they heard, not just from the Dunblane Snowdrop Campaign, but from many others.

The gun lobby is a very strong one. We know that from the United States, where the extent of the availability of firearms for personal use and personal protection, as well as for many other purposes, is because of the weight that is behind that lobby. It has a lot of money and a lot of influence, and we do not want to see that happening in this country. Not enough restrictions have been applied in the United States. This is why everyone walks around wondering if someone is going to pull a gun on him if he says something. We never want that to happen here, and legislation is one of the reasons we do not have that here.

Mr Peter Robinson made the point that he believes in restrictions. He does not think that some people should have so many guns, or guns of a particular type. Well, if he were to follow Robinson's law through to its conclusions, he would be supporting this motion. This motion does not call for exclusion or banning, it calls for restrictions. And the reason we call for restrictions is that we believe that people in this country do not want to end up like those in other countries who have created a gun culture.

We are used to having guns in Northern Ireland, and when I say that I look forward to the day when we do not have them. I mean that; but I know I might not get that. However, we are allowed our wishes, our dreams and our desires for a gun-free culture. I want all illegal weapons taken out of this society. I believe that decommissioning does have to happen. I also believe that the RUC should prosecute every single person who has an illegal weapon. It does not have to wait while de Chastelain's committee continues with its decommissioning reports; it should proceed now to prosecute those who carry illegal weapons. However, that does not stop me from still wanting to extend the restrictions on hand-guns in this society.

Mr King's point about the Dangerous Dogs Act is a perfect example. That legislation came about because of dangerous dogs. We needed that legislation. Mr Eric Smyth and others asked "What do I want restricted?" Members know that people cannot drink and drive any more. Members know that there was a time in this society when people got into their cars, having taken drink, and felt at liberty to drive around the country. Members know that the people — particularly as a result of the fatalities on our roads — had the spirit and the will to have legislation introduced that banned drinking and driving. It still does not stop drunkards getting into cars, driving dangerously and killing others. But because of it there is a new generation growing up today who believe that one does not drink and drive, and I love to see it.

I love to see my young sons coming home and telling me that they had a lesson on drinking and driving. I love to hear teenagers saying that they have no intention of taking cars with them with they go out. There is a different culture now, and the reason that culture developed was that people decided that it was no longer acceptable to drink and drive. Members know as well as I do that this will not stop a criminal, murderous act from taking place. But it puts legislation in place which says that what was once acceptable is now unacceptable.

Members should also know that it was once permissible to hit a woman with a stick no thicker than a thumb — hence “the rule of thumb”. That legislation was introduced 100 years ago. One hundred years later, what was once acceptable was unacceptable. We have legislation restricting people’s actions, telling them that their behaviour was unacceptable.

Domestic violence is not a joke and it is not humorous; it is a serious crime. Someone in the Forum referred to domestic disputes. Disputes do not kill people, but when guns are used in disputes, they do. I have also said that strangulations occur; knives are also used; and there are carbon monoxide fumes as well. But are some Members simply saying that they want all things to continue as they are? Or are they saying that if we could introduce something that could stop a number of lives being taken, we should not do it? Every life is precious to me. If domestic homicides — and suicides — can be prevented, let us do something about it. To me that is the voice of a libertarian; not the voice of someone who is using right-wing, restrictive arguments.

We once talked about these as being ordinary, decent murders. What kind of society were we living in when these murders —

Some Members: We did not.

Ms McWilliams: The press referred to them in this society.

Some Members: We did not.

Ms McWilliams: I am including myself in this, OK.

Some Members: Shame on you.

Ms McWilliams: Let me finish. I have never for one minute thought of these as ordinary, decent murders. But when the press start using that language, people start internalizing it. They are not ordinary, decent murderers; they are criminals and they have been prosecuted. Members say that firearms have never been used in crimes in Northern Ireland, but either the death of a woman, man or child is a crime in the context of domestic homicide, or it is not. And they have been used. The evidence is there, and the RUC can provide it.

I also saw a poster in the States a couple of weeks ago when I was doing work on domestic violence. The poster was in a refuge, and it had a large fist on it with the slogan “Not all weapons are imported”. That struck me very strongly — not all weapons are imported. I cannot stop people from using their fists or knives, but we can argue that those things are wrong. We have already introduced legislation telling people that they cannot continue to do what they once did, in the way that they once did it. That is why we need to have this legislation restricting the use of hand-guns.

I say to Mr Maginnis that I am the daughter of a farmer. I accompanied my father when he went out at night to try to see the dogs that were worrying his sheep and, indeed, the dogs that were killing his sheep. That is a childhood memory of mine. But I am not talking

about shotguns; I am not talking about farmers' weapons; and I am not talking about those that have been used in sports. We are talking about this legislation, and it only refers to hand-guns.

Mr Peter Robinson: Ms McWilliam's speech referred to a weapon-free Northern Ireland.

Ms McWilliams: Mr Chairman, are you going to rule a point of order here or do I have to —

The Chairman: The Member is doing very well. Do not worry, keep going.

Ms McWilliams: If I referred to a weapon-free society, I would be surprised if Mr Robinson found that objectionable. Surely, we all desire that.

But I am a realist, and all my life I have lobbied for legislative change. The Member is saying that if this legislation comes across the water and is accepted in its present form, it will be a disaster. This is how I respond to the point that was made about parts of that legislation: we have the Office of Law Reform and each and every time legislation is introduced, they look at it and make amendments. That is why we have some of the best pieces of legislation. Our legislation generally comes in two years, four years or six years later than that in Great Britain, but it is often much better than what Scotland, Wales or England have. I have been party to the introduction of such legislation, and I am glad to say that that is the case, particularly in the case of the new Family Law Act.

I have no idea why people think we do not support decommissioning. We have argued that we want decommissioning. But the Secretary of State's point about buying illegal weapons has actually come from Ambassador Johnson who sits on the decommissioning committee. I was shocked by that because I do not believe for one minute that that should even be a proposal. He suggested that when he was ambassador in Bolivia, and he argues that it works. We absolutely do not want to see anything like that happening with weapons. We want to see legislation introduced that will restrict these weapons from ever being used again. That is why we are saying that not just illegal weapons should be removed, but legal weapons also.

I have heard a great deal of talk about personal-protection weapons, but this legislation does not refer to them. Some day, I hope, we will not need personal-protection weapons, and I hope everyone agrees with that. But there are problems with personal-protection weapons, and, indeed, there is a problem with vetting. There was such a problem with this that when we were working with the RUC on domestic violence, they agreed that it was necessary to put on the proforma used to collect statistics on each incident they attend whether a weapon was used. They use the words firearms/weapon because they themselves want to know to what extent legally-licensed weapons are used in the context of domestic violence. They would not be doing that if all the people who had personal-protection weapons were perfectly responsible human beings. That is not the way the world works, and that is why they have introduced that. This is the only country currently using a proforma to collect information on domestic violence.

Mr Peter Robinson made the point that as a libertarian he does not want to restrict the rights of sportsmen and women, though it has to be said that there are many more men interested in the sport of shooting than women, and the same applies to boxing. But it may be the case that we will have to introduce restrictions if we are to save lives, and that is why the legislation was introduced. If we are talking about making Northern Ireland more attractive because its legislation is different — this legislation has not been introduced here — then I despair at the thought of making Northern Ireland more attractive by enabling more people to use guns.

Finally, I asked the RUC what the age limit is for someone to use a small hand-gun. I was told that a person of 16 years of age can apply for a hand-gun. There are criteria which mean that they cannot get a full licence until they reach 18 years of age, but they can have a hand-gun loaned to them until they reach that age. Again, that is what we are talking about: having restrictions applied to hand-guns.

Mr Maginnis: I am grateful to Ms McWilliams for giving way. I find it difficult to recollect a murder where a gun was used before we had terrorist violence. Can Ms McWilliams cite such a case; and if she can cite one, can she cite a second one? She will have memories going back to some time before the start of the troubles, as I do — although perhaps not as long. But I challenge her to cite a list of violent offences that were committed with guns prior to the start of terrorism.

Ms McWilliams: I assume Mr Maginnis is talking about legally-held weapons. I asked the RUC's chief statistician to provide statistics, but the data only goes back to the mid-1970s. However, if we were to trawl the criminal records — prosecutions made by the DPP — we would find that legally-held weapons have been used in domestic homicides. There is no doubt about that. Why should Northern Ireland be different from any other country?

The Chairman: We are coming to the end of this debate.

Ms McWilliams: We can continue this discussion, but it is the case that these weapons are used the same way in Northern Ireland, in peace as well as in conflict, as they are elsewhere. I am simply making the point that the availability of these weapons has increased domestic homicide. Members have mentioned that suicide will happen anyway, and I take Mr Brewster's point on this. All I am saying is that the availability of a small hand-gun ensures that an attempt to take one's life succeeds, and the same is true with domestic homicide. This is not about what we want, it is about what we need. For the Women's Coalition, this is about restriction; it is not about banning or about exclusion — it is about restriction, and any sensible, civilized society should want that for themselves and their children.

Question put: That the amendment be made.

The Forum divided: Ayes 39; Noes 4, Abstention 1.

Ayes: Antony Alcock, May Beattie, Thomas Benson, Robert Bolton, David Brewster, David Browne, Cecil Calvert, David Campbell, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, James Clarke, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Nigel Dodds, Joseph Gaston, Oliver Gibson, John Hunter, Derek Hussey, John Junkin, Peter King, Trevor Kirkland, St Clair McAlister, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Joan Parkes, Iris Robinson, Peter Robinson, James Shannon, Eric Smyth, Hugh Smyth, James Speers, May Steele, Robert Stoker, John Taylor, Peter Weir, Robert John White, Sammy Wilson.

Noes: Eileen Bell, Kieran McCarthy, Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar.

Abstention: Hugh Casey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum believes that instead of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of legal hand-guns being extended to Northern Ireland the Government's priority must be to insist upon immediate and actual disarmament of illegal weapons.

The Chairman: I declare the amended motion to be carried by the necessary percentage, but I must also consider my decision under Rule 13(1). While some traditions might not support the resolution, it would seem perverse to strike it down when it is calling reasonably for the disarmament of illegal weapons. Therefore I am not going to strike it down.

COATS VIYELLA

Mr Brewster: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum deplores the action of the Coats Viyella Company upon their workers who wore poppies and calls on senior management to cease discrimination, either financial or otherwise, against those employees.

I am going to very brief because the facts are very well-known, and I am sure Mr Gregory Campbell will be able to fill the Forum in with the details. What we all know is that up to 20 employees in Coats Viyella, a factory in Londonderry, have been penalized by their employer because they chose to wear a poppy.

There are occasions when words sometimes fail me. One recalls the Enniskillen bombing 10 years ago, when to have said anything might have seemed like being on automatic pilot; words would have been cheap beside the outrage we all felt. Similarly now, I am very loathe to say anything which could be interpreted as bringing political controversy to the Royal British Legion.