

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM

Friday 13 September 1996

The meeting was called to order at 10.02 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

The Chairman: Welcome to the ninth plenary meeting of the Forum, on a lovely day. We thank God for one bit of good news for farmers.

FORUM: COMMITTEES

The Chairman: Yesterday the four Committees that the Forum decided upon were set up, and the members elected their Chairmen, as follows: Parades, Cedric Wilson; Education, Oliver Gibson; Agriculture, David Campbell; Health, Hugh Smyth. The formation of these Committees and the fact that I am now planning their real work (taking evidence, accepting submissions, and so on) is proof — if it were needed — that the Forum's desire to get its teeth into real issues has borne fruit. It is through such a Committee system that the remit of the Forum — promoting dialogue and understanding — will be met. I hope that those who attempt to question its ability to fulfil its remit will take note of the progress we have made.

FORUM: RULES OF PROCEDURE

The Chairman: As the Forum asked me to do, I invited the Secretary of State to attend a meeting of the Rules Committee at 1.00 pm last Tuesday. He replied within two hours to my letter. He said he was unable to attend but offered, instead, to send two senior civil servants. The Committee had a frank and useful exchange of views with the Secretary of State's representatives, who agreed to report the Committee's view back to him. As a result, I received from the Secretary of State on Wednesday a letter to say that before reaching a final view on the two Rules about which he had reservation it would be helpful, he thought, if he and I could discuss them. He offered me the freedom to bring other members of the Rules Committee, but I think that there is potentially more to be gained by having a one-to-one discussion. Unfortunately, he was not available for a meeting before today, but I shall be attempting to arrange an early meeting — perhaps on Monday — so that I can report back to the Rules Committee as soon as possible.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. Before this sitting we had a meeting with you, at which you agreed to put the record straight. At the last meeting of the Forum before the recess you stated that the Rules of Procedure had been agreed unanimously. We asked you to set the record straight because, as you know, the Rules were not agreed unanimously. I ask you to do so now, before we proceed with today's business.

The Chairman: I am perfectly happy to do that. My use of the word “unanimous” excluded the views expressed by the Women’s Coalition. In the Forum Committee there was a degree of unanimity. Views were so close as to make my use of the word “unanimous” reasonably accurate. If there were reservations as to some of the Rules that we put forward, so be it. I apologize if my use of the word has worried or concerned people who, as I said to the Rules Committee, were in a very difficult position. Only two people — Mr Curran and Ms McWilliams — felt that they had to take a position different from that of the other Members present that day, and I commend them for it.

If, therefore, you want me to qualify my use of the word “unanimous”, I certainly do so now.

BEEF INDUSTRY CRISIS (BSE)

The Chairman: I trust that the background information on BSE that was sent to Members has been helpful. I hope to adopt the procedure of making facts — not comment, but facts — available to all Members so that they will be in a position to make informed comment.

Mr Dodds: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum, appalled at the continuing crisis in Northern Ireland’s beef industry, demands:

1. that Northern Ireland be recognized as having special status for BSE purposes so that the world-wide export ban can be lifted as quickly as possible;
2. that the backlog of cattle in the over-30-months cattle slaughter scheme be eliminated;
3. that BSE “flagging” should apply to herds, not holdings, and that a voluntary “buy-up” scheme be introduced for BSE “flagged” suckler herds;
4. that specific beef intervention for Northern Ireland be introduced;
5. that Government provide fair and adequate compensation for beef producers, in keeping with previous commitments; and
6. that HLCAs be increased in the autumn review.

Furthermore, the Forum condemns the Minister responsible for agriculture, Baroness Denton, and the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Douglas Hogg, for their failure to safeguard the Northern Ireland beef industry.

This is an extremely important debate. The fact that we are discussing this issue today illustrates the value of the Forum. We have heard many comments about what is called the irrelevance of the Forum. We have heard many comments about how it has become bogged down in various side issues. The reality is that over recent weeks it has been dealing with some very serious and important matters that affect this province as a whole. Those who have been making some of the comments we have heard on radio and television and through the other media have reflected not the reality but their own distorted and partisan political

views. It behoves the media, in particular, to pay attention to the reality of what we are dealing with in respect of issues of this sort.

BSE is one of the biggest crises ever to hit not just the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland but the economy as a whole. That is why it is so right and justifiable that it should be the subject of one of our first debates. There is no doubt that 20 March 1996 will go down as one of the blackest days in the history of the Northern Ireland agriculture industry — indeed, the agriculture industry of the United Kingdom.

When Stephen Dorrell stood up in the House of Commons and made his by now infamous remarks some people could have guessed at the impact. But time has revealed just what devastation has been caused. The crisis that we have known since that date is particularly hard on Northern Ireland because of the value of the beef industry to the province — proportionately, far greater than for the United Kingdom as a whole. The industry is worth almost £0.5 billion per year and employs almost 25,000 people, directly on the farm, in ancillary industries and in the agriculture supply sector. When you consider all the other spin-offs in hauling, distribution, packaging, sales, and so on, you begin to see the impact that this crisis has had across the entire economy.

The first message that we want to send out from the Forum, to reinforce the efforts that have already been made by politicians of all parties and right across the industry, is that it is absolutely essential that the beef industry in Northern Ireland be preserved and maintained, that it should not be allowed to go to the wall.

It is an irony, indeed, that, as a result of EU actions and the ban that has been imposed on world-wide exports, we should be facing the devastation of our single biggest industry just when the EU is committing money to Northern Ireland through the peace and reconciliation fund. On one hand, money is being given to help certain sectors of the economy in certain communities to overcome the worst ravages of the troubles; on the other, our traditional industry — our single biggest industry — is being devastated as a result of what is being done in Europe. The irony is not lost on many people in Northern Ireland.

Of course, we rightly welcome the money that is coming from Europe, through both the structural funds and the peace and reconciliation fund. We welcome anything that will help to create and maintain jobs. But if the beef industry goes, we shall be talking about not just a few hundred but thousands upon thousands of jobs. Indeed, we shall be talking not just about jobs but about the devastation of the rural community. That, of course, is the difference between agriculture and other sectors which provide employment.

Sometimes people ask, "Why shouldn't farmers and the agriculture sector simply take the full force of the market? Why should they be protected or given subsidies when other sectors are simply allowed to be subjected to market forces?" Here is the difference: we are talking not just about certain jobs but about the entire rural community. We are talking about whole towns, villages, communities that will simply be devastated, that have no alternative. There will be no come-back for them if this crisis is allowed to continue, if the agriculture industry is not properly and adequately supported.

10.15 am

One of the most frustrating aspects of this entire crisis has, of course, been that so much of it is based on myths, so much on half-truths, so much on misinterpretation or malicious interpretation of scientific evidence. Indeed, in many cases there is precious little scientific evidence to support rumours and statements. Very little attention indeed is given to hard scientific facts. That is one of the tragedies.

No doubt we shall all say that the consumer must be protected. The consumer has a right to the safest possible food. He has a right to know that the food he eats, including beef, is safe for consumption. But we have gone to the extreme that instead of facts we have a diet of innuendo, and instead of reality we have supposition and falsehoods. There has not been a proper balance. One of the most shameful aspects of this entire crisis is that you have rumours which hit the headlines and get massive coverage — acres of newsprint and hours of broadcasting time — in great depth. But when the facts come out later they are hardly worth a mention. They get hardly any coverage.

One of the other frustrating aspects of this entire crisis is that we all know that much of it is based on political considerations. We know that a lot of what is going on in Europe, for instance, has very little to do with concern about the standards of United Kingdom beef. It has more to do with the current intergovernmental conference to revise the Maastricht Treaty. This can be used as a very strong weapon against the British Government, to get them to water down some of their demands.

Many German MEPs make no secret of the fact that what is going on has nothing to do with health. Indeed, many of them admit that even British mainland beef, never mind Northern Ireland beef, is totally safe to eat. This has more to do with politics, and many farmers have the right to complain strongly that they are being used as pawns in a wider political game, that their industry, their communities, their farms, their whole livelihood are going to the wall as a result of something which has nothing really to do with farming or agriculture.

We should not underestimate the desire of some companies and some Governments, having seen the Ulster beef industry being able to eat into domestic markets because of the high quality of its product, to seize the opportunity to get rid of it: "We will get rid of competition and protect our own industry" — an industry of which, in many cases, one could say far worse, in terms of health standards (look at the drugs, the hormone crisis, and so on), than anything that could be said against Ulster beef or, for that matter, British beef.

The reality, of course, is that beef produced in Northern Ireland is of the highest standard in Europe. The Ulster Farmers' Union and others have made perfectly clear why this is the case. The reason, of course, is that Ulster has been way ahead of the game — ahead of the situation on the mainland, ahead of the situation in Europe, ahead of the situation to the south of us. We have a full traceability system. The history of every animal, from birth to slaughter, is known. That has been the case since 1988. We have the lowest incidence of BSE in the United Kingdom. We have the highest standards of supervision in our abattoirs, we have the confidence of our own consumers, and we have the farm quality

assurance scheme. All these things point to the reality that Ulster beef is of the highest standard.

Yet the special status of Ulster beef has not been recognized. Our producers have been lumped in with those in the rest of the United Kingdom for the purposes of this world-wide ban. Market outlets in Europe and elsewhere have made it clear that they would be perfectly happy to accept Ulster beef, but they are prevented from doing so — not on grounds of health, but for political reasons. We on this side of the Forum condemn the deplorable fact that at the outset the Secretary of State and the Minister responsible for agriculture here were so quick to come out against special status for Northern Ireland. They should have seized the opportunity then to lobby very strongly for special status and ensure that Northern Ireland did not come within the general export ban.

Now, there is some truth in the assertion that the Minister here, Baroness Denton, is to a large extent the prisoner of Government policy as a whole. That is why I am quite happy that the Forum should today be urging the Minister and Douglas Hogg, the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to honour their commitments. The reality is that many farmers believe that they were badly let down when the Minister and the Secretary of State, who, after all, is charged, first and foremost, with protecting and safeguarding the interests of Northern Ireland producers, followed a policy which was to a large extent dictated by the Treasury, rather than by the interests of the farming community here.

I have no doubt that if it had been the other way round, a different attitude would have been taken. Some people foolishly say "Well, you know, we are all part of the United Kingdom, so we should all stick together and have exactly the same policy." It has been said that you either stay together or sink, but that does not apply to other issues in relation to Europe. It is a bit like the Secretary of State coming to the Forum and saying "You know, Northern Ireland is offered Objective 1 status, which means that we can get more money from Europe through the structural funds than we would otherwise be able to get, but because the rest of the United Kingdom is not designated as Objective 1, we should not have it either." That argument is so foolish that nobody would even dare advance it.

Yet when it comes to the beef industry the ludicrous notion is advanced that regional differences are important but should not be recognized at all, that we must have exactly the same policy as Great Britain, regardless of the fact that the situation in Northern Ireland is different from that in the rest of the United Kingdom. That argument simply does not stand up. Either we shall get the ban removed for the whole United Kingdom or it will not be removed at all. We have always said we believe that the quickest way to get the ban lifted would be by stages — incrementally — and that the first place in which that could happen is Northern Ireland. Once Northern Ireland had the ban lifted, it would be easier in the rest of the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, that policy has not been pursued.

Under the framework agreed in Florence, Northern Ireland will, I think, have an opportunity to move ahead. We already fulfil many of the criteria. This should lead to a situation in which Northern Ireland will get the ban lifted more quickly than other areas of the United Kingdom. That is why it would be a tragedy if at this stage — again with motives perhaps not the soundest, but dictated by the Treasury — the British Government were to

consider backing out of the agreement. That would not be in the best interests of the Northern Ireland beef producer.

At the end of the day, the rest of the United Kingdom can live with the ban to a large extent because consumption can take up whatever is produced. But we in Northern Ireland export most of our beef — almost 80%. The Northern Ireland consumers have proved extremely loyal, and we commend them for that. But even though they use Ulster beef we have to export. That is why it is so important that the ban be lifted for Northern Ireland, that we do not just jettison the framework that has been put in place. We simply have nowhere else to go.

There are several specific issues included in the motion. I do not want to go into these in great detail as I am sure that other Members will do so. However, I should like to make a number of very general points about one or two of them.

First, it is unfair that, having been landed with this crisis, Northern Ireland is treated, in some respects, differently from other parts of the European Union when it comes to the imposition of some of the restrictions. For instance, in relation to flagged holdings, if you cross the border to another member state of the European Union, not far from us, you will find that a relatively short time after a farmer has had his herd culled he is able to restock and carry on his trade. In Northern Ireland that is unfortunately not possible. The holding is flagged — not the herd — and at the moment, for those people who have flagged holdings, it seems that there is no way at all out of the crisis. They are in a 'Catch-22' situation.

I know that the Northern Ireland MEPs are going to raise this issue with the Farm Commissioner in Europe next week. If we are going to be landed with these restrictions it is important that the Northern Ireland beef producer should not be disadvantaged by comparison with his counterparts in other parts of the European Union. It is absolutely vital that the commitments entered into by Douglas Hogg and the Government be honoured. One of the Government's commitments was that no beef from cattle more than 30 months old would be imported from other European states. In fact, that is happening. It is well known, for instance, that McDonald's are using beef imported in the way I have described. They certainly have not been supporting the United Kingdom industry — even advertising that they sell only imported beef. That is something that the Government need to look at.

They should honour the clear commitments that they gave to beef producers, as well as their commitment to clear the backlog of cattle. Back in April Douglas Hogg came to the House of Commons and said that this backlog would be cleared, yet here we are in September with tens of thousands of cattle still on farms, having to be housed and fed over the winter. Farmers simply do not have any provision for this, and there is no prospect of getting them away for culling. The Government must honour their commitment and get that backlog cleared as quickly as possible.

There are many other issues that we could go into, but the clear message that must go out from this Forum today is that the ban has got to be lifted, that we back Ulster beef. We are glad that the Ulster consumer backs Ulster beef, and we hope that the British Government, Douglas Hogg and the Northern Ireland Office will do likewise by taking immediate steps to deal with the short-term crisis, but also by redoubling their efforts to get

the ban lifted and enable our tremendous beef industry to get back on its feet, thus giving the farmer hope and providing sustenance to our rural community.

Mr David Campbell: I commend Mr Dodds for his eloquent and convincing presentation. As he knows, I have been an admirer of his work, not only in the field of promoting our agriculture industry but in other fields also, for many years, and I am aware of the efforts that he and others have made to ensure that the industry is supported at this critical time.

10.30 am

My party has a modest and, I hope, constructive amendment to propose. With your permission, Mr Chairman, I will deal with that in a moment.

The motion addresses many of the concerns voiced by the Ulster Farmers' Union and by NIAPA. The Forum Secretariat, as you have pointed out, Mr Chairman, has circulated to Members many convincing reports, many technical analyses of the situation. These should be taken up and studied by Members, because this is not the time or the place to debate the causes or the mismanagement of the BSE crisis. That should come at a later date, perhaps in the form of a Royal Commission or a public inquiry into how this whole problem started back in the 1980s, when permission was given to feed animal remains to animals.

We see today the result of tampering with nature. The Government will have to give many answers to such a commission or such an inquiry. But this is the time and this is the place to highlight the despair and anguish being faced by beef and dairy farmers in particular but also by the wider agriculture and economic community. The Government must make an immediate announcement of full implementation of the 30-month-cattle slaughter scheme to remove the backlog of some 80,000 cattle on farms.

I welcome the announcement yesterday by NIGEN that it is examining urgently the feasibility of incinerating cattle to produce electricity. I hope that the company will be encouraged and, if necessary, given financial support by the Government to implement this idea.

This is a productive start, but the silence this week from the Government, and the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture in particular, in the face of formal requests by the Ulster Farmers' Union only last week has been deafening. Perhaps I have been remiss, but I have heard no formal response from the Government to the Ulster Farmers' Union requests — requests which have been tabled for each Member here, requests for action that were endorsed by all political parties and all Leaders and are included in the motion before us. Instead of action, we have inaction and equivocation from the Cabinet. I share Mr Dodds's concern about the Cabinet's announcement yesterday and its severe implications for the industry in Northern Ireland — not in Great Britain but in Northern Ireland.

There is not one farmer in Northern Ireland who seeks the unnecessary slaughter of his cattle. Farmers in Northern Ireland take pride in the production of their livestock. To see good mature beef being incinerated for no reason is a shame and a disgrace, but this situation has been forced on farmers since Easter. As Mr Dodds has highlighted, we face having some

80,000 cattle on farms as part of the backlog. If the announcement by the Cabinet yesterday means that those cattle will not now be culled, and if the export ban is not then lifted, what is to be done with the 80,000? I can tell Members what the farmers will do with them. It may break their hearts, but the animals will be shot in their yards and burned in their fields because there will be nowhere to house them and nothing to feed them on.

I put it to the House that if it had been an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease that our agricultural industry was dealing with, our herds would have been slaughtered and buried or burned months ago, and full compensation would have been paid to the farmers.

I pay tribute to the farmers and to the farming lobby because they have put careful thought into this crisis and how to deal with it. They have produced proposals to deal with the backlog of cattle: the use of land-fill sites, farm burials and increased cold storage, amongst other measures. Let us now see the political and financial will from the Government to implement those proposals.

Something that Mr Dodds said is worth repeating. Northern Ireland's beef industry exports 55% of its produce to places outside the United Kingdom. We must also see the lifting of the world-wide export ban. Our beef has special status. We have a farm quality assurance scheme, with more than 6,500 registered farmers producing top-quality mature beef. We have the lowest incidence of BSE in the United Kingdom. But, foremost, we have the highest veterinary and inspection standards and a cattle registration scheme which records every bovine from birth to death.

I appreciate that the flagging system has created its own problems — this motion addresses those — but I maintain that it and the registration system must be central planks in our case for special status. It is my information that the European Commission has been willing to grant special status for Northern Ireland but that our own Government have to date refused to request it. The Forum demands that it be requested forthwith.

This motion is an appeal for help, a plea from our largest industry for assistance in its hour of need. Let us not underestimate the problems and the scale of despair in agricultural communities. I bring to you constituents of mine who have had no positive cash flow for eight months. I bring to you farmers who face a winter not knowing how to house or feed their livestock. I bring to you farmers who cannot sell their finished cattle for a profit, who do not know how they are going to pay their fertilizer bills for this year, who do not know how they are going to meet their meal bills over this winter.

I bring to you, in particular, the large proportion of small livestock farmers whose only source of income is the sale of their suckle calves this autumn and who are facing, without further support measures, a price reduction of up to a 50% — no profit, but a loss, and no income for those families. I bring to you landowners who do not know if their rent bills will be paid this year, let alone next year.

I bring to you the farmers' wives and children, who do not know if they will have an income to depend on, who do not know if they will have a farm this time next year — a farm which has been in their family for generations and which has been the staple of their family and the foundation of rural society. I bring to you our rural villages and communities facing

the knock-on economic hardship and despair. I bring to you an industry being brought to its knees by a German-inspired Euro policy that has little to do with animal health and much to do with anti-British Euro politics.

Where now is the fighting talk of banning German imports into Britain? Where is the fighting talk of suspending British payments to the European Commission? Gone, with the fighting talk on all the other issues in respect of which John Major has let us down over the past five years.

If anyone has doubts about the seriousness of my remarks and those of Mr Dodds, or about the seriousness of this situation, let him go next week to the agricultural mart in his town. Let him go and talk to the farmers and share their tears. I never thought I would live to see farmers crying as they come out of their markets, getting for their finished cattle not even the price they paid for them four or five months ago — real tears: tears of despair, tears of anguish.

I have said that my party has an amendment to move. In the light of my speech, which has been largely condemnatory, Members may find the amendment slightly contradictory. However, I believe, in the light of representations that my party and others have made to the local Minister, Baroness Denton, even in recent days, that she should be given an opportunity to address these issues and to come to the Agriculture Committee of the Forum. The amendment I propose would make the final paragraph read as follows:

“Furthermore, the Forum urges the Minister responsible for agriculture, Baroness Denton, and the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Douglas Hogg, to honour their commitment to safeguard the Northern Ireland beef industry.”

Rather than prejudge the Agriculture Committee's urgent deliberations over the next fortnight, we should reserve our condemnation for a later date. It may well be that in a fortnight's time the original wording of the motion will be justified, but I feel that it is wrong to prejudge Baroness Denton.

As my speech has indicated, I do not share the confidence that the National Farmers' Union in England appears to have in Mr Hogg and the action he took this week. I believe that Northern Ireland agriculture is being exploited and is being sacrificed on the altar of political and financial expediency in Great Britain.

I draw Members' attention to a trade mission that Mr Tony Baldry, the Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, is currently leading to Latin America — in particular, to four countries whose trade with the United Kingdom amounts to more than £1,200 million per year. The mission will last one month and is visiting, amongst other countries, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Peru. Its purpose is to promote the British agriculture exporting industry and British agriculture, yet there is not a single Northern Ireland representative on it, at a time when Northern Ireland is arguing for special status and for the defence and promotion of its agriculture industry. There should be some comment from the Department of Agriculture as to why Northern Ireland appears to have been excluded.

Let me digress briefly to inform the Forum what the Agriculture Committee is doing to complement the DUP motion. We met yesterday for the first time and decided, after the formal elections, to immediately pursue the submissions that we have received. We hope next week to receive the Ulster Farmers' Union and officials from the Department of Agriculture and its division to brief us on the background to the crisis and on the real situation affecting farmers. We shall seek answers from the Department. The most important matter is the need for the Minister of State and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to promote special status for Northern Ireland beef. Answers have to be given, and they have to be given in front of the public representatives of Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

The Agriculture Committee is made up of a range of people from a farming background — a specialist background. At the first meeting, yesterday, I was impressed and encouraged by those members who represent inner city areas but, nevertheless, recognize the real problems besetting our industry and realize that the economic effects of this crisis will extend to their constituents even though they are not directly involved in agriculture.

I shall conclude by giving one assurance to the people of Northern Ireland from the Agriculture Committee. It is an assurance given especially to those farmers who in the last election voted for Nationalist parties — the SDLP in particular. This crisis does not differentiate or discriminate between Unionist and Nationalist. It does not discriminate against Roman Catholic or Protestant. I can assure Nationalist farmers that, in the absence of Nationalist representation on the Committee, their case and that of our own constituents will be pursued with equal vigour.

I support the motion and commend to Members the amendment that I have tabled.

Mr McCarthy: The crisis in the beef industry is undoubtedly one of the greatest threats to the Northern Ireland economy. All those engaged in it, including farmers, manufacturers and retailers, are suffering. All the efforts that have been put into rural development, through the IFI, peace and reconciliation money, the INTERREG programme, and so on, fade into insignificance compared to the losses suffered by farmers and others because of the BSE scourge. I fully endorse the Ulster Farmers' Union's proposals to deal with the crisis. The Alliance Party was represented at the meeting between political leaders and the union on 5 September, and our spokesman signed the letter to the Prime Minister.

There are many points of concern, but it seems to me that there are fundamental matters that must be addressed.

First, in the short term the Government must take serious action to remove the backlog of cattle awaiting slaughter. It is utterly ridiculous that, six months after the beginning of the crisis, there are still at least 50,000, and possibly up to 100,000, animals over 30 months of age awaiting slaughter. This week's news that there may be a further delay because of the number of bull calves that will be born in the coming weeks is most worrying. The Government must speed up the slaughter scheme. The target date of the end of October to clear the backlog is fair and reasonable, but further delay would be disastrous and totally unacceptable.

Secondly, the Government have a duty to ensure that Northern Ireland beef exports restart at the earliest possible date. It is disgraceful that the Ministers seem to have no understanding of the different needs of Northern Ireland or of the depth of the crisis here or the scale of the threat. It is simply not good enough to demand that the United Kingdom be taken as a whole. Everyone in Europe knows that Northern Ireland has the best means of tracing animals through the unique computerized system maintained by the Department of Agriculture. Why will the Government not recognize this? If Northern Ireland and, subsequently, Scotland were allowed to resume exports before England and Wales, that would not harm farmers across the water. Removing Northern Ireland beef from the home market would actually improve the situation for producers in Great Britain. Interests in England have tended to oppose special status for Northern Ireland, but there seems to be a growing realization that the situation is changing.

My party has been in contact with the Liberal Democrats in London to consider the national implications. I was pleased to see that this week Paul Tyler MP, the Liberal Democrat spokesman, called for

“a rolling programme with a realistic timetable to establish BSE-clear herds and areas, emphasizing the positive qualities of prime British beef.”

It is important that politicians and farmers in Northern Ireland establish contacts with their counterparts from other parts of the United Kingdom to build agreement on what needs to be done. Alliance will be having a meeting with the Liberal Democrats in a week or so to advance this discussion. I hope that leaders of the Farmers' Union and political representatives will be able to meet the Prime Minister soon to put the case.

Mr Dodds: I note that the Member is going to meet the Liberal Democrats, with whom I know he has a very close relationship. I take it that when he is talking to that party he will raise the question of its full support for the proposal to scrap the cull programme altogether. The Liberal Democrats have made it clear that they do not wish the British Government to adhere to the Florence framework, which, as has been pointed out by Members on both sides, would be a complete disaster for Northern Ireland beef producers, no matter what the situation in the rest of the United Kingdom. I take it that the Member will have something to say on that particular Liberal Democrat proposal.

Mr McCarthy: I assure the Gentleman and the Forum that we will be putting Northern Ireland's case very forcefully to everyone we come in contact with.

We must be concerned about suggestions that have emerged during the last few days to the effect that Government Back-Benchers are trying to back-pedal on the question of a selective slaughter programme. The industry in Great Britain may be able to wait five or six years for BSE to die out naturally, but farmers in Northern Ireland most certainly cannot afford to wait. We have called on the Government to take action. The farmers in Northern Ireland too must be prepared to take action to improve the long-term prospects of the beef industry. We must do everything we can to build a clean and green image. Actually, we have that already, but we must do everything to ensure that it goes forward. This means that we need to keep a high veterinary status, and the computerized animal tracing system must be

upgraded as other parts of Europe upgrade their systems. It is important that we have the highest standard of animal welfare, building on the success of the existing farm quality assurance scheme.

Consumers are clearly showing that they want a natural, healthy product, and those producers who cannot satisfy consumer demands will go out of business in the long term. But in the short term the priority will be to give farmers confidence this autumn and to move towards a situation where we can expect good Northern Irish beef as soon as possible. If the Government do not take action, there will be many thousands of animals which cannot be fed or housed properly over the winter months. If this situation arises, the blame will rest squarely on the Government.

We in the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland fully support all the efforts to overcome this crisis as soon as possible. We support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I concur with the comments of the two Members who commenced the debate, and I commend them on their excellent and informative speeches. I do not want to downgrade the debate with my lack of knowledge of the intricate details of the crisis facing the farming community, but I can say, as a businessman and as someone who lives in a rural area, that the comments of Mr Dodds are understandable even to a lay person or someone who does not have any great knowledge of the farming community's problems. I refer in particular to the point that if the farming community sneezes, we all catch a cold. The economic effects for the province as a whole are probably comprehensible to all of us. The United Kingdom Unionists would like to identify fully with the motion and the amendment. Again I congratulate those who have helped to inform other Forum Members about some of the finer details of this crisis.

Mr Poots: Bovine spongiform encephalopathy — BSE, as we have come to know it — is a relatively new disease. It first appeared in the 1980s, coinciding with the relaxation in the treatment of meat-and-bone meal. It is similar to scrapie in sheep, first observed in the late 18th century, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans. Incidentally, the first victim of the latter was a German teenager, which is quite interesting because up to now it has been said that all cases involved older people, and only in the last two years have younger people been taking the disease. In fact, the first person to be diagnosed was a teenager.

In the United Kingdom some 162,000 cases have been reported since 1988, in a herd of 11 million cattle. In Northern Ireland, to date, there have been 1,688 cases, in a herd of 1.6 million cattle. The number peaked at 487 in 1993 and has declined rapidly since. Between last November and today 68 cattle — representing 0.004% of the Northern Ireland herd — have been diagnosed with BSE. Only 15% of these originated in beef herds, and of those, 80% originated in dairy herds. It is worth noting that 30% of the 68 cattle that were slaughtered were diagnosed negative after slaughter. The transmission of BSE to humans has never been scientifically proven. Indeed, the BSE agent has never been found in the blood, bones, meat or milk of animals, and unspecified offal has been banned from the food chain since 1988. The reality today is that beef products have never been safer to eat, but, owing to mistakes made in the past, that is not the public perception.

The effect on the farming community has been catastrophic. It is the one topic of conversation that nobody enjoys but simply will not go away. Cattle prices have slumped by £200 to £300 per head, depending on size. I personally have been at the sharp end. I had animals ready for slaughter in the week in which Stephen Dorrell made his announcement, but had to keep and feed them for a further six weeks. I lost some £250 per head. That is the experience of farmers throughout Northern Ireland. Agri-related industries are suffering the consequences, as are the farmers, with their sluggish sales and increasing bad debts.

11.00 am

I was quite brave the other day. I ordered some blocks from a local concrete firm, and the fellow driving the lorry said "Yours is the first farm I have been to this summer. Normally we do a lot of trade with the farmers in the summer-time." And the firm was even braver that supplied me. I jest: they need not panic, because the cheque is in the post. But will it go through? That is the important thing. But — on a serious note — companies are finding it very difficult to get their money in, and the impact begins to reverberate across the whole agri-industry. It starts with the farmer. Then the person supplying him has cash-flow trouble. It affects virtually everybody in the province.

It is essential that decisive action be taken to counteract these problems. We therefore call on the Government to clear the way for Northern Ireland beef to re-enter the world market. Removal of the 2,000 cattle in Northern Ireland deemed to be at greatest risk should be carried out in accordance with the Florence Agreement. When 4,000 cattle — healthy beef animals — per week are being slaughtered, another 2,000 would be neither here nor there. We believe that, with Northern Ireland's unique traceability system and the slaughter of these 2,000 cattle, the door would be open for us to re-enter the world market. And we need to re-enter the world market, with over 55% of our produce going that way.

I want to say something to put CJD in context. In 1994 — the most recent data — 553,194 people died in the United Kingdom. Of those, 141,747 died from cancer, 134,000 from heart attacks, and 58,000 from strokes. If you move on down, you find that 50 people died from varicose veins, six from variant CJD, three from haemorrhoids, and one as the result of an accident with a tea cosy. Believe it or not, those are official figures. Wouldn't the hundreds of millions of pounds that have been spent trying to counteract this have been better spent on research into cancer and heart attacks? Thank goodness, there have been only two cases of variant CJD diagnosed since the statement of 20 March.

Let us get back to the motion. I would like to cover some aspects of the backlog of cattle in the over-30-month scheme. First, it is an immoral scheme. It is an absolute sin that perfectly healthy, good-quality beef is being thrown in a skip, rendered and dumped in Dargan. It is a crime against humanity, when people in the world are starving, that we should be wasting good food in this way.

Research was carried out into cattle taking BSE. Young calves were orally administered BSE infection at birth. It took 35 months for the first calf to develop BSE — to have signs of it in the brain — and the average was 60 months. The 30-month scheme should be extended to 33 or 34 months at least. That would take many more cattle out of the scheme

and put them back into the food chain, where they belong. This should never have been brought in at 30 months in the first place.

Currently some 100,000 cattle are waiting to go away under the slaughter scheme. The number being handled is 4,000 per week. Unfortunately, a further 2,000 are coming into the scheme every week, so we are taking two steps forward and one step back in clearing this backlog. In six months' time, at the present rate, we will be clear, but by that stage a further 50,000 will be in the scheme, and these will take a further three months to deal with.

It is essential that something be done to clear the backlog more quickly. Now, it is very difficult in this province to do that as there is rendering capacity to handle only 4,000 cattle per week. So we are going to have to look at an alternative. One way is to slaughter cattle and put them in cold storage. Another is to export them to Scotland — where the cull has been completed, but I am not sure that the Scottish meat plants want that. Yet another way is to slaughter on the farm and either bury or burn the carcasses. Some means will have to be found to do something about this. One hundred thousand cattle cannot go inside.

Mr Ken Maginnis: I am listening very carefully. The difficulty about the Member's proposal concerning on-farm slaughter and burial is that it would not satisfy the Europeans. Until our Government are able to win their case in Europe, we are pretty well tied to the existing scheme.

Mr Poots: I am not altogether sure what the European standard is, but I know that in the past, in the case of foot and mouth disease, as has been mentioned, an on-farm slaughter scheme was adopted, and the animals were burned on the farm. Whatever way we get rid of this backlog, it has to be done. In six weeks' time cattle will be closed in the house. They will eat, on average, five tonnes of silage over the winter, which means that an extra 500,000 tonnes of in-silo grass will have to be found, and it just is not there. We should be thankful that the Lord has been good to us. He has given us a good harvest, but there simply is not enough to cope with that number of extra animals.

One thing that has alleviated the BSE problem slightly on the farms is that the sheep industry and the pig industry have been performing well. Many people involved in mixed farming have been able to offset their losses at the beef end with better profits at the other. However, this does not adequately compensate.

I would like to address the question of HLCAs, and the hill farmers specifically. Since 1994 these farmers have been receiving a top-up of some £42 on their suckler cow premium. Before that it was £63.50. They are from severely disadvantaged areas — for example, the Glens of Antrim and the hills of Dromara — where the only thing they can grow is grass or trees. There is no means of diversification. The Government must consider topping up HLCAs. These should never have been cut in the first place, and the Government should look at increasing them.

Also, in the case of the 300 suckler herds which are flagged, there will have to be some compensation package. It is impossible for producers to sell their livestock in the market. This is their only source of income. If it is announced that a herd is being flagged,

the finisher simply has no interest in buying the animals. It is essential that this matter be looked at quickly.

I support the motion, with the amendment put forward by Mr David Campbell.

Mr Junkin: I should like, first, to commend Mr Dodds on his opening speech. It was very good and very illuminating to anyone who knew little or nothing about the beef crisis in Northern Ireland.

I have to say that all my stock have two legs. I am not a beef farmer, but I am influenced by the beef farmer. I am surrounded by beef men of all political persuasions. Unfortunately, the parties that some of them voted for are not here today. However, I shall continue to represent them in the absence of those parties.

The beef industry, as has been said, is very important to Northern Ireland. It has been led by foreign demand for our superior product and by Government incentives to expand and provide better facilities for rearing and keeping beef animals. I believe that this is all part of the post-war cheap-food policy. I do not particularly agree with that policy, though I could be classed as biased as I am one of the primary producers. On the whole, because of it, food of all types has been devalued. People do not put a proper value on food until something goes wrong.

Officially, BSE has been noticed during the past 10 years, and it seems to be positively linked to meat-and-bone meal in rations. The same meat-and-bone meal has been responsible, in the past, for the spread of salmonella in chickens. With its removal from all rations, all classes of livestock can only gain. All our animals are now required to be given feed free of such substances. This will lead to a better, greener image. Our cattle feed is free of hormones and all sorts of other additives that the Americans and others feel free to put in. We should build on this and keep going.

The mistakes and wrong decisions of the past 10 years seem to be aired in the press weekly, until the average citizen is very confused about just how his beef is being produced. Indeed, some people would say that BSE was found in Britain in 1983. One wonders why things were kept quiet for three years. The sad fact is that our primary producers — the farmers — who at this very minute are driving round, in their boiler suits, on their tractors and working with their graips and equipment in their yards, are the people who are suffering very badly. They are caught with excess cattle because of this 30-month scheme. And we all know what happens when you cannot get rid of your stock. It happens in the chicken industry too. There is a shortage of yard space. There are going to be far too many cattle on many farms.

Some farmers will be forced to put cattle in yards that are not really suitable for modern-day beef production. This will lead to more slurry being produced, more run-off, fuller tanks and more and more environmental problems as the winter months go by. Let us hope that the dry weather will continue.

Farms with a reduced or non-existent cash flow — even a negative cash flow, if creditors are involved — will have to finance more equipment (more troughs and feeders) and

probably more contractors to do their work during the winter. Where will the money come from? As we have heard, some farmers have not received money for eight months. If they were in a difficult position previously, it is going to be a crisis now.

I have not heard anyone mention farmers' health. Some farmers are doing more than tearing their hair out. Society should not force them into such circumstances. The Government, with their mistakes and their wrong promises, are responsible for the position they now find themselves in.

The 30-month backlog must be reduced. More incinerators will have to be provided or found. The idea of burning waste in an electric incinerator attracts me. Urgent steps should be taken to get that matter moving, even if it means relaxing some of the emission specifications for flues. About four years ago a German company came and promised us a system that would incinerate all the waste of Magherafelt and other districts. At that time the issue of fallen animals was very high on the agenda. The company promised that they could build into their incinerator a facility to take all the fallen animals in the area. If that was possible four years ago, I do not see why, with modern technology, things cannot be done a little more expeditiously now.

As has been said, whole communities depend on farming. In the case of some villages, the dependence is complete. Farmers must be adequately compensated, and quickly. I plead with creditors, such as the banks, to go easy, not to press farmers but to allow them a period to get back into business and get the cash flow going.

I have pleasure in supporting the motion.

11.15 am

Mr Morrow: I support the motion. I do so as someone from a town that has two EC-approved meat plants.

I understand that quite recently Coopers and Lybrand were commissioned to carry out a survey of the cost of the disposal of culled cattle. Members will probably know that until recently the Government paid £81.50 for disposal. But there was an interesting finding: this could be done for £41. Now, it does not take a genius to work out that factories follow profits. The question that I would like to ask is this: did they include just EC-approved meat plants, or were there other considerations? It is obvious that if the cost is going to be reduced from £81.50 to £41, factories will become less and less interested.

I believe that the nine meat plants operating in Northern Ireland can deal with the backlog. It has been said that about 90,000 animals are awaiting slaughter. I believe that the factories can cope with that, but rendering facilities are totally inadequate to deal with the fallen carcasses. Carcasses and softs must be disposed of. Mr Poots outlined a number of ways in which that could be done. Those directly involved in the slaughter of animals maintain that one of the quickest and most efficient ways of dealing with the carcasses and softs would be cold storage. Incineration has been mentioned. But that would take probably years. Cold storage can be provided quickly. If these facilities were available and if the Government addressed themselves to the problem, culled cattle could be dealt with quickly.

That is, if the Government are going to take this course. But, as Mr Maginnis has said, we are tied to Europe, and it seems that we will have to go down that road. My understanding from talking to the farming community is that they are not opposed to it. What they are steadfastly opposed to is indifference, dithering and uncertainty about what is going to happen.

Mr David Campbell outlined the dilemma facing farmers. They have got to feed these animals. They cannot just let them die. So what are they to do? They need leadership. If the Government are not prepared to stand up to Europe — in particular, the Germans — on this issue, let them identify with their own farmers. Of course, Northern Ireland is somewhat different from the rest of the United Kingdom. We depend on exporting for the disposal of beef, whereas on the mainland the home market can absorb much more of what is being produced.

Disposal of culled cattle has got to be a priority of the Government. New incentives must be given to the renderers right away, otherwise this catastrophic crisis will be irreparable in a few months' time, and our farming industry will be so devastated that there may be no way back, particularly for the beef sector.

There will be a knock-on effect on land prices, even for those who are retired and depend on letting for their income. Can anyone imagine what land letting prices will be, come April, if this crisis is not sorted out? The Government have not demonstrated that they are taking it seriously.

Mr Campbell has suggested an amendment to the motion, and I can see what he is getting at. But the Government stand condemned. They have dithered. If we cannot go to the person responsible — namely, Baroness Denton — and say that "You are part of the problem", whom can we go to? Maybe Mr Campbell feels that we will get more with honey than with vinegar. Perhaps, but there comes a time when people have to stand up and be answerable for their actions. In this instance, by her lack of action, Baroness Denton has a lot to answer for. The motion should be supported in its entirety because it lays the blame where it belongs. I hope that the Forum will support it unanimously. I understand the reasons behind the amendment, while not necessarily agreeing with it.

We should send the farming community the message that we understand and identify with their plight. Sadly, it is not sympathy that they need — it is positive action. The crisis is so deep that unless the Government step in right away, we will be in a no-win situation, which in two months' time will be irretrievable.

I congratulate all those — in particular, Mr Dodds, Mr Campbell and Mr Poots — who gave a fine insight into the details. As there would be no purpose in repeating points made in their excellent contributions, I will leave the matter there, supporting the motion as it stands.

Mr Gaston: I am sure that many people not directly involved in farming find it hard to understand the full implications of the BSE crisis and what it is doing to the agricultural economy. Those who sell feed, fertilizers, tractors and machinery, as well as sub-contractors

to that side of the industry, depend largely on the spending power of the farming community. In the case of livestock, it is mostly beef that has been affected, but the dairy side has been too to some extent.

The drastic effect is just beginning to bite, but it is nothing to what the coming months of winter will bring. Beef farming, as an industry, has a very long production line and cannot be shut down like an industrial plant. It is a living process, built up over generations of farmers producing high-quality animals, from conception to slaughter at three or four years of age. We have an industry which cannot be switched off, and when slaughter is not reducing the backlog, numbers continue to increase. There was a breathing space, an opportunity during the grass-growing period of spring, summer and autumn, to reduce numbers to a manageable level, but that has not happened. There have been many hold-ups, along with the reduction in compensation.

At the outset of this crisis, in March, the Government gave a commitment to safeguard the beef industry. They have so far failed to deliver. Losses of £200 to £300 per head have been quoted. Cows which should have been culled earlier in the year are still in the dairy herd. In-calf heifers are coming into the milking herd and are creating a surplus of milk, well above the quota, involving heavy penalties for over-production. Who is to blame for all this? Is it the Government for being too slow to act with regard to the meat-and-bone meal in animal feed? Have scientists proved beyond reasonable doubt that BSE can be transmitted to humans? I do not think so, but they have managed to destroy consumer confidence.

Or maybe we should look at our so-called European partners. They also have BSE — at least, some of their cattle have. British beef — in particular, Ulster beef — was making in-roads into European markets, so our EC partners seized the opportunity of the British Government's indecision. One has only to look at the French farmers who poured diesel oil on and burned British lamb imports and at the Spanish fishermen who have pillaged our fishing stock and literally swept the seabeds with their drag-nets. Or is it Germany, having unified west and east, finding its economy beginning to slacken and its products overpriced? Do they want to drive the United Kingdom into a corner by means of a single currency, a federal Europe, or whatever? If Britain were to say "We are going into a single currency" the beef situation would suddenly ease in Europe.

Sound, common-sense steps have got to be taken to restore confidence in beef, not only to protect the consumer but for the benefit of the producer as well. It is time some people stopped playing politics with a valuable food industry, otherwise it will be put in a position from which it will take many years to be rescued. The facts and figures have been well recorded — the numbers involved and the loss of value. Animals have had to be fed far beyond economic age or weight. What has been a crisis during the past six months will turn into a disaster affecting large sections of the community. Banks will soon begin to call in loans. This will start a chain of events that does not bear thinking about. Commitments made by the Government must be honoured — and soon.

I support the motion.

The Chairman: Before calling Mr Sam Clyde, I want to report on the matter he raised in the summer recess debate of 26 July — the ban imposed on the export of breeding cattle in general from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland. Mr Clyde pressed for a meeting between the two Agriculture Ministers to discuss this matter, with the aim of securing removal of the ban on the movement of Northern Ireland breeding cattle — action that we all regarded as unjustified in the prevailing circumstances. I have received a reply, on behalf of Baroness Denton, saying that a substantive response will be issued as soon as possible.

Mr Clyde: Mr Chairman, I am pleased to hear that you have received a reply about pedigree cattle. I hope that the ban will be lifted very soon, as that would also help the farmers in Northern Ireland.

The problem about speaking after so many others is that many of the things that one intended to say have been said already.

There are farmers who have had cattle entered for the cull scheme for over two months and still cannot get them to market. Cattle that can go straight to the abattoir are being bought in markets. I cannot understand this. For cattle entered over two months ago, the price was 240p per kilo. It is now down to 150p. Farmers are losing out.

11.30 am

I am told that cattle are being brought up from the Republic of Ireland. When they have been here three months they will be eligible for the cull scheme. That too is hitting our farmers. We are told that if cattle have a temperature or are being given antibiotics when they are brought to the abattoir, they will not be accepted. Such animals are to be incinerated. They will not go into the food chain. Farmers have to hold on to cattle until their temperature returns to normal and the antibiotics are out of their system.

Another ridiculous fact is that, although we are banned from exporting, beef is being imported into Great Britain and Northern Ireland from Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina and possibly the United States. It is being distributed by wholesalers, although it is not up to the standard of Northern Ireland beef. This should be stopped immediately.

A new beef insurance scheme has been proposed. Most beef farmers have received literature giving details. The membership fee is £35 plus £3.35 per head. The purpose is to enable farmers to get cattle away up to 42 months. Beasts have to be given foodstuff produced on the farm. There are, I think, few farms in Northern Ireland which will qualify.

The suckler cow farmer will be worst hit. Producers in upland areas will not be able to sell their calves. There is not enough room to house them, and there will be extra feed costs. There should be some special scheme or grant to help such people through the winter months.

I support the motion.

Mr Foster: In supporting the motion, I commend other Members on the incisive way in which they pointed out the real problems. I feel very much like the little dog running up a street full of lamp-posts, coming near the end of the street and fast running out of ammunition.

These days, farmers are in a state of gloom, the inevitable doom ahead. This is very sad. Indeed, it is sickening. I reiterate a point made previously: that the Government must live up to their commitment and ensure that the beef industry is protected. This is vital. The huge backlog in the cattle slaughter scheme must be eliminated, and eliminated now. I am informed that there are over 100,000 cattle still to be slaughtered. The difficulty of housing and feeding such an over-abundance of animals during the winter months is beyond comprehension. The selective slaughter programme can be implemented more quickly in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain owing to our traceability system, which can home in on BSE infection. In Northern Ireland, of course, the incidence of infection is limited.

The financial loss to farmers has been mentioned. I understand that this can be £200 to £300 per animal. Financial ruin is undoubtedly staring farmers in the face.

Reference has been made to HLCAs for suckler farmers in the less favoured areas. These people will experience the full effects of the crisis when calf sales commence in the autumn. This system needs to be supported by the Government. In fact, an increase is necessary. As I understand it, there has been a decrease over the past couple of years.

Another important point is that, with so many cattle in a static situation, dairy farmers, through no fault of their own, will be over quota. These people should not be penalized.

I emphasize the need for cold storage and support the suggestion that capacity be increased. In addition, more rendering capacity should be made available.

Burning and burying cattle at a central location would be a good idea, but environmental implications would have to be closely monitored. In the spring, I led a deputation from Fermanagh District Council, along with local butchers, to Baroness Denton. She assured me that there would be no burning or burying on farms anywhere in the province. I hope that it will never come to that.

Because the bulk of our beef is exported, I cannot emphasize enough the financial problems and other difficulties. This is a disaster for our major industry. It is a dreadful thought that many farmers will not survive and that rural areas will be decimated. There will be a decrease in the rural economy, leading to job losses in construction, transport, food technology and manufacturing. Purchasing power will disappear, and this, in turn, will deplete businesses dependent on support from the farming community. A dangerous spin-off will be the closure of small rural schools. This is especially so in County Fermanagh, which is not suitable for large acreages of grains and therefore dependent on cattle-raising. It is a real calamity for Fermanagh farmers — truly grotesque. I realize that things are going to be bad everywhere, but in a cattle-raising county like Fermanagh the local economy will be pulverised.

What will be the result? Bankruptcy. I hope that the banks will be kind to farmers in the days ahead. Psychiatric problems — fear, emotions, sleepless nights, all leading to depression — are a very real danger. The destruction of our major industry is under way, and in the autumn and spring there will be devastation. It is so sad and sickening to see such a situation developing in Northern Ireland, with its excellent beef standards and first-class traceability.

Morally, it is a crime against common decency to destroy good, wholesome food to satisfy marketing and political forces. Not one of us is a saint. This world is a sinful place filled with circumvention, evasion and deceit. I think it was Albert Schweitzer who said

“A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him — that of plants and animals, as well as that of fellow-man — and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help.”

There is bound to be a harsh recompense for all the unnecessary slaughter that has been forced upon us.

I support the motion and the amendment, although we should be thinking about sending deputations to Ministers.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment. We may feel at a later stage that we have to turn the screws, so to speak, on Ministers. Then, perhaps, condemnation will be more appropriate.

Coming from a rural community and living in the countryside, surrounded by beef farmers, I am very aware of their current problems. I am a member of Ards Borough Council, which discussed this matter earlier in the week. We have been in touch with the Ulster Farmers' Union, which has sent information to all Members of the Forum. I hope they have had time to look at it.

Mr Dodds indicated the importance of agriculture to the province. We are all very aware that the farming industry is the number-one employer in Northern Ireland — and I am not talking just about jobs on the farms. Here, farms are small, and usually family units. More often than not, difficulties in the industry will have a greater impact on the community as a whole and will be more acute than in other places. Difficulties will also arise in the large manufacturing industries that derive from farming — the processors of butter, milk, cheese, yoghurts, bacon, and so on.

Just after this scheme came into operation, I was in the Ards abattoir one day as cattle were being killed. They were brought up a big ramp and thrown into the back of a lorry, where a man was spraying them. The colour indicated that the beef was not for human consumption and, therefore, had to be taken away. In the Ards abattoir farmers are able to watch their cattle from the time they come through the gate until they are at the end of the production line. This time they were watching their cattle go into large skip lorries to be carried away. There were tears in their eyes at the realisation that those were perfectly good animals that they had reared. There was nothing wrong with them. They were perfect for human consumption. But instead, they were going for incineration or, first, to be refrigerated.

That is very difficult to understand. It is very wrong that a perfectly good beast should end up in that place.

One glimmer of hope is that, by and large, in the home market the beef industry is back where it was prior to the start of the BSE crisis. Butchers with whom I come in contact tell me that consumption is back to normal. This is an indication that people acknowledge that beef produced in the home market is now acceptable. It is absolutely OK. There is no problem with it. The ordinary housewife knows that and is buying beef at home. But this country, including Northern Ireland, does not depend solely upon the home market. It is very dependent on exports. One hears different figures. I am told that 80% of our cattle are exported, but Mr David Campbell has said that the figure is 55%. Anyway, it is a very large proportion of the beef that is produced here. There are many statistics. Some say that there is a problem, and others say that there is not. When you find out that vegetarians have died from BSE you say to yourself "My goodness, how could that be?" Questions have to be asked. Perhaps the problem lies elsewhere. Each of us has a different genetic make-up, and people react differently to various things.

11.45 am

In a shop one day I heard a lady telling a story about her daughter, who was a vegetarian. She was anaemic and went to her doctor to see if he could do something to make her feel better. He said "I suggest that you go home and have a bit of good beef — a good steak. That would be a start in making you feel better and helping your condition." She did that, and is no longer a vegetarian — a move in the right direction. We need many thousands of people to change in the same way.

Members are probably aware of the farming calendar — season following season. In farming life, we are now coming into a time when suckler men especially will be trying to get rid of their calves. Some Members have said that there will probably be a 50% drop from the normal price. I think it will be worse than that — that it will be very difficult just to get calves away. Numbers are increasing. Eighty thousand has been mentioned. Indeed, Mr Foster talked about 100,000. It is very important that something constructive be done to help the cull. This industry is worth £50 million to Northern Ireland. That is a fair indication of its importance.

The knock-on effect is important. The beef producers and others who work on the land will be affected, but so will people right down the line — housewives, those who work in shops, and many others. It is no exaggeration to say that we could see here something similar to the hungry 1930s. We are looking at "melt-down" in the farming industry come October or November this year, particularly in respect of beef. There is a very real possibility of a recession because of what is happening to the biggest individual production industry in the province. I feel particularly aggrieved that the Government have not grasped that. It is also important for the public to realize that damage to farming will affect the life of everybody.

I am particularly concerned about some of our Common Market allies, especially the Germans and the French. Britain was prepared to cull all the old cows at the beginning. That was a step in the right direction, and many felt that it would have been enough. But the

Europeans demanded that we kill whole herds. However, I do not believe that they are prepared to settle even for that. What they want is eradication of all British cattle so that there will be no more British exports of beef or milk products. Then there will be only the Germans and the French left to supply all the markets. They know that British beef and beef products are of such quality that they are acceptable to our European neighbours. What has been resorted to amounts almost to blackmail. I think it was Mr Gaston who said that if agreement were reached in Europe on other issues, the BSE crisis could be overlooked.

It is important that Forum Members express their support for British industry — the beef industry in particular. I suggest that if beef is on the menu at lunch-time today we should all have it. And if they do not have enough, they should send out for more. We have to restore confidence. This goes even beyond the actual BSE crisis. Perception is important. We have to convince people that beef is safe.

I have mentioned the knock-on effects with regard to farm machinery, buildings, and so on. I know a farmer from Ballygowan who had the champion prize bull at Balmoral this year. He sells two or three bulls every year, and normally this is no problem as they are pedigree animals — the best of stock. He advertised about a month ago, but has not had one inquiry — not even a phone call from a prospective buyer. At present farmers have no money to spend and are wondering what to do. This will have a tragic effect on the whole industry — indeed the whole province.

Several Members have mentioned extra cold-storage facilities. If there is insufficient incineration capacity in the meantime, it is important to have the necessary cold storage. I understand that cold stores are almost full. What are we to do with all these 80,000 cattle? The situation is unbelievable. We must be seen to be doing our best and we must urge the Government to do whatever they can.

Separate status for Northern Ireland is one of the most important issues that have been talked about today. Indeed, it is one that the Ulster Farmers' Union is most anxious to see taken on board. Separate status would not affect our standing as a part of the United Kingdom. The Government realize that it is the only way to save the industry. Cutting back on the cull programme might be all very well in the rest of the United Kingdom, which is predominantly urban — and Government supporters in the shires might be convinced of its acceptability — but we in Northern Ireland have to look at the problem in the context of our particular circumstances. We need separate status and special treatment. Our whole economic future depends upon this industry.

I hope and pray that Members, the public and, in particular, the Government, who can do something to alleviate it, understand the seriousness of the problem.

The Chairman: Members will have noted Mr Shannon's recommended dish. I hope that it will not all be gone by the time I get there.

Mr Benson: I compliment Mr Dodds on this very fine motion, and Mr David Campbell on the proposed amendment.

It has been stated that agriculture is the most important industry in Northern Ireland, and I think we all agree. Owing to the BSE problem it is now going through a very serious stage. Many farmers, as has been stated, are close to bankruptcy. Many, expecting that some of their stock would be culled, went out and bought replacements. Now the slowness in the cull has left them with considerably more animals than they can afford to feed, especially when there is no obvious market for them. Firm action must be taken to ensure that the recommended cull takes place as soon as possible. The huge backlog in the over-30-months slaughter scheme must be eliminated before the end of October 1996, by whatever means.

It is essential that there be continued and additional funding to provide sufficient compensation for producers. We must not forget the serious effect on the livelihood of others, including butchers and some abattoir owners. They must all be helped financially. The problem is not of their making. Northern Ireland must be allowed to make progress towards lifting the world-wide beef export ban. That should happen when the province fulfils the conditions. We should not have to wait for the rest of the United Kingdom, where the problem appears to be much worse. In Northern Ireland, I think it is safe to say, BSE is now insignificant.

Mr Dodds expressed concern over reports that Douglas Hogg is permitting the import of beef over 30 months old from other countries. I am concerned that this beef, perhaps from North or South America, does not meet the high standards of our home-produced beef, particularly the American beef, which may be stuffed full of hormones. I seek assurance from the Minister that all imported beef is rigorously inspected.

I should like to refer to milk production. Dairy men must not be penalized for over-production resulting from the retention of extra cows. It is important that the Government take immediate action to deal with this serious problem.

I fully support the motion with the proposed amendment.

Ms McWilliams: The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, believe it or not, has a view on this motion, despite the fact that none of us are farmers. I myself come from a farming background — my parents are on the land — and I am glad that the Forum is expressing sympathy and concern for the plight of farmers, producers and all others whose jobs or businesses are affected. I agree with the Gentleman from the DUP who made a very strong point about the emotions that farmers must be experiencing at this time and about how their wives are helping them through the crisis. Someone from the Rural Development Network last night made the point that many of those women, probably for the first time, are forced to seek alternative employment in an effort to maintain the income of their families. Indeed, the income level will probably never be the same again.

We are concerned about the safety of food and the threat to public health. Indeed, we would like to broaden the debate beyond BSE to food safety generally. Why have consumers lost confidence? There have been a number of food scares in addition to BSE. We have heard about salmonella in chickens, patuline in apple juice and pesticides in cucumber and about the illegal use of clembutrol — otherwise known as angel-dust — in beef cattle. Indeed, in the last few days there has been concern over baby milk. Consumers just did not know whom to believe, and those of us who are mothers certainly had to be careful about

what to feed to our children. For instance, was it safe to give them hamburgers? There is often conflicting evidence and information, and even the scientists could not give us the correct information.

In such an atmosphere of uncertainty, people take no chances. Certainly I want safety in what I feed to my children. Because of BSE, people simply stopped giving their families beef. This was understandable and rational. They did not know whom to trust. Rightly or wrongly, consumers lost confidence in Government Departments. Because of the way in which issues had been dealt with, there was a strong feeling of distrust. Of all the sources of food-safety information and advice, Government Departments, unfortunately, are regarded as the least trustworthy. Much of the distrust arises from the fact, for example, that the Department of Agriculture is perceived as having the interests of the agriculture industry at heart, rather than those of consumers. Some Members would agree. Results from Government Departments led a majority of consumers to take action themselves.

Public health, in turn, has taken a backward step. If you are told that your health is going to be seriously affected by something you eat, you have no doubt about what you should do. So far as BSE is concerned, the debate now is not about public health but about limiting the damage to the beef and food industries, about levels of compensation to farmers and about Euro politics. The public are beginning to be concerned and to ask questions about their health. But this is not the first time public health has taken a step back. In 1993 Northern Ireland relaxed its strict poultry-hygiene regulations to bring them into line with those of Great Britain, against the advice of the then Chief Medical Officer. It appears that the food safety role of environmental health officers has been diluted.

12.00

Mr Poots: The relaxation in salmonella testing took place after five years of intensive testing on the laying flock. At the end of that time not one case of salmonella was discovered, and further testing was seen as unnecessary.

Ms McWilliams: The point I am making is that information must be got across to the public. If regulations are to be reduced, public confidence must be restored. Other Members know as well as I do how scared the public were of salmonella. There is now exactly the same concern about BSE. If we are going to make progress we have got to make sure that the public get information. There are ongoing problems despite all the action that has been taken. Real concern and potential problems remain. For example, we are still feeding chicken offal to chickens. Is this likely to become another major problem?

Mr Junkin: Poultry offal is not now being fed to chickens. That practice has been stopped for quite a few months.

Ms McWilliams: I am glad to hear it. Why was it still being fed to them until a few months ago? Last November the state veterinary service produced evidence that some slaughtering practices were not being observed and at the weekend the Institute of Environmental Health Officers expressed concern about the loopholes in the disposal regulations.

What, then, is needed to restore consumer confidence? First of all, trust. The overriding requirement is to restore consumer confidence in the safety of beef — in the safety of food generally — and a number of things need to be done. It is necessary to build trust, first, in Government Departments; secondly, in food safety policies; thirdly, in the way animals are reared and in the way food is processed and manufactured; and, finally, in the way food safety rules and regulations are monitored and enforced.

How are we to restore trust and confidence? Whether we like it or not, in the existing climate of mistrust and loss of consumer confidence, it is not sufficient to argue that the risk is small or negligible or that consumers are behaving irrationally. In this situation, perceptions are all-important, as we have heard today. Whatever the official view, food, in the eyes of consumers, is only as safe as they perceive it to be. Action is necessary to change perceptions. One way is to let consumers see for themselves that their interests are being taken into account. And we have a number of suggestions.

First, the primacy of public health in the roles of the Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment must be restored. The DHSS must be made better able to direct food-safety policy and practice. The Department of Health and Social Services should have primacy over the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment on all food-safety matters. It must have proper access to information and be able to operate food-safety policy. We need to look at all interdepartmental mechanisms.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept that in the past three years the British Government have initiated some 57 sets of health regulations to do with this crisis but that they have not had the effect that she claims is necessary? Does she accept that this argument has very little to do with public health or consumer confidence, and everything to do with a greedy Germany trying to take our export market?

Ms McWilliams: I wish that were the case, but I am afraid that, from where we sit, it does not seem to be. It has to do with Euro politics, but also with public confidence. We have to live in the real world. Why are people not out buying beef if it is not to do with public confidence? The Member has a right to ask if more regulations, or if the public are getting the right information about what the regulations were doing, would increase confidence.

The Department of Health is not taking the leading role that it should be taking with regard to the BSE crisis. We suggest that a separate Northern Ireland food-safety agency would help. Such a body would have several advantages. It would independently monitor and advise on food policies from a safety point of view; it would independently monitor and advise on animal husbandry and farm feeding practices; it would independently monitor and advise on food manufacturing and processing practices, and would monitor and advise on food-safety enforcement matters; it would advise on legislation and regulations; and it would have regard to any special Northern Ireland circumstances. Indeed, it would help to reassure consumers that their interests were being given proper consideration in the overall conduct of food policy.

So what would we like the Minister to do? Action must be taken, and must be seen to be taken, now. The Minister should set up an independent food-safety working party to consider in greater detail all the issues I have mentioned. It should take expert opinion, including the views of the Forum's Agriculture Committee, and come forward with specific recommendations. Given the councils' statutory remit in respect of food, we would be happy to participate in that. Being seen to be taking action would not only increase consumer confidence but, in the long run, help the food industry, which is further damaged each time there is a scare.

I support the motion.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I thank Mr Shannon for offering to buy us all a beef lunch. I look forward to that.

I have already welcomed the fact that we are having this debate. It is right that such an important subject should be given priority. I wish that Members from other parties were here to voice the needs of their constituents and to unite with us in a call that might contribute to better understanding of the problem and lead to at least a partial solution.

The BSE crisis affects the entire community economically, politically and, of course socially. There is no doubt that the greatest impact is on the rural community. Many Members with great expertise in agriculture have referred to the seriousness of the crisis for the rural community. My own office has had to deal with a never-ending line of farmers and people in related industries. They are under intolerable strain owing to something that need not have happened. The hand of support must go out from this Forum today. We must reach out to rural communities and say "We are with you in this crisis. We are going to give you as much support as possible. We will voice your needs. We will not stop until there is a solution for our premier industry."

The crisis is taking its toll on the health and well-being of many farmers. I am reminded of a recent report in the press. Even before this problem was brought to the public's attention, farmers were among those most likely to commit suicide. What must the loneliness be doing to that community? Just think about the stress and strain on farmers who cannot meet bills, through no fault of their own but because of an inept policy of a Government that does not know how to deal with the problem. Bankers and creditors are chasing hard-pressed producers for money they simply do not have. It would be interesting, and undoubtedly frightening, to make a study of the decline in the health of many farmers. The increased evidence of heart disease, suicide and other stress-related problems is a symptom of the BSE crisis, and it will get worse until a solution is found.

The facts of the beef-export ban speak for themselves. Northern Ireland is hit particularly hard, as well over 70% of all beef produced here is sold outside the province. The fight for status separate from that in the rest of the United Kingdom must go on, as the motion says. There are four reasons. First, the incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland compared to that in the rest of the United Kingdom is minimal. Of herds on the mainland, 34% have been infected by the disease, compared to only 3% in Northern Ireland. Some 160,000 cases have been recorded in Great Britain, whereas the figure for Northern Ireland is

considerably less than 2,000, although we have more than 10% of the beef herd of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, a major difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the Kingdom is that a full record is kept here. This means that all cattle are fully traceable in terms of background, health and contacts. We have one of the best systems in Europe — a model for all parts of the European Community.

Thirdly, Northern Ireland and Great Britain are separated by sea.

Fourthly, market outlets in Europe and beyond have made it clear that they are prepared to sell Northern Ireland beef but are prevented from doing so by political decisions of their Governments in the European Union. This is utterly unacceptable. The case for separate BSE status for Northern Ireland is unassailable. It has not been answered by the British Government or by anyone else in the European Union.

As I have said, the Government's strategy is inept, despite their boasting of a clear strategy. They recently published several documents on their policy for the eradication of BSE in the United Kingdom. They boast that they have introduced some 57 sets of regulations. These are panic measures, more to do with public relations than with the public good. Until we get a clear-minded, straightforward policy, which deals with the real issue rather than with side issues, the crisis will continue to grow. I hate to say so, but it is true. The policy of burning perfectly safe beef is a bureaucratic blunder which will cost United Kingdom taxpayers some £2.4 billion over the next three years.

The Government's handling of the BSE crisis is bewildering. So is the diverse impact of the problem, which is affecting all kinds of subsidiary industries. We have heard about many of these, including the hide industry, the butchery and haulage. All will be drastically affected.

12.15 pm

Many people have not grasped the enormity of the beef cull. This is the biggest slaughter ever seen, involving the incineration of some 3 million cattle throughout the United Kingdom. For some years the average person in Northern Ireland will be paying hundreds of pounds in additional taxes as a result of one of the greatest bureaucratic blunders in our history. Ironically, what is achieved will be the opposite of what was intended. Destroying 30-month-old cattle has nothing to do with creating consumer confidence, as several people have said. Scientific evidence suggests that 30-month-old cattle are less dangerous than those of 40 months. It is an arbitrary figure, but the cost of the policy is astounding.

We can see the hopeless disorganization of the scheme and the deplorable waste of public money. Prime Ulster beef will soon be in very short supply. There must be a total rethink. Of course, we in Northern Ireland are not unfamiliar with Tory Party blunders. We have had, for example, the agri-health mismanagement. And we all remember the salmonella scare, egged on by Edwina Currie. That had very little to do with public health. It had more to do with the loose talk of a Tory Minister. Where is she today? Thank goodness, she is out of government.

Now we have the BSE crisis, driven by a panic-stricken Government and a loose-talking Minister. Many people are asking what industrial sector is to be targeted next by this blundering Tory hit squad. The fact is that we need a clear-minded strategy. We are in a European beef war, and we had better realize it. Unfortunately, the Government do not appear to have either a contingency plan or even a strategy. They are fighting the war in the wrong theatre. They target their own industry, rather than take on the missiles of lies and innuendo fired at us by our so-called European partners. The "softly, softly" reactive policy will get us nowhere.

How can we win this beef war? Revelations in the recently published Oxford report on BSE explodes many myths. This is a welcome development. I hope that the Agriculture Committee will get the report and circulate it to all Forum Members. It should be well thumbed because of the material that it brings to the public's attention. Every step must be taken to rebuild consumer confidence by public attention on the basic fact that BSE is not a real crisis at all. The real crisis is the needless slaughter of British cattle. This will have little effect. Indeed, the problem will be eroded naturally by the year 2001.

We must take on those, including other nations in Europe, who are deliberately targeting our export industry. If it were the car industry, it would be the very same. The fact that it is beef is a mere detail. Britain must take Germany on. The wanton destruction of perfectly good British beef has been criticized. Now is the time for a much more pro-active Government campaign throughout Europe. If necessary, there should be more aggression against those nations that are against us.

The German Government have set themselves up as an authority on healthy consumer produce and an arbitrator on the sale of British beef throughout Europe. They do not deserve this role. They are usurping powers and status to which they are not entitled. The British Government should call upon the European Commission to challenge Germany for orchestrating a campaign against British beef for economic rather than health reasons. If Germany is not tackled now, it will develop its anti-British stance, seriously undermine every facet of our industry and jeopardize employment throughout the United Kingdom. Farmers too have a role to play in the beef war, as has the consumer.

I do not want to target any particular car manufacturer, but I have to say that anyone going to farms will see many German vehicles. What sort of crisis would there be in the German industry if farmers were to take those cars back and say "We are buying British?" If that stark message were to get through to German exporters, they would soon put pressure on their Government to go softly in the British beef war.

The British Government should invent a strategy to win this war. They had the beginnings of such strategy when they organized their "Say No to Europe" campaign in the European Commission. They put pressure on our Union partners, making them think about the BSE issue not in irrational terms but in terms of the economic implications for the whole of Europe. The Government ought to be trying to win this war. I quote from an editorial that appeared in the 'Daily Telegraph' about a month ago:

"The decision to suspend the policy of non-co-operation with the European Union was taken on the basis that other members would move to a progressive lifting of the export ban, uninfluenced by political or commercial considerations."

If our partners prove unwilling to keep their side of the bargain, that policy should be reversed. That is the way forward. Our Government should wait no longer. They should take Europe on and demonstrate that it cannot do without the United Kingdom. I hope that the ban will be lifted very soon.

I support the motion in its amended form.

Mr King: I shall not dwell on the facts and figures or the counter calculations that this most European of Euro-fiascos has dealt us. There are people in this Chamber better qualified than I to do so. I want simply to ask why family farms in the townlands between Antrim and Randalstown are facing ruin although they have produced nothing but prime Ulster beef. Why are service industries in my constituency facing a reduction of income akin to that confronting a mining village threatened with pit closure? Nothing but prime beef has ever been produced. It is very important to get over to the non-rural, non-agricultural section of the province the enormity of the problems facing us.

The beef-production business in Northern Ireland is worth £425 million. In a province of 1.5 million people the enormity of its collapse cannot be over-estimated. Livelihoods all over Northern Ireland — in Ballyclare, Londonderry, Fermanagh, Belfast — are threatened by the loss of income that could be the outcome of the great game now under way in the European Union. The world-wide ban on us was imposed by faceless beaurocrats, not at Stormont or Westminster level, but in Brussels, and it has absolutely no logical basis. Despite the fact that it is illogical, we are told that it could outlast the final days of the twentieth century. Will Europeans allow us to sell our beef across the world?

The smoke-screen which had made people unwilling to eat British beef, even in face of the recent Oxford study, which suggests that the problem could see itself out within five years without even a further cull, is shocking. There are European Governments prepared to sacrifice our farmers in an attempt to better their domestic beef industry. Cynically, German consumers are being told that if there is no County Antrim beef in their burgers, it is safe to spend their mighty Deutschmark on Westphalian rib roast. That is the reality. Livelihoods in Northern Ireland are being put at risk for domestic reasons in Europe — no logic, no medical reasons, no anything. We are being cynically manipulated to keep producers and consumers in countries far from here happy. Is that not the best way to destroy a very important industry in Northern Ireland?

Meanwhile, our traditional export markets, such as South Africa, are being lost for ever. There is a real danger that, far from being a blip in the fortunes of our beef producers, this crisis will mark the start of terminal decline for an industry worth £425 million.

If there are any sane people with their hands on levers of government listening — and I hope that there are — I implore them to act on the Ulster Farmers' Union's eight core demands. I implore them to unilaterally lift the ban on United Kingdom beef exports. I implore them to put a brake on the great proposed Florence cow massacre. Ministers cannot

be suffering from any new strain of Creutzfeld-Jakob disease. There have been no new cases of it in the past three months. There are only 12 sufferers in the entire United Kingdom. So far as I know, no member of the Cabinet has succumbed. Among the 12 cases, there is no proven link with our beef, yet we are facing the destruction of our most important industry. There is no proven scientific link with any aspect of beef production in Northern Ireland, or even the United Kingdom in general. Let those who are in charge catch themselves on before it is too late.

I have great pleasure in joining other Members in supporting the motion, and I urge the House as a whole to do so.

The meeting was suspended at 12.27 pm and resumed at 1.45 pm.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I have said every week that I will be brief, but this time I really mean it.

I support the motion and the amendment proposed by the Ulster Unionist Party. Most things that could be said have already been said, but I must say how impressed I was by the level of debate this morning. It gives the lie to those people who continually accuse the Forum of being nothing but sectarian.

I would like to refer to a few Members in particular. One could not have failed to be impressed by the speeches of Mr Dodds and Mr David Campbell, and the Women's Coalition reminded us of things that at times we do not particularly want to be reminded of. Of course, it would be wrong not to mention the wonderful contribution of Mr Ian Paisley Jnr. The speeches of all who took part were probably as good as I have ever heard, and that augurs well for the Forum.

I support the Ulster Farmers' Union in its endeavours to have this great wrong put right. The situation has been mishandled from the word go. I will not go into all the reasons, as these have been dealt with more than adequately. Belfast Members must support those in the rural areas whose livelihoods have been seriously affected. We must stand together because the plight in rural areas will have a great bearing on what happens to us in the city of Belfast.

I hope and pray that the banks will not be found wanting when the time comes. We hear a great deal about the bank that likes to say yes. I hope that all the banks will be saying yes. It is certain that they will be asked to do so. They should be prepared to take great risks. Sooner or later — we all hope and pray that it will be sooner — everyone will realize that this is a great wrong, the ban will be lifted, and Ulster beef will once again be exported to countries which — if the truth were known — would accept it tomorrow but for the European Union.

I cannot say how angry I am about a certain matter. Companies like McDonald's are opening everywhere. They come from America and promise jobs. Then they ignore British beef, including Ulster beef. What is the result? All the jobs that they brought are no good because of the unemployment caused by their cowardly actions. People talk about boycotts. I

have indicated that I am not in favour of boycotts, but I say to every housewife in Ulster that she should make her own hamburgers. Let McDonald's pay as they are making the farming community pay.

I pledge my support and that of my party to the farming community in its plight.

Mr Calvert: I congratulate Mr Dodds on his presentation of this very important motion. I also congratulate Mr David Campbell on his election as Chairman of the Forum's Agriculture Committee. Mr Campbell's great capabilities are known to me personally, and I wish him God's blessing as he seeks to help the farming industry and community.

As a humble farmer who lives in a less-favoured area, I know all about what this ban will mean in the weeks ahead for the beef industry in Northern Ireland. I was at Ballyclare mart last Monday. Quite early in the morning — just after 8 o'clock — the lines of trailers coming in indicated that farmers are beginning to realize that they must move their beef. I was told that in the previous weeks there was no difficulty at all, as there were very few cattle in the mart. This proves a point that has been made. The large number of cattle will drive prices down, and this will affect the farming community very seriously indeed.

BSE is the greatest tragedy to hit the farming community. It is an issue above party politics. When I look round the Forum and see the empty seats left by the SDLP and others in their boycott, I feel that these people are doing a great disservice to the people who elected them — many, I am sure, from farming communities who are looking for their support. This crisis affects everyone in Northern Ireland, and we, as elected representatives, must be seen to be giving all possible support to the hard-working farming community, who are facing great hardship.

I do not apologize for repeating some things that have been said by other Members. The situation is too serious for that. In recent weeks we have heard a lot from concerned residents' groups about the right to march. Hard-working farmers have a right to live and to provide for their families. But this right has been diminished because a muddled Government have not been strong enough to stand up to the Germans and their associates in Europe. The farmers in Northern Ireland can stand over their beef as being the best in the world. I call on the British Government to recognize that and to give us special status so that we can sell our beef abroad and prove to the world that our farmers are the best in Europe.

At a recent meeting of Lisburn Borough Council the Chief Veterinary Officer, Mr Martin, said that the beef industry, worth £650 million prior to 20 March 1996, came to a stop within one week. That shows the gravity of the situation. Farming, unlike other industries, does not have a 40-hour week. Farmers, especially those with suckler cows, have to work all hours. Cows do not calve to suit farmers, so a careful watch has to be kept on stock — sometimes between midnight and 8 o'clock in the morning. No time and a half or double time there. And many farmers are part-time. There is even more pressure on those who have to cope with an outside job and look after a farm. At this time of crisis they are thankful for a job to subsidize their farming activities.

Housewives have brought to my attention the fact that the big reduction in the price of beef that farmers are experiencing has not been passed on to the consumers. Why?

The huge backlog in the over-30-months cattle slaughter scheme must be eliminated before the end of October 1996, by whatever means. Approximately 60,000 cattle have been slaughtered, leaving a backlog of just under 100,000. A further 2,000 are entering the system every week. The current throughput of the scheme in Northern Ireland is approximately 4,000 per week. It will take about six months to clear the backlog. The problem is that many farmers have been waiting two or three months — sometimes more — to bring their cattle to the slaughterhouses. Who pays for the feeding? Who will do the extra work involved in looking after these cattle, coming into the winter months?

Under the scheme, farmers have to feed their registered cattle for up to three months, waiting their turn to take them to slaughter. This is totally unacceptable. Coming into winter, farmers will simply not have enough housing. Hence the urgent need to remove the export ban. Exports accounted for approximately 55% of the total volume of beef produced in the province. It is, therefore, imperative that they recommence at the earliest possible date. Northern Ireland's beef already fulfils a number of the requirements in the Florence Agreement to qualify for step-by-step lifting of the world-wide ban. In particular, we have an established and widely recognized identification and tracing system. The selective slaughter programme can be implemented here much more quickly than in Great Britain, as a much smaller number of cattle will be affected, and the targeted animals can be clearly and readily identified. It is widely accepted that our identification scheme is the best in the world — much better than Great Britain's. All our animals are known from birth to death, and there is absolutely no reason for not treating them as a special case.

The British Government must honour their commitment to fully compensate farmers for losses suffered through the cull. But even that will fall far short of the substantial market losses, ranging from £200 to £300 per animal, as was borne out in Ballyclare last Monday. Good animals are away below — sometimes £100 to £200 below — the market price. In the end, farmers are not getting money in to pay their bills. This is an extreme situation. Many beef producers face financial ruin. Unless additional financial resources are made available, many of them will qualify for social-security assistance. I understand that, in addition to its aid package for the beef sector, the European Union permits member states to provide matching funds. There is an urgent need for further and continued funding to provide sufficient compensation.

2.00 pm

It is important that the hill livestock compensatory allowance be increased substantially in the autumn review. There are many hill farmers in Northern Ireland, and if it were not for this money, I do not know what we would do. We would be bankrupt. In view of the hours that farmers have to work, it is justifiable to ask for a significant increase. Allowances were significantly reduced in both 1993 and 1994, and they have remained static since then. Without an appropriate increase, the future of producers will be severely jeopardised.

Abattoirs are working at approximately 100% above the accepted limit in an attempt to reduce the backlog. I am aware of the effect of the smell on my constituents who live close

to the plants. They have been very understanding of the farmers' problems, brought about by a Government lacking purpose in the fight against BSE.

I fully support the motion and hope that the Agriculture Committee will do everything possible to alleviate the severe problems facing farmers. All they are asking for is a fair deal — something that they are not getting at present. Account should be taken of the extra work involved as we go into the winter. There is great pressure on farmers and their families as they try to cope with this very serious crisis.

Mr Robert John White: It has all been said by Mr Calvert and other Members, but there are one or two things that I would like to say in support of the motion and the proposed amendment. This is not really the Government's fault — at least, not directly — but they do certainly need a push to help us get out of it.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is obviously German. As it must be in some way indigenous to Germany, one must ask what the Germans are doing with their beef. Actually, they eat a lot more pork.

The Government are aware of the farmers' plight. We just need to reinforce their awareness to make sure that they do something about it. The Farmers' Union is very active in this sphere, and we commend it for putting its own case.

The offending material is supposed to have been taken out of feed in 1989, but we heard a few months ago that some old feed was still in store. Apparently, some may have been used after 1989. It is the Government's fault if it was not taken completely out of circulation. In my youth, bone-meal was something you did not stand on the windward side of. And you did not get close to offal products — in any direction. If there was any shaking, you certainly did not breathe while in the vicinity. But there no longer seems to be such a requirement. Animal offal of any kind was something to be avoided. It was always dangerous, and putting it in the feed of herbivores seems totally contrary to nature.

The 30-month cattle that are now being killed should never have been fed this meal mixture. There can be very few cows in circulation that are more than eight years old — even seven years. If offal was indeed taken out of all feed in 1989, there should not be a cow that has ever eaten such a mixture. The feed in question has not been proved conclusively to be the cause of the disease. However, the indications are that taking it out of the chain will probably result in the eventual disappearance of BSE. It is now being said that this disease is akin to foot-and-mouth in that the ground is affected. It should be emphasised that it is the herd we are talking about. If there is evidence to the contrary, the farmer and the community need to know.

Thorough research is necessary. There should be no argument as to whether progeny inherit BSE. Currently, all that we have are hints. In Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe, and wherever else it occurs, this is the biggest problem facing mankind and "cowkind". I was rather disappointed that there was no beef on today's menu in the Dining Room. Chicken is fine, but — no harm to Mr Junkin — not even ostrich would compare with a slice or two, or three, of roast beef.

There is an immediate need for definite Government action to get the farmer and the community out of this crisis.

I support the motion and the proposed amendment.

The Chairman: I managed to get some delicious cold beef, but it was not quite what I led you all to believe we were going to have.

Mr Carrick: Speaking in support of the motion, I realize that the subject has been very well ventilated, and the critical issues correctly identified. However, I want to draw attention to a couple of cases that might help to focus attention on the gravity of the situation in which farmers find themselves.

I do agree that a healthy and vibrant agriculture industry is a vital element, a foundation block, of a successful economy. Agriculture in Northern Ireland was plunged into turmoil in March last with the advent of the BSE crisis. That sector of the economy continues to be devastated, and the industry dogged by uncertainty and lack of confidence.

Farmers and families are beleaguered. Many feel that they are victims of power politics being played out in the European Union. Not only are farmers suffering financially — many are on the verge of financial ruin — but the sheer burden of the BSE crisis is affecting the health and psychological well-being of themselves and their families. Distress, despair and depression in the farming community are adding mental breakdown to financial ruin. In addition to this disastrous effect, there is the adverse impact on the beef support industry and related ancillary services. Many small businesses in these areas are on the very verge of bankruptcy.

My first illustration is the case of a farmer outside Portadown. He operates a suckler cow herd on 35 hectares. This is his sole farming enterprise. The entire herd of 160 is flagged. He has 40 cattle aged 15 months, for which there is no market. There is a shortage of winter feed because he used his silage ground for grazing during the spring and summer. A backlog cull scheme for animals over 30 months is operating. His cash flow is nil, as is his profit expectation. Indeed, serious losses are anticipated. He applied for social-security benefit, but it was refused, and approaches to his bank manager have drawn an unsympathetic response. His young family have still to be fed. He has commitments in respect of bank borrowing for his business, a farm-house mortgage and hire-purchase debt. Given such a scenario, how could a farmer and his family survive? The Government must act immediately in the national interest to bring stability and confidence back into the agriculture sector, so that men like the one to whom I have just referred will not go under financially and — more seriously — will not be driven to suicide.

My second illustration relates to problems experienced in an ancillary industry — again a small business outside Portadown: an animal head de-boning enterprise. The BSE crisis precipitated the closure of the business. Twenty-two workers were made redundant. The proprietor was caught with upwards of £100,000 worth of products already processed and in transit. With the news of BSE, he is unlikely to be paid for this work. Therefore, he is unable to meet the redundancy costs. He would have no prospect of recommencing business

even if there were a BSE solution, since, under a Government prohibition, there is no market for processed animal heads. His house and lands are at risk as creditors press for payment.

I believe that these two examples illustrate the gravity of the problems that the agriculture industry is experiencing at this time. In supporting the motion I advocate separate status for Northern Ireland because of its special situation. And there ought to be exceptions to the policy of targeting aid at the essential links in the beef-supply chain. I urge the Forum to apply whatever pressure it can to encourage the Government to address this terrible situation.

Mr Empey: As was said earlier, this is not a problem just for Members representing rural constituencies. An industry of this significance has an impact on the urban dweller, not only as consumer but also as fellow citizen. Ancillary industries go far and wide, and everybody is affected. This has been acknowledged in the contributions of Members who represent urban areas. I want to say something about the ban that has not already been said. It will not necessarily be accepted by everybody, but it has to be said.

2.15 pm

Many Members want the ban lifted so that they can get back to business. I should like to inject a word of caution. Even if the ban were lifted tomorrow, there would be no market for the product and therefore no income for the farmer. But the Government would be off the hook. If the ban is lifted — and I hope that it will be — there should be a transitional scheme to cover the period when the market is being redeveloped. Otherwise the Government could wash their hands of the whole thing. The farmers would be left with no support from the state and no market for the product. So we have to tread with care. There must be a period of extensive work to rebuild the market. I understand that the Department of Agriculture is urgently seeking additional cold-storage capacity. Let us hope that there will be an announcement fairly soon.

This crisis should be treated in exactly the same way as any other natural disaster. It is a natural disaster to those who are directly affected, just as an earthquake or flooding would be. The Government displayed incompetence and adopted a penny-pinching attitude at the outset. If they had spent a few pounds at the very beginning, we would not be facing catastrophe. The cost would have been minimal compared to the financial millstone that people are carrying now. It is the old, old story, and it has been told on a number of occasions of the present Government. They are penny-wise and pound-foolish.

I do understand why the market price has not been used to try to create demand for the product. It is not any cheaper in the butcher's shop today than it was before 20 March. In order to build up the market, one must first cut the price.

There is no early solution to this problem. Every target that the Government have set has not been met. None of their promises has been fulfilled. And I cannot see any sign of change. Unless there are scientific developments, by way of direct testing of individual beasts to establish whether they have the disease, it is likely that we will be in the early years of the next century before this matter is resolved. Farmers are being fooled if they believe

talk to the contrary. Every promise made by Douglas Hogg has not been fulfilled. The Treasury has suddenly woken up to the cost of the whole thing and is in full retreat.

There has been speculation this week that the cull is to be terminated or drastically reduced. In the light of what we have heard from all sides of the Chamber today, we might wonder what on earth is going to happen here, with our dependence on exports. I sincerely hope that farmers will not be caught on the wrong side of a deadline. I am flagging this up now because I believe that the only way to meet cull quotas on time is to have a massive amount of cold-storage capacity. My concern is that the scheme may be terminated or drastically reduced at the very time our people are at their most vulnerable — that is, over the next six to eight weeks. The Government will have counted the cost and reckoned how much they could save by drawing a line. One Member made the point that he was taking cattle to market at the very time the ban was introduced and was therefore caught on the wrong side of the line. This could happen again. I see no sign of compassion — it is a matter of arithmetic.

I say to Mr David Campbell that it is essential for the Agriculture Committee to arrange an urgent meeting with the Minister to seek clarification of the consequences of a reduction in this scheme. Land bills are due in a few weeks, and additional animals will be coming into the queue. Current capacity in plants is far below what is required. Only a massive purchase of cold-storage space will deal with the backlog.

Mr Carrick gave the very sad example of an individual who, through no fault of his own, found every avenue closed. It is not often, in business, politics or anywhere else, that you discover that there is not a single option open to you. What should that man do? Should he allow the animals to starve to death in the fields? That is indeed how it will end.

We have a job to do today. Some people may argue that it is not directly related to peace, reconciliation and dialogue. In fact, very few things that politicians in this country could do to foster better relations would be more effective than coming together to try to solve this problem. I deeply regret that there is not the unity of purpose on the issue that there ought to be. I refer to absenteeism to make political points. We should all bury our political points when discussing this matter. If we cannot do it now, we will never do it. The Committee should quickly make our views known to the Minister and report back so that the matter will not just have been dropped when this debate has ended. We should persist in our questions and demands. We should keep up the pressure until we get some answers. As each week passes, the catastrophes get worse. But even if we get solutions — if bans are lifted and transitional arrangements put in place — there will be people who will never recover, just as there are people who still have not recovered from the effects of the salmonella issue of nearly a decade ago. No matter how it ends, there will be a trail of broken families, broken businesses and broken lives. We must pursue these matters urgently.

The Chairman: Among their papers, Members will have seen a letter from the Chief Executive of the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland, Mr David Rutledge. I was talking to him in similar vein. If you can't sell it, can you keep on doing it? That is what 20 years in the airline business taught me.

Mrs Parkes: I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this very important debate, which affects not just farmers but the entire community. I speak not as a farmer or a

farmer's wife, but as a consumer and a housewife and as someone who has close family ties with people who raise beef cattle and are dependent on that activity for their livelihood.

The BSE crisis is undoubtedly one of the worst economic disasters to hit the Northern Ireland farming community. It is having a major effect on our economy. Northern Irish beef is an excellent product. Its standard is among the highest in Europe. This needs to be emphasized. But the man or woman in the street has had to contend with conflicting information from Government bodies.

I must say to Mr Calvert and Mr Empey, both of whom talked about the price of beef, that, as a consumer, I find it strange that farmers get nothing for their cows but beef still costs so much in the shops. Perhaps something should be done about this.

As consumers, we must have confidence in the product. I think that the Northern Ireland public have been reassured about Ulster beef.

The Government must treat Northern Ireland as a special case, particularly as it can meet all the stringent requirements. Not only do we have full traceability of cattle and strict enforcement of health regulations in abattoirs, but we also have an extremely low incidence of BSE. The Government must stop penalising Northern Ireland because other areas of the United Kingdom have no such controls.

The crisis is further deepened by the backlog of cattle on farms. Given that winter will soon be upon us, urgent action is needed. Otherwise farmers will be unable to cope with feeding.

The situation will not be helped by the suggestion that the cull should be shelved or reduced. Surely anything that would help to lift or alleviate the ban on our meat should go ahead. The crisis is not only affecting the economy but also having a devastating effect on individual farmers. The immense pressure on many farming families is having a serious effect on their mental and physical health.

2.30 pm

My cousin farms in North Antrim. When, a few weeks ago, he took his cattle to the abattoir, it could not cope with the pressure. When he asked "What am I to do with them?", he was told "Well, you could take them home, shoot them yourself and bury them." This is the sort of pressure that farmers are put under. It is terrible to raise a cow from a calf and then be told to shoot it yourself. Those of us who represent people living in Belfast and other towns, do not fully understand what is happening to farmers. Perhaps the townspeople need to be told in no uncertain terms.

Pressure needs to be applied to the Government to ensure that they understand the serious impact of the crisis in Northern Ireland. More help is certainly needed to ease the financial difficulties that farmers find themselves in. I am happy to support the motion and the proposed amendment.

Mr Nesbitt: As several Members have indicated, little remains to be said.

I shall dwell on just a few points that have permeated the debate. I shall be looking for what will happen after all the representations have been made. Can we judge whether there has been progress?

One of the first things we need to look at is the need for clarity of guidance and direction by the Government. We need to be sure that Ministers are advocates in our best interests. That point was made this morning when Mr Dodds asked the representative of the Alliance Party whether certain issues would be raised. Are the Government advocates in our best interests? We heard first that there was no crisis, then that there was a crisis. We heard that animals were not to be culled, then that they were to be culled, and now that is being questioned. Indeed, news coming through from the European Union today raises other issues. We are talking about confidence. Is there confidence in those who govern? Without clarity of direction, there will be no progress.

But the Government need support, so I am looking also for confidence in the clarity and direction of scientific evidence and documentation. I know that scientists can disagree. These past few weeks it has seemed that they are like economists: if there are two of them in a room you will have at least three opinions. But Government inaction cannot be excused just because there is not enough scientific evidence. That must come forward. I am looking for confidence in the Government and confidence in the scientific community that is supporting them.

The third kind of confidence I look for — and it has been alluded to in this debate — is confidence in the market. Mr Empey, Mr Paisley Jnr and Ms McWilliams talked about whether this was a German conspiracy. Regardless of the rationale for where we find ourselves today, there is no confidence in the export market. Consumer demand is a funny thing. Many people will buy products at a price far in excess of the normal cost. They are prepared to pay an excessive price for a brand name. Equally, products, such as like Northern Ireland beef, can be excellent, but people will not buy them. So Mr Empey is perfectly correct when he asks "If this ban were removed tomorrow, who would buy the beef?" Theory says that price will clear any market, but in this case it would not provide sustenance for the farming community. Confidence must be restored, but we must be very careful about how it is managed. It must be restored progressively.

However, confidence in the Government, in the scientific community and in the market is not enough. Another thing I shall be looking for over the coming weeks is recognition. We will be making progress if there is recognition. Recognition of what? Recognition of the fact that we in Northern Ireland manage cattle production as well as anyone — whether beef cattle, dairy cows, drop calves or suckler herds. We have managed exceptionally well, but unfortunately that does not seem to be recognized. Until it is recognized, we may not make progress. Recognition will give confidence, and if the Government can provide direction we may begin to make progress.

Finally — and it is back to economics — the Government must demonstrate financial commitment to alleviation of the hardship in the agricultural sector. Many Members have referred to the extent of the hardship and to the knock-on effect on all and sundry — whether in urban or rural areas, whether young or old, whether farmers or people associated with

farming. They will all be affected. The Government need to demonstrate financial commitment to getting out of this situation.

I am not going to get into the overall debate. I have just tried to summarize how I perceive the problem and how it might be resolved. Are the Government giving clear direction? Is the scientific community giving clear support? Is confidence being restored in the market for beef? And is there recognition of Northern Ireland's special position with respect to the way we handle our meat industry? Are the Government prepared to make funds available to provide support to the agriculture community that so needs it? I wait and watch, and I shall form an opinion, as we all will.

Mr Gibson: I want to congratulate those in the political world who have given leadership in this crisis, including our three MEPs and our Members of Parliament, who have led the field in trying to mediate in the desperate circumstances that prevail. I also congratulate the Ulster housewife, who stood by, believed in and trusted the good work of the Ulster farmers. Without hesitation I support the six parts of the motion, as well as the proposed amendment.

I had the experience of watching some of our mutton being burnt at Cherbourg. I was in Germany recently and saw how Germans have developed an anti-British attitude. It is ethically and morally wrong for any nation to burn prime beef. It is disastrous for people to be forced to burn food that they have produced.

For six months, or more, before this disaster came upon us, in March, many of our so-called great partners in Europe, including Germany, France, Portugal and Southern Ireland, were sponsoring adverts in various Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Arab world. They advised against British beef. In other words, in Europe there has been a real conspiracy to tackle the primacy of British beef. Unfortunately for Europe — this was emphasized by Mr Empey — the credibility of other European Governments has been shown to be just as questionable as we have seen that of our own Government to be. The consumption of beef in Germany has dropped by 64%, confirming what we have heard about the European market. In France the decrease has been 52%, and Belgian housewives never believed their own Government and never had any confidence in their own beef industry. Therefore, even if the ban were removed, there would be little or no European market.

I congratulate Mr David Campbell on being elected Chairman of the Agriculture Committee. We all appreciate that it has an urgent and difficult, but most important, task to carry out.

All Members who represent rural areas are very well aware that the farmer's income lubricates the financial machinery of the rest of the economy. A quick glance at the statistics will show that the agriculture industry, worth £651 million, accounts for half our gross domestic product. The beef industry alone — £425 million — accounts for 32% of that. So we are talking not just about a crisis but about something that has accumulated to the level of a disaster. There are 15,000 people who work as farmers and 20,000 whose work has a direct connection with farming. Then there are the allied industries. If this were to happen in any other industry, it would be declared a disaster. The Government would recognize it as such, and effective action would be taken. As has been indicated, there is no confidence in the

research, for the simple reason that financial support for research was withdrawn in 1991. When there should have been active research in this field, the financial support was not available. There is therefore growing alarm at the conflicting evidence presented by various scientists — people who are normally noted for clinical objectivity.

There is no market, but the Northern Ireland Office and the Minister responsible are doing little to tackle the problem positively. We must promote the beef industry as it exists — not just in Europe, but elsewhere. We should diversify in terms of world markets. Surely there is enough ability and intelligence to consider how we could get ourselves out of this situation. If it were a motor car manufacturer, the model would certainly be changed. In agriculture you cannot do that so easily. But the farmers of Northern Ireland have been quick to adapt. Many have specialised and have shown that they can switch specialization. But this takes time and finance. The Committee must consider what guidance can be given to bring Northern Ireland's major industry out of what has developed into a disastrous situation.

2.45 pm

I congratulate all Members who have contributed today — in particular, Mr Dodds, Mr David Campbell and all those who have described personal experiences.

The county that I come from produces 55% of Northern Ireland's milk. A large number of the farmers in West Tyrone are small operators. Their income has to be kept rolling. They are now in a desperate plight because their financial reserves are depleted. They face important meetings with bank managers, shopkeepers and various other suppliers. Their situation is critical.

Livestock cannot be sold, and farmers are in a dilemma. No Ulsterman wants to destroy what he has reared and tended. There is a very human side to all of this. Farming is a very personal industry. The farmer takes his livestock seriously. This is not just our largest industry, but one that is handled with care on a 24-hour basis. People develop an intimate knowledge of all the workings of their farms. My heart goes out to them today, as it did during the summer when I could see a farmer struggling, hoping that someone at the other end of a phone line could give him guidance. But neither the Department of Agriculture nor those in the meat processing industry could hold out any hope.

I worry when I see a line of Land-Rovers at a meat factory. A cattle dealer can turn up with a large lorry full of animals, drive past them all, and have his produce processed. Someone will have to look into the inequality of such a situation. Why should anybody have a right to book cattle that he did not purchase, and why should there be default in the case of someone turning up with fewer cattle than he booked, allowing someone else to come in and top up? The equitable thing to do, if a person does not provide the number of cattle that he booked, would be to go down the queue. The Agriculture Committee must consider how such racketeering could be stopped, for it does no good for the Ulster farmer or the beef industry.

I support the motion unhesitatingly, and I wish God's blessing on the Agriculture Committee.

Mrs Steele: I commend those Members who have spoken. There have been very good speeches from all sides of the House. I regret that some sections of the community are not represented here today.

We have heard about the farmers, the economy and the consumers. I would like to say a few words about something that may have been touched on but not in great detail.

I live in a very rural area, surrounded by beef, dairy and sheep farmers and I want to put in a word for those who cannot speak for themselves — the animals. We are all rightly concerned about the future of the farming industry and about the cost to the economy if it should fail. But let us spare a thought for the animals — whether beef or dairy — carefully produced, reared and tended for a useful function, that are now to be culled. Thousands are to be condemned to death for no useful purpose — just a huge incineration of healthy animals. Surely that is morally wrong in a so-called Christian society.

We have other fears, with the culling backlog getting bigger by the week and winter coming on. As Mr Campbell warned very eloquently, shortage of feed will force farmers to face the horror of having either to starve their animal — which is not an option for any of them — or to shoot them in their yards. Is that not morally wrong? It is a disgraceful example of how we are being forced to treat the animal kingdom — God's creatures. We tamper with nature at our peril. We are all paying a heavy price for the sake of European political expediency and for man's greed and Government incompetence, both at Westminster and in Brussels.

I wish Godspeed to the Agricultural Committee and beg to support the motion and the proposed amendment.

Mr Eric Smyth: I support this proposal. Like many people, I feel that when you interfere with nature you get disaster. God created animals for man, and man has destroyed that which God gave. We listen to scientists as they speak with authority, but this has happened because of their advice.

I do not profess to know anything about farming, though I do enjoy a good steak, as my Ulster Unionist Colleague, Mr Browne, could confirm. He and I enjoyed a good steak last night in the City Hall.

Mr Browne: Several.

Mr Eric Smyth: We will not go into that.

I often wonder how so many butchers on the Shankill Road survive.

In saying that, I am certainly not suggesting that there should be any boycotting.

We should encourage the people of Northern Ireland to support the farmers. I have farming friends in Londonderry, Kilkeel and other places. I have stayed on a farm and learned a lot. It is good to have a wee bit of knowledge.

People have criticised this Forum, but I am proud to be here today. Here we are together, fighting on issues that concern people right across Northern Ireland. I am sorry that the Nationalist representatives are not here to stand with us on this great issue. Some people say that the Forum will do no good, that they see no purpose in it. But it does have a purpose. Those of us who are members of councils may have less opportunity than we have as Forum Members to put to the Government the views of the people we represent. The Forum, if used properly, could impress on the Government our concern about what is happening in this province.

Certain companies are boycotting Northern Ireland meat. We should be zooming in on them and telling them that they are not giving a great example by their fear that their businesses will go down. They are not taking care of farmers and those whose businesses will be destroyed if they are not supported.

Having done a wee bit of travelling in the world, I feel that Northern Ireland has been treated badly. This country is quick to impose Common Market regulations on health matters relating to the farming and food industries. When new rules are introduced we ensure that the industry acts right away to put them in place. When I was chairman of the environmental health committee I would go round different meat plants. I was surprised at the number of restrictions and how the council had to keep in line with Common Market rules. In various parts of Europe I have been surprised to see that principles laid down by the Common Market are not observed. For instance, Belfast City Council has just spent over £200,000 to upgrade playgrounds to Union standards, yet parks in Brussels are not half as good as ours.

That is only an illustration. What I am getting at is that the British Government seem to be against what the European Parliament is doing to Ulster and the rest of the United Kingdom, while other European countries, such as Germany, are using the situation to take over our markets. As Mr Empey has said, we must be very careful, for farmers could end up with no market.

Mr David Campbell, the Chairman of the new Committee, will be getting worried that the DUP is praising him. He will tell us that there will have to be an inquiry. But in praising the Ulster Unionists on this occasion, we are giving credit where credit is due.

It is about time the British Government took account of the feelings of the people in the United Kingdom. It seems to me that they are more concerned about what other countries are saying than about the fact that people here have been hurt — families and those who are going out of business.

I must agree with the Women's Coalition — and it is not often that I can say that. Our wives do the shopping. My wife says to me "You have to be careful what you're buying." The fear is there because of our children. I say "Love, don't worry about me. It's too late for me." But it is quite right to be careful for children. Indeed, schools are boycotting meat. The education authorities are not supporting the farming industry. This is wrong because it has been proved that our meat is 90% good.

I do not know where the press are today. They are usually here when I am saying the wrong things. I hope they will carry the message that we are united in support of farmers in opposition to any boycott of meat. We must do all that we can to keep farmers in business.

I am delighted that we are able to debate this matter. Discussion is one way of coping with frustration. We want to play a part in the running of our country. I believe that the Forum can do that. We may not have any power, but we do have a voice. The Government want us to debate. Well, that is what we are doing today. It has been a good debate, and I have learned something. It is hard to teach me, but I do learn some things, and I am glad to support the motion.

Mr Tom Robinson: How do you follow that? The only words Mr Eric Smyth left out are "No surrender".

We are coming towards the conclusion of this debate, and all the major points have been covered. I congratulate Mr Dodds and Mr David Campbell, who led off and I would like to take up some remarks made by other Members. I found myself actually agreeing with Mr Hugh Smyth when he said that the Government had mishandled the whole BSE crisis. There is clear evidence. It has been a disaster for the farming community. To them and to the wider community, we offer our sympathy. After the initial publicity had died down, the Government appeared to be sitting back and, for political or some other reasons, hoping that if they did nothing the issue would go away. Reg Empey hit the nail on the head when he said that it is not going to go away. It will be with us for a considerable time. Mr Campbell said that this was not the time for an inquest. I agree, but at some stage in the future there should be an inquest into the whole BSE crisis and how it came about.

3.00 pm

In recent years successive Governments have encouraged a cheap food policy, not just in the beef industry but in other areas of agriculture too. I agree with Ms McWilliams that there can be no cheap food policy. The consumer has the right to demand that the highest-quality foodstuffs be given to all farm animals. Of course, that means higher costs to the consumer.

Consumer confidence is coming back — there is no question about that — but it has been severely dented. Mr Empey mentioned the cost of beef in supermarkets. When this crisis began, one supermarket that I know reduced the price, and people were buying beef. Supermarkets need to reconsider their pricing policy. We must rebuild confidence in the product. The BSE crisis is not the fault of the farmers; rather, they are its victims. In recent years agriculture seems to have gone from one crisis to another. Mention has been made of the salmonella scare and of the illegal hormones being fed to cattle.

Although not directly related to the farming industry, the dumping of nuclear waste at sea is a matter of concern. People might wonder exactly what is safe to eat.

We all know that the quality of Northern Irish beef is much higher and the system of tracing cattle much more stringent than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Obviously, Northern Ireland should therefore have separate status. The farming community deserve our

support, and the Government have a duty to help them to resolve the problem. By and large, farmers in Northern Ireland are very law-abiding. They are not keen to be terribly militant. Perhaps they should emulate some of their more militant European counterparts, who, when they want to highlight a problem, often take their case on to the streets. Perhaps our farmers need to be more radical in order to draw attention to the present crisis. The sight of 1,000 cattle being driven up the lawns of Stormont would exercise the mind of Baroness Denton. It would certainly give the farmers publicity and highlight the crisis. But the farming industry in Northern Ireland is a pawn in a much larger political game. I hope that the Government will have the courage to take a stand against our European colleagues and support the farming industry.

I support the motion.

Mr McAlister: I support the motion, although I have some misgivings, with which I shall deal at the very end.

I congratulate Mr David Campbell on taking up the chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee, and I wish him every success. I also congratulate Mr Dodds on the excellent way he set the tone for this debate, and I look forward to the summing-up by Rev William McCrea.

Then I have condemnation for the SDLP, who are not here today. This problem goes right across the political divide, and SDLP Members would have served their community much better by being here. I hope that this message will go out to them, loud and clear — and not just in relation to this matter, as there will be other crises to whose solution they should be adding their weight.

Much has been said today. I do not want to go over all the points that have been made, but anyone speaking in a debate should question his qualifications. I am the son of a butcher. My father was in the meat trade all his life. I am old enough to remember going out with him at a time when many butchers bought the beef on the hoof. I have been involved, in one way or another, in the meat industry all those years. On Ards Borough Council, I represent a rural area, and I sit on the council's abattoir committee. We are one of only two boroughs that have an abattoir, so we know the cutting edge of this problem. Obviously I come into contact with many farmers.

Words fail me when I try to describe the distress out there. I am very fearful for farmers. I fear not just for their wealth but also for their health. If this problem is allowed to roll on into the dark days of winter there will be serious problems in the farming community. There already is a very high suicide rate amongst farmers in the United Kingdom. There are many reasons for this. A report on the subject was issued 18 months ago. If this situation is allowed to continue, things will get worse. I fear for people who feel so desperate, so much up against the wall, so much without hope, that they would take their own lives. I hope and pray that it will not happen.

Looking outside the farming community, I see a microcosm of what is happening. In the area where I have my business, there is a car dealership which supplies quite a number of four-wheel-drive vehicles. It has seen a big downturn in sales inquiries. The oil man is

fearful about what the winter is going to bring. He wonders if he will be paid for deliveries to farmers, or even if they will order oil when their backs are against the wall. Home heating is probably another such matter. In our business, orders have been cancelled or put on hold. There has been a big drop in inquiries from the rural community. Eventually every part of the economy is affected.

I want the message to go out loud and clear that I admire farmers for their resilience and their restraint, which have not been emphasized enough today. If this had happened in France the streets of Paris would have been littered with carcasses and burning beef. If the farmers in Northern Ireland had come out like farmers on the continent, Drumcree would have looked like a picnic. As we look back, it would be good to be able to put our finger on the problem, but we cannot. Even the scientists disagree about where it started. Science played a part in all this, as has been highlighted today. We have entered an area where nature is being tampered with. No matter how much protein you can extract, it is not natural to feed one animal to another. Scientists, whether in the feed industry or in Government research establishments had a part to play. There was not enough research. I hope that the Government have learnt a lesson, not just for the present but also for the future.

Mr David Campbell: It should be pointed out that farmers were not aware of what they were feeding to their animals. If when meat-and-bone meal was being used as an additive, you inquired about what was in the meal, you were told that there was so much barley, so much of this and so much of that. You were given to understand that the protein element consisted of, say, soya or fish oil, but it was a trade secret. Farmers, when they asked, were not advised that meat-and-bone meal was being used. As part of my degree course in general agriculture at Queen's, I spent a year studying animal nutrition. That is 10 years ago. I have talked to people I studied with, but we cannot recall ever being told exactly what constituted the protein supplements in feeds — what animals were being used for meat-and-bone meal. It should be made plain that what was fed to animals is regarded by farmers as unnatural. Had they known, they would not have used it.

Mr McAlister: Mr Campbell has pre-empted what I was going to say, though not in such a scientific way. Surely this arose because someone felt that it was a cheap way of putting protein into feed. Never mind the scientific background, never mind what the end product might create — it was a cheap way of providing protein. That is obviously what happened. If it had been more expensive, producers would not have gone down that avenue. Scientists, whether in the private sector or in Government service, bear some responsibility. I agree with Mr Campbell that farmers would not have bought the product if they had known. But they are well warned for the future.

3.15 pm

But there is a greater game being played here. It is bigger politically than we realize, and, of course, we are concerned about the amount of money involved, though it seems very small when you look at the game that Europe is playing — in particular, Germany. It seems that every day there is another hiccup, another hurdle. Indeed, at lunch-time it was announced that there is a threat of court action from the European Community. Who knows what delay that will cause?

I want to sum up by saying that, although I understand the rationale behind the amendment — it is difficult to condemn Baroness Denton and Douglas Hogg and then ask them to come along and speak to us — I agree with my Colleague Mr Morrow, who said that the Government are condemned already. They are guilty in this situation — guilty initially of not having the right feed safeguards; guilty in letting the situation go on too long; guilty in not addressing the problem and not putting enough effort, money and time into solving it; and guilty, even now, of procrastinating.

I agree with Mr Empey and other Members that we have a situation which, even if it were sorted out tomorrow, would leave what I would call the ongoing problem. We in Northern Ireland export 80% of our beef, and 20% is for home consumption. What happens in any scare situation? I remember that, even when I was a boy with my father, there were always downturns in the meat industry — maybe a good summer, then some food scare. A little bit of food poisoning would cause a slight dip for a week or two. But now there are people who are lost to the beef industry. They have decided that they will never eat beef. No matter what the Government or anyone else says, they are off beef for life. I think, though, that it is a small percentage. If 20% of our beef is for home consumption, and if even 10% of consumers do not ever go back to beef, we are talking about only 2% of the overall quantity.

The greater problem is going to be with the PR job in front of those who have to sell the 80% that we export. The Government have a responsibility here and I urge the Committee, when it meets whoever comes before it, to press the point that Ministers must not only address the problem we have now but also give a commitment that they will continue to support a new campaign financially and by whatever other means are necessary. There will have to be advertising. There will have to be a new PR campaign to win back those markets.

As I have said, I support the motion. The debate has been enlightening and encouraging, not just for the farming industry but also for the Forum, in view of what it was set up to do. Let me end by saying that I agree with my Colleague Mr Morrow that the Government have failed us in this situation.

Mr Hussey: I wish to speak briefly in support of the motion.

I am tempted to take "BSE" as meaning "bloody stupid Eurocrats". Actually, I withdraw that immediately, because it would be totally wrong. What we are facing are blatantly slanted bureaucrats, as evidenced from the beginning by the common agricultural policy, aimed, I believe, at diluting the efficient agriculture system of the United Kingdom, in favour of bolstering inefficient farming methods elsewhere in Europe.

Consider the reunified Germany, which presented major problems for the former West Germany, with a major part of the enlarged country having to deal with an agricultural community akin to that in a third-world state. They were seeking targets to gain money. I agree with those who have talked about tampering with nature. You cannot turn a herbivore into a carnivore. It is as simple as that. Tampering with nature produced what we now know as BSE, leading to the human equivalent. That gave European politicians an opportunity to attack a good agricultural market that they had targeted.

I challenge the rest of the world. I challenge them on their level of veterinary expertise, on their level of traceability and on the level of the commitment of their farmers to quality products. In respect of those three factors, there is no doubt that the farmers of Northern Ireland are unequalled.

Mr Shannon referred to the possibility of Europe seeking a complete cull. If they were to do so, where in the world could they send our farmers to get clean stock? There is a European country just on the other side of our border. Is somebody trying to tell me that its herds are clean? Are the herds in Europe clean? No way. It has been said that we in Northern Ireland have the cleanest herd in the world. I have no qualms whatsoever about saying so. If it were decided that the solution to the problem was to cull the entire British herd, where would we restock from? I say this: cull the rest of the world, and restock from the cleanest herd in the world — Northern Ireland's.

This condition is called by other names — the shakes, magnesium deficiency. The experts can tell me the rights and wrongs of that. They hide it. Perhaps because of the level of veterinary expertise in the United Kingdom, we cannot hide it. Are we the victims of our own success? That is perhaps the problem that we face.

Then there is the problem that Northern Ireland has had for many years — a democratic deficit. We are relying on the British Ministers in control of our Departments to handle this, but they are not handling it. Let us get back to local representation — true local representation. Let the case be fully put. Let the consumers be made aware. It has been referred to as consumer credibility. We know that we have the best beef in the world. We have got to let the rest of the world know. That will be done when we have true local representation.

I support the motion.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: I support the motion. I can safely say that the farmers' case has been well put, and many aspects of this whole crisis have been raised.

Looking at the background to the crisis, we note that for eight years Ministers insisted that there was no link between BSE and CJD. When they finally did make a statement, it was to say that the limit was only a probability. All this goes to show that science alone cannot give us absolute truth. The most that the scientist can say is "It is likely that". Now, that has serious ramifications, which are too often forgotten. Too many people, including politicians, put their faith in those with white coats, thinking that they have the answers, that if we but defer to them they will produce the solution.

Here is a case that has been manufactured and based on a flawed principle — rationale. It is true that steps must be taken to deal with the situation, but in what framework? What will be the rationale? The problem will not be solved by a reshuffle or by reorganization of Government Departments. Nobody will solve it by giving primacy to health and to consumers. It will not be dealt with by anyone playing politics or by the Euro-sceptic coward hoping to win an election. It is the height of folly to try to draw up schemes to deal with this crisis, divested of any framework.

It would be remiss of me to conclude without drawing attention to another aspect that has been mentioned once or twice but was not given full weight. In 1865 there was an outbreak of foot and mouth disease across the kingdom. A national figure — second only, perhaps, to Gladstone — in a speech about that disease, made a number of important comments that are relevant to us in the 20th century. I want to read some of them:

“There is a crisis among us, an evil that demands our serious attention, whether we like it or not. It has seized the nation by the throat, and will have a hearing.”

That evil was foot and mouth disease.

“There will be a loss of wealth for many people. The injury to private interests is almost too fearful to contemplate. The meat on the table, the milk and the butter that people use are all affected. This will reach every home and come home to all.”

I wish to draw attention to one or two things which, amidst the anxieties of the crisis now upon us, may have been lost. Many statistics have been trotted out today, and behind every one of them is a human tragedy. It would appear that in the midst of this crisis certain other factors are likely to be forgotten. Let the scientists, the physicians and others propound their theories of prevention and cure. I find no fault with one or another.

What is the cause of this plague? Why has it come? I answer: it has come upon us because of our national sins. In our sceptical age this may seem a ludicrous statement. It may seem that because we are in a sophisticated, scientific, technological age, if we but have the right piece of equipment, the right piece of machinery and the right policy, all our problems will be solved. But that has never proven to be the case. Today we are being told that this disease has been with us for a long time, that it will be dealt with here and there but cannot be eradicated. Why has it come? Because God has a controversy with us. To make money and die rich seems to be thought the highest of virtues and the greatest wisdom. But God has said that covetousness is idolatry. This is the finger of God.

The second national sin is hedonism — the love of pleasure. Never, surely, was there a time when people ran so greedily after excitement, amusement and gratification of their senses. The many are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. This is the finger of God.

The third national sin that is drawn to our attention as a result of this national calamity is neglect of the Lord's day.

The Chairman: Mr Kirkland, I am sorry to interrupt you, but the day is going on, and I'm not sure that this is totally relevant. Is it?

Rev Trevor Kirkland: It is very relevant, Sir. If we think that by mere politicking, introducing some scientific scheme, we will solve our national problem, we are totally mistaken, because every answer has a moral framework that will shape it.

3.30 pm

Here was a crisis identical to our crisis today, and here was a national figure — second only to the Prime Minister — standing before the nation and saying

"We must not forget the framework in which this problem occurs and must be solved."

This may be an apparent irrelevance to some, but there are those of us who believe that it is vital to the shaping of our answers. The speaker went on to say —

The Chairman: Is there much more of it?

Rev Trevor Kirkland: No.

The speaker went on to say

"This crisis has application to every person in our society. It is an age of hurry, bustle, restlessness and fast living. We would do well in our nation if we were to sit down and to think a little more and reflect a little more. Are we living too fast? Is our society too greedy? We are trying to keep calm in the midst of a crisis. Happy is the nation that begins to think about its crises."

I support the motion, but I do so while reminding every person that no answer can be produced without a moral framework, without application to the people in our generation. I trust that that message will go along with our having raised the crisis and emphasized the resulting human misery. People's attention must be drawn to this other factor, which is equally important.

Mr McFarland: It is late in the day, and I am conscious that most of the arguments have been fairly well thrashed out. However, there are a few comments that I would like to make.

We have in this crisis an interesting political juxtaposition, in which the British Government are preventing us from making common cause with the Irish Republic, in terms of gaining special status for Northern Ireland farmers. Politics aside, we have heard about German objections. The reality of the current situation is that the Germans are not going to change their mind. Having lived in Germany for some years, I can say that, as a nation, they are perhaps overly enthusiastic about what might be termed green issues. The entire nation is very conscious of green issues. These include their food, and they see the BSE crisis and our efforts to export beef as a threat to their health. This is aside from their Government's jumping on the bandwagon and using the crisis to promote their home-grown food industry.

It is my view that the Germans will not have a change of mind and that this crisis will be with us for some time. It seems to me that there is only one way out of the disaster for our farmers — and it is a disaster. Although I now represent farmers in North Down, I was brought up in the western Sperrins. As Mr Gibson has said, all these farmers are facing total disaster. The destruction of the herd and adequate compensation may solve the problem this winter, but what will happen next year? How will the farmers earn their livelihood until the predicted clearance of BSE in the year 2001?

We have heard about the problems of restocking herds. I believe that the mass slaughter of clean animals should stop. The farmers should be compensated for this winter, and all our efforts should go into getting the ban lifted for Northern Ireland. Such a course of

action would allow us to export world-wide. At the moment the problem is the world-wide ban. Regardless of the Germans' continuing their boycott, charity begins at home.

I support the motion and the proposed amendment.

Mr Sammy Wilson: I will be as brief as possible, for two reasons. First, coming at the end of the debate, I suppose that, as other Members have said, most of what has to be said has been said. Secondly, coming from an urban constituency, I am perhaps at a disadvantage, inasmuch as a good deal of the terminology and many of the technicalities may go over the heads of people who simply eat beef, rather than grow it. Nevertheless, there are some things that need to be said.

There is no doubt that we could use this debate to lay blame. But, as has been said by many Members, the cause is very complex. The advice of scientists has been referred to. So has the desire of consumers. The people I represent want cheap beef, and this was part of the problem.

There may also have been carelessness on the part of farmers. Certainly there was a lack of knowledge because of the way in which the feed merchants, as we have been told, kept some ingredients quiet. Also, of course, there has been the problem of the Government. So I do not think we can really lay the blame.

The one thing that we must get across today is that this crisis has widely affected an area where agriculture and related industries are very important. And the one thing that we can all say with great certainty concerns the safeguards in relation to Ulster beef. I do not know a great deal about the computerized tracking systems, RFQAs or any of the other systems whose terms have been used today. However, there is very clear evidence that, while many herds in England — I think that the figure quoted was 37% — were affected, this applied, in any way, to only 5% in Northern Ireland. The history of our cattle, from birth to slaughter, is known.

We all have a part to play. I take Mr Empey's point: this crisis will not be easily swept aside. However, we as public representatives, the Government, the farmers and everybody else involved in the industry have a duty to put across the message that beef is safe. Now, I know what sometimes happens when assurances are given by politicians. I think of some of the assurances about safety. The person I have in mind is not here at the moment. Some fringe people have said that the Union is safe, and other such things. Such assurances are taken with a degree of scepticism because the facts do not back them up.

But there are facts in this situation which do back up the claim that is being made. And there is a big marketing job. But what I want to do at the end of the debate is look at the wider lessons to be learnt from the crisis. All the technicalities of what needs to be done, in terms of Government policy and in terms of the farming industry, are well covered in the motion and have been detailed by those who have immersed themselves in the problem. However, we can learn a number of political lessons. Several Members have touched on some of these.

The first political lesson is that we have a Government which, first of all, cannot make up its mind and, secondly, allows itself to be pushed around. We heard the Government say that there would be no killing of animals, then that there would be limited killing. Now it is back with even more limited killing. First, the feed was safe; then it was not safe. First, BSE could not be passed on; then maybe it could be passed on. We have had a Government that cannot make up its mind and has allowed itself to be pushed around by the bullies from Brussels.

I do not care what anybody says, the dimension here is not one of food safety. I take the point that has been made about green issues perhaps being bigger on the continent than they are here. But it is not a question of food safety. Look at the inconsistencies in the case from Brussels. Beef is banned in the rest of the world — Brussels is not the least afraid to interfere in the affairs of other countries — but not in Britain. If the Eurocrats really thought that there was a food-safety problem, they would use their dictatorial powers to have the ban made world-wide.

In fact, we have an even greater inconsistency. At the height of the crisis we were told by Jacques Santer and the German Agriculture Minister that, although they had banned exports of British beef, they were eating British beef. They banned it in the interests of safety, yet they said "We eat it ourselves." When you see that inconsistency you have to ask yourself "What was the real reason behind the actions by Brussels?" We have had it touched on here today. Brussels wanted to teach Britain a lesson. Unfortunately, we had a Government that had given all the signals: "Push us around and we will lie down." The unfortunate thing for the people of Northern Ireland is that they allow themselves to be pushed not only by Brussels but also by Dublin and Washington. They are pushed around by everybody who wants to do so. That is the first lesson that we learn from the crisis.

The second lesson concerns security, especially border security. I did a wee bit of research on this and was amazed to read that when the announcement was first made, the Dublin Government, worried about the effect it might have on their beef industry, took certain security action. A senior Garda source was quoted as having said that they were mounting an anti-cattle-smuggling operation in Donegal. He said that it was the biggest border security operation since 1967. Between 1967 and 1996 we have had border towns blown apart. We have had hundreds of people killed along the border. We have had the movement of IRA arms back and forward. Yet what provoked the biggest security operation along the border since 1967? Not the incursion of IRA terrorists into our country, but the threat to Dublin's beef. It is very clear that Dublin can take action when its cows are in danger, but not when people in Northern Ireland are in danger. That is the second lesson we can learn. Time and time again we were told by Dublin Ministers "We are doing everything we can. We are spending £90 million a year on border security." At the first sign of a beef crisis, resources are no problem. But they were a problem when it came to protecting people in Northern Ireland.

The third thing that we learn about is healthy scepticism about cross-border co-operation. If there is any area in which cross-border co-operation is strong, it is agricultural matters, especially the health of livestock. This has always been the case. I had figures and quotations, but time is going on. But at the first hint of an opportunity to hammer everything British, cross-border co-operation is forgotten. We had Dublin Ministers

protesting to Egypt, where ships were sitting out in the bay, unable to get in. They protested to Middle Eastern and North African countries that cows from the Irish Republic are different from Northern Ireland cows. They are British cows or they are Irish cows. It is a pity that those Ministers do not recognize the people here as British, rather than Irish, as has always been the case.

When I was doing some work on this matter I noticed a little quote in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. In 1967, when the last great crisis arose from foot-and-mouth disease, Dublin used Britain's calamity as its own opportunity. Neil Blaney, the Agriculture Minister at that time, stirred it up, just as Irish Ministers have stirred it up in Europe. What was his advice to people in the Irish Republic? This is the degree of hysterical reaction there was:

"Any letters that come from Britain, burn them."

He made this little addition:

"If there is money inside, dip it in disinfectant."

It has always been thus, has it not? That is the last lesson we can learn. We hear much about cross-border co-operation and how it would help relations between the two parts of the island. Let us never fool ourselves: cross-border co-operation will be employed as a political tool when it is useful to Dublin and dispensed with when it is not useful. This is a healthy warning.

As for the technicalities and the danger to the economy of Northern Ireland, the motion is commendable. The crisis will not easily go away. It will have to be worked at very hard, but I hope that the efforts of this body will complement all the other efforts to rid the country of the great problems that it has caused.

Rev William McCrea: We have listened with interest to this debate. I trust that the farming industry will find some encouragement in the fact that so many people, from different backgrounds, have expressed unanimous support for Ulster beef. The crisis in our beef industry is by far the worst in farming history. I would like to express appreciation to the Ulster Farmers' Union for the extensive briefing paper that it took time to send to individual Members, for which it deserves credit. It is an in-depth study of the matter, outlining action that the UFU believes the Government could consider, to take us out of the present situation.

I would also like to express appreciation to my Colleague Mr Dodds for his opening speech, which set the tone for the rest of the debate, and to join in the congratulations expressed to Mr David Campbell on his appointment as Chairman of this very important Committee.

I am a farmer's son, and I have a farm holding. But, regardless of background, we are unanimously of the opinion that we face a tremendous and terrible crisis and a major challenge to the prosperity of the people of Ulster. As this is our major industry, what happens in it affects not just itself but also related industries. My Colleague Mr Dodds mentioned many of these.

For a healthy economy, it is important that people be healthy. Therefore I have no problem whatsoever about supporting these related matters. We want the health of the people to be cared for. This aspect of the matter has been researched, and the research has proved that Northern Ireland is far ahead of not only the rest of the United Kingdom but the rest of Europe. What is rather annoying, as one listens to the whole debate across Europe, is that it ignores the fact that standards in Northern Ireland industry, including farming and meat production, are far ahead of those in the vast majority of the other countries in the European Union. We do not have to apologize to anyone. It is important to state — coining another phrase, perhaps — that Northern Ireland beef is simply the best.

This is not a short-term crisis; it is a situation that has rocked the major industry and backbone of the Ulster community, and we have got to take it most seriously.

I want to refer to a matter that my Friend Mr Wilson raised: the situation across the border. What we have is sheer hypocrisy. If people there want to talk about their cows, let us ask where Northern Ireland's old cows have been going for years — down to the Irish Republic, in lorry loads. In truth, the Republic's industry ought to be rotten to the core. But the problem is not called BSE; it is called JCB and is therefore dealt with in a different manner.

The situation is serious. Our farmers are facing a crisis not of their own making. As was rightly pointed out by Mr Campbell with regard to meat-and-bone meal additives, farmers were not given the relevant information, otherwise they certainly would not have been feeding their cattle that stuff. Actually, they were paying high prices for feed, wanting to give their animals the best. Northern Ireland farmers look after their animals. Their attitude is not "Oh, it is just an animal." They put great care and much affection into caring for their livestock.

When I travel the world — and I have travelled quite a bit — I ask myself, as I look at some of the scraggy animals in Europe and compare them with those in the fields of Northern Ireland, who has the major problem. Much of this comes from hypocrisy in the Irish Republic. I have read in the paper that, at the first whiff of a steak, they put 800 extra guards on the border. They stop the cows, but it was all right for the IRA and the murder gangs to cross the border at will. That is sheer hypocrisy. And Germany is saying "We did not win the war, but we will make you pay a price for winning." Of course, that aggravation has been going on. France too is anti-British when it comes to the farming industry.

We are facing a crisis, but thank goodness there is no lack of confidence in Ulster beef. I have heard much talk about loss of confidence. Well, confidence has come back to the Ulster table and the Ulster housewife. Ulster people are buying Ulster beef, and they deserve credit. They know that we have the best animals and the best meat industry in the world. That is why there is no lack of confidence.

I have heard people say in this debate that there is no market. Actually, that is not true. The Dutch would buy our beef if they were permitted to do so. They have said "Get the ban on Ulster beef lifted." They even tried to find a way round it because they believe that our produce is the best. People in Ulster have confidence in our beef, but so do people in

Holland. And we could gain the confidence of many other countries but for the wrangle going on in the European Union. What we are witnessing at the moment is the reason for the difficulties that we face.

I am not going to rehearse the problem much further, but I will say this: many farmers in Northern Ireland are deeply concerned.

Mr McKee: Owing to the lateness of the hour, many Members will not get to speak, so I thank the Gentleman for giving way.

He has talked about the farmers. Does he agree that farmers are the salt of the earth, the backbone of Ulster? Does he agree that they made Ulster what it is and that the Government have treated them very shabbily, being uncaring and unsympathetic to their plight?

The Member mentioned the Committee that has been set up. Does he agree that there is a great task ahead of it? It has its work cut out, and every Member should back it. I certainly wish the farmers well in their plight.

Rev William McCrea: I agree wholeheartedly that the entire Forum ought to give the Committee its support. There is a tremendous burden on it because the whole industry is in crisis. We have been fed a diet of rumour. It is disgraceful. We have been pawns in a wider game, and we are facing the collapse of a major industry and a vital part of the community.

Owing to the huge backlog of cattle in the United Kingdom awaiting slaughter under the over-30-months scheme and the fact that a considerable proportion of them are dairy cows still being milked, milk production is dramatically in excess of quota. It is important that the producers in Northern Ireland should not be penalized, for the over-production is not their fault. We have been led by a muddled policy. There has been total administrative instability in the tackling of this whole problem, and the farmers of Northern Ireland must not be made to pay.

The whole Forum has presented a strong case in support of the Ulster farmer. I am happy to support the motion and the proposed amendment. They are in the interests of the industry. We should be pressing Baroness Denton and Mr Hogg to take our views on board and act urgently in defence of the best beef in Europe and the world — Ulster beef. The case for special treatment has been made today.

Amendment made: Leave out the last paragraph, and add

“Furthermore, the Forum urges the Minister responsible for agriculture, Baroness Denton, and the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Douglas Hogg, to honour their commitment to safeguard the Northern Ireland beef industry.” — [Mr David Campbell]

Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum, appalled at the continuing crisis in Northern Ireland's beef industry, demands:

1. that Northern Ireland be recognized as having special status for BSE purposes so that the world-wide export ban can be lifted as quickly as possible;
2. that the backlog of cattle in the over-30-months cattle slaughter scheme be eliminated;
3. that BSE "flagging" should apply to herds, not holdings, and that a voluntary "buy-up" scheme be introduced for BSE "flagged" suckler herds;
4. that specific beef intervention for Northern Ireland be introduced;
5. that the Government provide fair and adequate compensation for beef producers, in keeping with previous commitments; and
6. that HLCAs be increased in the autumn review.

Furthermore, the Forum urges the Minister responsible for agriculture, Baroness Denton, and the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Douglas Hogg, to honour their commitment to safeguard the Northern Ireland beef industry.

The Chairman: Thank you very much for an excellent debate. Thirty-one people spoke today, and I even called them by their right names! I want to say one thing about the Farmers' Union. I have had two telephone calls from Brussels — one from Mr Greer McCollum, the other from Mr Walter Elliott. They were well aware of this debate because we invited the union to give us a briefing note, as we did in the case of others. They called from Brussels just to emphasize that they were very happy and proud that the Forum was going to debate this matter so urgently and to offer every possible help.

FORUM: BUSINESS

The Chairman: The debate next Friday will be about housing. The subject for the following week will be considered by the Business Committee on Thursday. It would be very helpful if Members were to give some suggestions to their Committee representatives.

Mr Peter Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. At the Business Committee it was agreed that a Notices of Motion paper would be provided and that any Member wishing to have a motion debated should submit it for consideration. Of course, it would be possible for more than one motion to be taken if the Committee were so to decide.

The Chairman: That is absolutely correct. We want to have a backlog — or a forward-log, if there is such a thing — of subjects to deal with. I shall make sure that a book is made available and is passed round the parties.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.00 pm.