

# NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM

Friday 27 September 1996

*The meeting was called to order at 10.00 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).*

## FORUM: RULES OF PROCEDURE

**The Chairman:** As Members have seen, the Secretary of State wrote to me on 19 September indicating that he is now content that the name of the Forum should be the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue and that in Rule 13 we may use the phrase "various traditions" rather than "communities".

The only outstanding matter on which he has asked us to yield is that we need a mechanism to determine whether any matter taken under Rule 13(1) may be deemed to command sufficient support. In my discussion with him I indicated that, while not exactly happy with this responsibility as Chairman, I could see the justification for having some mechanism in place and was therefore prepared to discharge the responsibility to the best of my ability. We shall have to see how it works in practice. It is really up to Members. In order that we may operate under our new Rules, may I have agreement to the reworded Rule 13(1)?

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** It is difficult for you, Mr Chairman, when not all the traditions are represented in the House. Must you refer only to the people in the House when you take your decision, or must you refer also to Members who do not attend? If the latter, the situation would be impossible for you. You would have to read minds. If, however, you had to deem whether a matter had support across the board, in terms of people attending the Forum, that would be reasonable.

**Mr Trimble:** It is significant that the legislation provides for a weighted majority of 75%, and it is absolutely clear that it is to be 75% of those voting. It was made very clear in the debate on the draft legislation that the figure referred to the persons who would be present. It was, indeed, to be an inducement to attend and a sanction on those boycotting.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** The UK Unionist Party concurs with the comments of Dr Paisley and Mr Trimble. If it is the will of the Forum to pass the Rules as they are now amended, I should like to congratulate you, Mr Chairman — and I am sure that I speak on behalf of all the House — on your sterling achievement when speaking to the Secretary of State. You seem to have some great powers of persuasion. One could be tempted to think that you might make a good chairman for the negotiations at Stormont.

**The Chairman:** Flattery will get you everywhere. Any further comments on this?

**Ms McWilliams:** Given the legislation, it seems to me that the Rule probably does ask us to make a judgement on whether any votes that we take in the Forum, particularly



when making affirmative decisions, would command cross-community support. That is going to be difficult for you, Mr Chairman. We will have to resolve the matter. Clearly, that is why the Secretary of State sent the Rule back in this form. Obviously we will not get agreement today. We have different opinions, but I concur with the Secretary of State's opinion.

**Mr Peter Robinson:** My understanding is that, in substance, this is the Rule that went to the Secretary of State. The only distinction is that it leaves you, Mr Chairman, to make the determination. What we now have takes into account the balance in the Forum resulting from the boycott of plenary meetings by the SDLP.

We are all delighted that members of the SDLP have recognized the worth of the Forum and have been coming to its Committees to give evidence. We would like to see that happening more often. Perhaps the more senior members will take a lead from their council representatives.

**Lord Alderdice:** We must try to be a little realistic. The purpose of this body, and of the talks process, is to try to reach agreement across the different traditions. For various reasons — some of them to do with the conduct of relations in the Forum and, I suspect, much to do with the conduct of relations in the community over the summer period — we have the current attendance situation. The Forum, unlike the 1982 Assembly, began with the participation of the SDLP. That was a tremendous start, but, because of events inside and particularly outside the Forum, we have lost that party's contribution.

We must realize that the Forum will be badly disabled if we do not have significant representation from the Nationalists. I and my Colleagues represent a particular strand of the community. Members on different sides represent others. Various strands are represented, but not Irish Nationalism in any significant way. That is a major obstacle to achieving the purposes for which the Forum was established. In the same way we have very considerable difficulties in the talks. That is very clear.

As I said before the events of Drumcree, if we do not take seriously the requirement to reach some kind of accommodation — and that is the responsibility not just of those who are represented here but also of those not represented here at present — there will be no real future for the Forum or for anything that might come from it, and there will be no future for the talks process. The future for Northern Ireland will be rather bleak as well.

I welcome the fact that Mr Robinson wants to see the SDLP return. So do I. But let us get real: there is no such prospect at present. Nor will there be, in my judgement, unless we make real progress on the substantive issues. Without the SDLP the future will not be good for the work that we do. This may not be very appetizing or appealing, but it is fact.

**Mr McMichael:** I am astounded by Lord Alderdice's comments. Of course, it is unfortunate that the SDLP Members have chosen to absent themselves from the Forum. All parties who are represented want to see them here and would join me in appealing to them to recognize the desire of the people of Northern Ireland to see progress in this body. They want to see it continuing to address issues of social concern which stretch right across the political and social spectrum. The SDLP should join in the very positive efforts to address issues that



are important to everyone. It is a major problem that they are not here, and it is an insult to Committee members, who have worked so hard over the past two weeks, looking at issues and taking evidence from people right across the community. As Mr Robinson has indicated, members of the SDLP who felt strongly about those issues did come and present evidence in spite of the boycott — for party political advantage — that the SDLP has taken as its position.

Lord Alderdice should reconsider what he has said. The people of Northern Ireland do not want to hear such negative comments. We have the prospect of moving forward in this process, both in the Forum and in the negotiations, as Lord Alderdice has mentioned. The morale of this country has taken a nose-dive, as it is, because of the events of the last few months. It is very unhelpful for politicians to make such comments at this time.

**Mr Eric Smyth:** Nor do I agree with Lord Alderdice. We all know the tactics of the SDLP Members. They do not want talks or genuine debate, and they do not want the Forum to work, because politicians work here, representing their constituencies on bread-and-butter issues. As my Colleague has stated, Committees have been set up, debate has taken place, and delegations have attended. I sat on the Education Committee on Wednesday, and we had people from the Roman Catholic community. They said they were dismayed that their representatives were not involved in the Committee to express concern at the proposal to reduce the number of boards from five to three.

In public life we meet all sorts, and I know from talking to different people that some folk are not happy with the SDLP's actions. We can all find reasons for not being in certain places. Here we have Drumcree thrown in our faces once again. Some of these people must have been on hard drugs or some such thing. This trouble has been going on for 27 years, and they are more concerned about Drumcree than about all the killing.

*10.15 am*

**The Chairman:** I am reluctant to interrupt you, Mr Smyth, but I must point out that we are sliding off the issue, which is a simple one. Please address that issue rather than Drumcree and the events of 25 years.

**Mr Eric Smyth:** I did not raise that subject; Lord Alderdice did. But I take your point, Mr Chairman.

We want a solution to Northern Ireland's problem, and we are here to debate. Indeed, we have done very well so far. We may not agree with each other, but at the end of the day some good decisions have been made. We have all worked hard for the people out there, and it is a shame that the SDLP Members, for their own political ends, have stayed away. Let us remember what they are up to: they want to destroy the Forum.

**The Chairman:** Please stick to the issue.

**Mr Eric Smyth:** I am speaking to the issue. We were talking about why the SDLP Members will not come back, and I am saying that it is because they do not want to make the Forum work, even though the majority of people, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, want



that. People want to get something settled for the good of all communities. SDLP Members are boycotting because they are not interested in the future of this country.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** It is vital that the message go out that all the parties here today want to see the SDLP in the Forum.

**The Chairman:** We have got that message already.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Well, I am reinforcing it, because I do not think we can say it often enough.

**The Chairman:** So far as I am concerned, you have said it once too often.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** I have spoken to Members from the SDLP who were formerly in the Forum, and I know that they are anxious to get back. That is especially true of some of the young Members. The problem lies with the leadership. It is clear that while John Hume continues his close involvement with the Sinn Fein/IRA Leader, Gerry Adams, we will not get them back. That is to be regretted. They have an important role to play, just like Members from the Women's Coalition and from Labour. We are all delighted that those groups have remained. I hope that that will continue.

**The Chairman:** I too hope so.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** It should be made clear that three of the deputations received by the Education Committee were led by SDLP representatives. That shows that there are SDLP people who are prepared to co-operate.

I chaired a meeting in Ballymena in which representatives from all the constitutional parties took part. They supported the Forum's Committee and the good work that it has already done. And reference was made to you, Sir. It was said that you had been able, as an emissary of the Forum, to get the Minister to put off his decision so that we could have an adequate discussion. He did not give us all the time we wanted, but we got some. The message needs to go out from the Forum — here I differ from Lord Alderdice — that boycotters cannot win. It is our duty to see that business goes on even if people boycott.

I have a very unfortunate constituency case at the moment. Last night the mother of a family was threatened by the IRA. If her husband does not get out of Portglenone before midnight on Sunday the whole family will be taken out of existence. That sort of thing has got to stop, and the boycotting has got to stop. Boycotting must not be allowed to pay. If the SDLP sees that it can wreck the Forum by staying away, it will have won. We must see that nobody wins by adopting the tactic of boycotting.

**The Chairman:** I am going to put a stark choice to you: either you trust me to do my best, or we continue in the limbo in which we have operated hitherto, with no Rules other than those that the Secretary of State laid down for us to begin with.

**Mr Casey:** I am not going to get into any of the haranguing that is going on. What the SDLP Members do is their business. It is up to them whether they come or stay away.



We in the Labour delegation have been welcomed and criticized here, so we are between the devil and the deep blue sea.

I am very pleased when people come here and make submissions about the important matters that affect Northern Ireland at this time. But the Forum must be serious about these matters. Success or failure will depend on the seriousness of its attitude. We must avoid haranguing and "them and us" talk. I claim to represent both sides of the community, as I am sure the Women's Coalition and the Alliance Party do.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** And the Ulster Unionists.

**Mr Casey:** Well, I forgot about you, Mr Chairman.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Not just the Chairman — all the party's Members.

**Mr Casey:** What yardstick will you, Mr Chairman, use when deciding whether decisions are likely to command support across the community? You have been given an awful responsibility.

**The Chairman:** It is a very good question. I will have to be guided very much by people's consciences.

When Members get up to speak, they should try to remember that we are here to do something for the general good of the province: to conduct dialogue and reach understanding — conceivably, consensus. We are a Forum for political dialogue, and so we should not be too prissy or too thin-skinned. The life of a politician — and I have become one over the last few weeks — is full of ups and downs and barbs and shafts, and anyone who cannot take those should not be here. But when a Member is making a speech, he should remember what we are here for — dialogue.

It is particularly noteworthy that in debates on subjects like BSE, boycotting — well, perhaps not so much boycotting — and housing, speeches have been measured and thoughtful. Members have gone to some trouble. I have helped as best I can by getting information from, for example, Monica Wilson. Nearly all Members speaking have done their best to make a sensible contribution on a matter that is important to all the people living in this great province. If we can approach future debates in this way — to answer Mr Casey's question — I will use my conscience. I will use my conscience, which is, I suppose, as strong as most people's, though no better than anybody else's, to see that what is transacted here will advance the cause of dialogue.

I have given you the choice of rejecting these Rules or accepting that I will do the best I can in the job that has been given to me. You know what you can do if I do not succeed. You can get rid of me if 75% of Members present and voting say "Out with him."

**Mr Peter Robinson:** I propose that we accept the draft Rules that are before us, subject only to the Business Committee's continuing to review their operation — in particular the operation of the one on voting.



**The Chairman:** Is that the feeling of you all?

*It was so decided.*

**The Chairman:** I am now going to operate under the new Rules, which require that we start a plenary session with two minutes during which time, if you are a praying person, you pray or, if you are a thinking person, you think, particularly about what your tongue may do during the day. So can we have now two minutes.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** Would it be appropriate during this moment of reflection, and out of respect for Members, for the media to turn off their cameras?

**The Chairman:** I am grateful to you, Mr Paisley, for raising the matter.

Is it the wish of the Forum that press cameras be turned off during the two minutes' silence?

*It was so decided.*

**Mr Peter Robinson:** May we be clear that in future only Members will be admitted to the Chamber until after the two minutes have elapsed?

**The Chairman:** Yes, but I am sure you will agree that we have a slightly different situation today.

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

**Mr Gibson:** The Education Committee received 21 delegations, 19 of which, including representatives from the church, business and education worlds, asked me to convey their good wishes to the Forum in all its deliberations.

10.30 am

**The Chairman:** Thank you, Mr Gibson. That is good to hear.



## HOUSING POLICY REVIEW

*Debate resumed on motion (20 September 1996):*

The Forum views with concern the Government's intention, as stated in the housing policy review 'The Way Ahead', to remove the provider role from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and to move the responsibility for further public-sector housing provision to mixed-funded housing association projects, leaving the Housing Executive with the diminished role of regulator. — [Mr Neeson]

**The Chairman:** I have been notified of the names of a number of Members who wish to speak, for which I thank the parties. I would like to devote one and a half hours to this subject, completing the debate at 12 o'clock.

**Mr Davis:** One thing we can all agree on this morning is that it is very good to have some refreshment in front of us, and even better to know that it comes from the borough of Lisburn.

Great advances have been made in all aspects of housing, and we should pay tribute to the Housing Executive, the housing associations and the many other interested groups and organizations that have helped to bring benefit to the people of the province. The progress and success of recent years are due, in my opinion, to the dedication and commitment of many people who work in housing.

In 1995 I had the pleasure of attending the International Federation for Housing and Planning congress in Belfast, the theme of which was "Accommodating differences". More than 700 delegates from around the world attended and talked about experiences in countries where housing issues are high on the political agenda. We heard about the social needs of minority groups, such as the elderly and people with disabilities, and the difficulties facing divided communities — the same types of problems as we have. It was particularly pleasing to hear the Housing Executive being held up as one of Northern Ireland's success stories because of its widespread cross-community support and international recognition, and also to hear of the recognition for the housing-association movement.

This document is about change, and as we look forward — to quote the Minister —

"to addressing housing needs in Northern Ireland into the next century",

we should reflect for a moment on what has been achieved. The Housing Executive was established in 1971 against the backdrop of increasing violence throughout the province. The effect upon housing conditions was devastating. Thousands of homes suffered damage from rioting and bombing. Families fled, in fear and despair, from areas torn by civil strife. In Belfast alone, in 1972, 14,000 homes were damaged. It was later estimated that between August 1969 and February 1973 some 60,000 people — about 12% of Belfast's population — were forced to leave their homes. That was described at the time as Europe's largest forced movement of population since the end of the Second World War.

There can be no doubt that the troubles exacted a heavy toll on the province's housing situation. Rent collectors were robbed of their moneys on an almost daily basis. By the beginning of 1973, squatters occupied more than 5,000 Housing Executive homes throughout



the province. Therefore, when the first housing-condition survey was carried out in 1974, it painted a very bleak picture. In overall terms it found that almost one fifth of all homes in Northern Ireland were in very poor condition and unfit for occupation. In Belfast the situation was even worse. One in four houses was found to require either demolition or major renovation. Northern Ireland was found to have the worst housing conditions in the United Kingdom, if not in Europe. It is against that background that we have witnessed a real and lasting impression upon the Northern Ireland housing landscape.

The Government declared housing to be their top social priority in 1981, and Housing Executive expenditure between 1983 and 1986, in Belfast alone, averaged nearly £100 million per year. What has been achieved is widely acknowledged, but we know that much more needs to be done, particularly in rural areas. Progress in the improvement of rural homes has not kept pace with achievements in urban areas. Despite claims by the Minister responsible for the Department of the Environment, there have been further reductions in Government funding.

The Minister states that there will be significant opportunities in the future for the Housing Executive, housing associations, the private sector and tenants to make an even greater contribution. I believe that that is so, and I am pleased that there is a continued commitment to retaining the Executive as the single comprehensive housing body and to developing its relationship with the housing-association movement. A unified waiting-list would make the business of applying much easier for those seeking accommodation or transfers. The enhanced involvement of genuine local community groups and their representatives, especially those in the more rural areas, will help to secure what people really want.

I am disappointed to note that it is still proposed to introduce compulsory competitive tendering, despite the lack of favourable evidence from the mainland. Last week several Members referred to CCT. It is most disappointing that a housing seminar entitled "CCT and Quality: a Practitioner's View on Quality in Housing Management", which was to be held in Malone House on Wednesday last by the Chartered Institute of Housing, had to be cancelled because of lack of interest.

The Minister has stated that it is imperative that public expenditure be targeted at those in most need. We have witnessed a reduction in the housing budget over recent years. The Forum should remind the Minister that the waiting-list at March 1995 was 23,355, and on the increase. At the same time, the total urgent-need figure stood at 11,196, with 10,068 people presenting themselves as homeless, and a total of 111,000 — 75.8% of Executive tenants — on housing benefit. There is a need for sustained financial resourcing to meet the challenge and build upon what has already been achieved. I am delighted that the Forum has this opportunity to make its voice heard and to contribute to the ongoing debate about the future role and direction of housing policy as it relates to Northern Ireland.

I support the proposed amendment.

**Mr Shannon:** I would like to endorse the proposal that has been put forward and to support the amendment.



The good work of the Housing Executive has been recognized, but it has been constrained by the financial conditions imposed by the Government. Dare I say that, as a result of these conditions, the Executive has been unable to meet all its obligations to the people of Northern Ireland? The provision of houses, whether by the Executive or by private housing associations, is a very important part of our everyday life. As Mr Davis has said, good housing contributes to a better lifestyle and gives tenants pride in their homes and surroundings. It would not be understating the case to say that poor or inferior housing can — indeed, sometimes does — lead to many social problems.

The needs of people are many, and houses must be brought up to a certain modern standard. They must be made attractive but also functional. The Executive has tried its best to achieve this, and in many places it has succeeded. The book we received last week — ‘20 years, 20 schemes, 75-95’ — gives an indication of the good work that the housing associations and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, especially, are doing and have done. No longer do they just build a house that gives a family two or three bedrooms, a kitchen, a toilet, and so on; they build a house that people can have pride in, with surroundings they can be proud of. It is important to give people pride and a better standing.

As I have said in other organizations, I am very concerned about the fact that in my council area of Ards there are many rural properties that have not received the attention they should have been given. Quite a few still have outside toilets — sometimes at the bottom of the garden. They have ancient electrical wiring, leaking windows, draughty doors and, in some cases, toilet-sized kitchens. In this day and age it is ludicrous to expect anyone to have a decent standard of living in a house like that. These problems need to be addressed. In many parts of the province, rural schemes are already 12 to 18 months behind schedule. It is annoying when a starting date is put back because of financial constraints imposed by the Government.

The greatest problem for the Executive over the last few years is that it has had to use most, or at least a large part, of its money to pay off loans and interest.

Last week we put Ballyhalbert on the map. It has not had any new-build for maybe 30 years. Perhaps the publicity will make the providers gee-up. But many other parts of my area have the same problems. There are long waiting lists, and they seem to get longer all the time. Demographic trends include population movement towards North Down, Ards and Lisburn.

**Mr Peter Robinson:** Castlereagh.

**Mr Shannon:** I thought that people were moving out of Castlereagh towards Ards.

I am very aware of the needs of those in the Ards area. There is an increasing demand for houses there, and I would like to see a larger new-build programme. We are told that the Executive would like to build 1,300 dwellings every year, but the numbers have been between 700 and 900. Provision is not keeping pace with demand. Even people on priority lists — A1s and A2s — have not received an offer, which is hard to understand. How on earth is the Executive going to address the situation of those further down?



I am sure that other Members could tell us about the situation in their areas. I know of young girls taking houses intended for just one person — old-age pensioners' houses or small bungalows with one bedroom. These dwellings were allocated at a time when nobody else wanted them. The girls then married and had children, and the houses are no longer suitable. The Executive awarded them priority status, yet after several months they have received no offer.

This issue must be addressed. Indeed, it will be when, as a councillor, I meet the Executive's management in Newtownards later this month. We have got to change the rules. We must make sure that people on priority lists get offers. A2s who have not had offers after, say, 12 or 18 months should be given A1 status.

*10.45 am*

I am a wee bit concerned about the movement from the Executive towards private housing associations. It is not that I am against private housing associations; I am just worried that when a constituent brings a problem to a councillor, it may be necessary to make two, three or four phone calls to associations, instead of just one to the local Executive office. The extra work involved is unnecessary. Why can't allocations be organized through one umbrella office?

I am also quite concerned about what happens when partners split up. One partner gets custody of the children, and the other has visitation rights. The latter may have a one-bedroom house or flat, and may find it impossible to have the children for visits. The Executive is unwilling to give some such people the priority that I believe they should have. I feel strongly about this. Something should be done about it. I intend to address the matter through the council, when the opportunity arises.

Unfortunately, new-build and renovation are not proceeding as they should be. Such schemes create jobs and, therefore, purchasing power, which has a positive knock-on effect in the community. Everyone benefits. A vibrant construction industry provides stability and encourages economic recovery.

Self-help schemes involving grant aid or other financial incentives are another means of improving housing and quality of life, but grants take too long to come through. An applicant may have to wait two and a half years, though the delay may be shorter for people in rural areas. The entire process can take three or three and a half years. That is intolerable. More money must be made available for this purpose. And the matter must be addressed very quickly, as delay leads to paralysis in the rural community. Contractors have to wait for their money longer than they should, and small firms employing no more than three or four people simply cannot afford that.

That better housing leads to better communities is a point that needs to be hammered home. I agree with what has been proposed. We all recognize the needs and good work of the Housing Executive, but we must ask the Government to meet their obligation by releasing moneys that are so necessary to improvement of the economy and people's lives.



**Mr Jim Rodgers:** During this debate I have heard a great deal about the great job the Housing Executive has done. As a representative of East Belfast, I have to take issue with such remarks. Anybody looking at the east of the city will see very clearly that the opposite has been the case. We have probably the worst public housing in Northern Ireland, and, despite what the Housing Executive has said, I have no doubt that for several years there has been a deliberate policy to deprive Belfast Protestants of public housing. I am not saying that members of the Roman Catholic community, or of the Chinese, Indian or any other community, should not get housing — they most certainly should. Where there is need, it must be met, but people have told me and other representatives that the Housing Executive has without doubt decided to build few, if any, houses in East Belfast. It may come as a surprise to Members that in this financial year it plans to build a total of 24 houses in the constituency — 24. No decision has been made for the next financial year, but there is talk of about 28 houses. The Ulster Unionist and DUP representatives have had several meetings with the Executive to press this point home, and it must respond in a more positive way.

I invite Members to go to the Newtownards, Albertbridge, Castlereagh and Woodstock Roads and see for themselves the conditions that people have to live in. I know that you, Mr Chairman, are a former Chairman and Chief Executive of the Housing Executive. We all hope that the problems will be addressed, albeit, perhaps, too late.

The allocation of houses is something that we must zoom in on. Far too many unmarried mothers are being given preferential treatment. Their so-called boyfriends use housing for Giro-drop purposes, and the Executive seems unable to do anything about it. One could say much the same of the Social Security Agency. Thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money are being wasted. Elected representatives, whether in the Forum, in Parliament or in councils, must put the pressure on to have this matter addressed. Young people today are so street-wise. They know every move when it comes to getting money from the Executive for, say, a new kitchen or a new heating system.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** It is all very well to blame young single parents. Does the Member realize that there is paralysis in our entire society? The people to whom he refers have a self-esteem problem, largely because the Government have failed to provide them with employment and because the education system has left a vast number of them without qualifications. Instead of targeting those people for abuse, we should try, as a Forum, to give them the esteem they need and encourage them to become part and parcel of the community.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** As one who works with young people, I know exactly what I am talking about. Perhaps nobody in the Forum has worked harder to help young people. But one can take them only so far, and I detest seeing people milking the system, which is what is happening. I will move heaven and hell to keep them out of trouble, to get them housing and to teach them the rights and wrongs of life. I have to admit that part of this society's problem is lack of parental control. That is why we have so much violence and so much vandalism and destruction. It all starts in the home.

The Executive spends staggering amounts of money on repairs because there are people who have no respect for the properties in which they live. They seem to get priority over those who care for their houses. I could take Members to a number of housing developments less than five years old that are like slums. Until we teach people to live



properly, there will be absolutely no point in giving them houses. It is taxpayers' money that is being wasted, and people are getting sick, sore and tired at what they see happening. Good areas are being pulled down because of the type of people to whom the Housing Executive is allocating houses. Some of the best areas in Belfast are getting undesirables. People may not like that word, but this is a fact of life that we will have to acknowledge. Undesirables go in and ruin everything that has been built up. The Executive, in conjunction with ourselves, must do something about it.

Another major problem that has not been touched on in this debate is racketeering and protection money. Many builders are encountering it. There are at least two sites in Belfast where a contractor walked off because he was being screwed into the ground for several thousand pounds. This applies not just to Republican paramilitaries but also to so-called Loyalist groups. The Forum must condemn this behaviour. People are being put out of business by those who come weekly or monthly for easy money for their organizations. If we are to get the houses that we want, we must ensure that the contractor can go on site, do the job and come away without being asked for money or having his equipment destroyed, as happens far too often. For obvious reasons, most contractors, just like the people who are currently being boycotted, do not want to go public. Perhaps this situation accounts for the fact that in some parts of Northern Ireland the Executive cannot deliver as quickly as it would like, and buildings are left unfinished. We have a role to play here.

I support the proposed amendment because there must be a twin-track approach. Most of the housing associations do a tremendous job, but there are one or two that do not look very kindly on public representatives. When we ring them up they treat us like dirt. Their attitude is "Who are you to ask about ...?" That must change. The Minister said that he welcomed the merging of housing associations, but I am not sure that that is the road to go down. We all know that mergers mean the loss of jobs. Well, that is not what we as public representatives are in business for. We want to see employment being created. And the Minister should give back the £10 million that he took from the housing budget in this financial year, as the reduction is causing major problems for the Executive and suffering for many people.

Mr Shannon talked about grants and delays. One of the reasons for the delays in providing grants is that the money is no longer in the system. The waiting-list for repairs is going to get longer and longer.

*11.00 am*

Often — all due respect for the two gentlemen sitting beside you, Mr Chairman — civil servants produce papers and reports during the holiday season. Malcolm Moss, the Minister responsible for housing, published his findings in July, when many people were on holiday. That could be deliberate policy to deprive members of the public and elected representatives of the opportunity to respond.

It may be too late for an amendment. I understand that this may go into operation within the next two months. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Minister will listen. Let him pay attention to the outcome of this debate. What we are suggesting is in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, and we want to see them getting the best possible deal.



Some areas of this province, I have to admit, have probably the best housing in Europe, but that does not apply to East Belfast or to Protestant districts in general. As one who tries to work across all communities, I hate to have to say that, but it is a fact.

I hope that the new director of the Housing Executive's Belfast region will respond to our concerns in a very positive way, so that in the not-too-distant future I can get up in the Forum, or wherever, and say "Yes, the Housing Executive has done a magnificent job for all the people of Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland."

**The Chairman:** I am sure you were not accusing either Nigel Carson or Murray Barnes of cunningly putting out the housing plan after Parliament went into recess. I will have to plead not guilty on their behalf.

**Mr McKee:** Much has been said about this issue, and some very good points have been made. I too support the motion.

I congratulate the housing associations. In my area, organizations such as the Fold, the Royal British Legion and Laharna, which cater mainly for the elderly and the disabled, do an excellent job. They have given satisfaction to many of their tenants, and for that achievement we should pay tribute to them.

The Housing Executive has done some good work in Northern Ireland over the years. I agree with much of what Mr Rodgers said. He was speaking about his own constituency, but every area has its tale. Over the years, I have been very critical of the Executive. I have had many conflicts with it, but after some 24 years on a council, one begins to realize what a mammoth task it has.

I would like to pay tribute to you, Mr Chairman, for the work you did during your period as chief of the Housing Executive. We did not always see eye to eye in the council chamber when we were both members of the Housing Council. We locked horns on many occasions. I have no regrets about having stated my views, but I would like to point out that on one occasion I was proven wrong. A plan that you, Sir, had instituted for the redevelopment of the Tullygarley area of Larne had caused quite lengthy debate and some upset in the town. Residents' groups had been formed, and all sorts of action had been threatened. When the development came to fruition and we saw the excellent job that had been done at Tullygarley and at Larne Harbour, we realized we that we had been wrong and that the Housing Executive had got it right. Sometimes we do not have all the wisdom that we think we have.

I praise you for the job you did as chief executive, particularly through the long, difficult years. Mr Davis has mentioned the IRA bombings and murder, the death and destruction. Every bomb took its toll on the Executive's budget. Money has been taken away from it, and it has not been able to do all that it would have liked to do. In the Larne area, much still needs to be done, but a start has been made. Some good work has been done, particularly in the renovation of homes. People have been provided with new fitted kitchens, central heating and new bathrooms. That is good. When we started in the council 24 years ago, there were dwellings with dry toilets. Thank goodness that situation does not now exist in the town, or if it does, it is on a minimal scale.



However, more needs to be done, particularly with regard to grants. More money needs to be made available. We should get back to the days when grants were first made. A young couple would buy their home — perhaps a terraced house — and upgrade it. They could not afford anything more luxurious as a first home. But things have changed, and people often have a long wait for a grant. The system needs to be speeded up. I hope that more houses can be built in the Larne area. They are certainly needed. The waiting-list is going down, but it still exists. I would like to see an improvement.

The Housing Executive has failed in the rural areas. My Colleague Mr Tom Robinson mentioned this last week, but it is worth repeating. And it was a hobby-horse of yours, Mr Chairman. You promised that if a list were forwarded, the Housing Executive would consider it. But who would consider putting his name on a list if he knew that there was no hope of a house in the area? The Executive should pay more attention to the rural areas, bearing in mind that young people have to move into the towns. The churches are affected, and so are the schools.

**Mr Shannon:** The Member would probably agree that part of the problem arises from the fact that people who were born, brought up and married in a rural area cannot get a house locally. The Executive has been unable to address this problem to the satisfaction of the people. Such things must be taken on board. The Member has probably come across examples in his area. I certainly have in mine. It is one of the things that especially concern me.

**Mr McKee:** I maintain that the Housing Executive's powers should be increased, rather than reduced. It has not got everything right, but, warts and all, it has done a pretty good job and deserves the support of every Member.

Last week there was an attack on the DUP by Mr Hugh Smyth. He was very unkind in his remarks, and he blew his own trumpet.

**The Chairman:** Are we talking about housing now, Mr McKee?

**Mr McKee:** We are indeed, Mr Chairman. You allowed him to speak, so I should be allowed to reply.

He blew his own trumpet and set himself up as some sort of Mother Teresa of the Shankill. He did a great disservice to those DUP councillors who have represented the Shankill Road and Belfast as a whole over the years. He did not mention Councillor Proctor, who was the leader of the DUP group on the council at that time. Other councillors, such as Mrs Paisley, did a good job. Then there was Johnny McQuade, who was the MP for the area and was renowned as a man of the people.

Mr Smyth should think before he speaks and should look around him at times. He described the DUP as a one-man band. I do not accept that. In the Forum today there are 24 Members elected by the people. So the DUP is more than a one-man band: it is a party of the people and for the people.



Mr Smyth also spoke about people leading parades down the Shankill Road and then forgetting about it. I certainly reject that. No doubt he was taking a swipe at the Leader of the party to which I belong. Mr Smyth will never be able to fill Dr Paisley's boots. He will never be able to hold the position that the DUP Leader has long held. But I am sure that Dr Paisley will not get too upset at such unfair criticism. When God made him he gave him broad shoulders.

**The Chairman:** You have carried on your shoulders quite a number of things in addition to housing, but, in view of the nice things you have said about me, I feel slightly forgiving towards you.

**Mr McKee:** Mr Smyth was allowed to make that unwarranted, uncalled-for attack, and it is only right that we should be allowed to reply and reject his criticism. Blowing your own trumpet does not always reflect well on you; it is far better that somebody should blow a trumpet for you. The electorate did not blow a trumpet for him Mr Smyth; they blew it for the DUP.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** This is certainly an important debate. It is good to have a fresh look at housing. I have had a number of problems with the debate so far. I listened carefully last week, and I have taken time to read the various speeches.

Several assumptions have been made throughout. The first is that every person should have a house. As an absolute principle, I reject that. Every person does not have a right to a house. What about drug dealers and drug pushers? What about terrorists and their spokesmen? Perhaps their houses should be taken from them. The second assumption is that every house should be a decent home. In one of the submissions that I have read, the very first line says

"Without decent housing, people cannot fulfil their potential, and communities stagnate."

I reject that as absolute claptrap. I went into my library and looked at the shelf on biographies. The vast majority of the biographies of people who have left their mark in the world stated that they did not have a house, or had poor housing, for most of their life, yet they certainly fulfilled their potential.

One thinks of David Livingstone as an example. If one goes to where he was raised, one sees what is today a beautiful white painted building. It looks like a wonderful castle until one goes inside and discovers that on every floor a family had only two rooms to live in. But can we say that David Livingstone did not fulfil his potential? Of course he did. So it is absolute nonsense to perpetuate the notion that without a decent house, people are somehow lacking and unable to fulfil their potential. That is dialectical materialism at its most crass. I trust that we do not have a materialistic view of humanity.

11.15 am

The third assumption is that the Government ought to provide a house for every person. When did the Government arrogate to themselves this tremendous responsibility? It is not the Government's job to provide housing for all people. Indeed, it might be argued that



the Government should not be involved in housing at all. I would go further and say that the notion that the Government should be in the house-building business furthers a dependency culture — and the last thing we need is more and more people dependent on the state. If this motion is to have any value, if it is to have any worth, if it is to be somewhat radical, it should call for the abolition of the Housing Executive in total and for the Government to encourage housing associations, especially to cater for specialist needs.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member not accept that the Government have a responsibility to provide for those who are not able to provide for themselves — to give them a roof over their head and put food in their stomach and clothes on their back? He is saying the contrary.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** No, I do not agree that it is the state's responsibility to be involved in many of these areas. Giving people material things will not improve their lifestyle. Those who rattle on about how we should continue to create a dependency culture think that this is the way forward. It is not the way forward. It is a retrograde step. This motion, if it were to have any value, would go further and ask for the abolition of the Housing Executive.

**Mr Hugh Smyth** *rose*.

**The Chairman:** An intervention, Mr Smyth, has got to be accepted by the Member speaking, and I do not know that that is the case.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** If this motion is to have any bite it should call not only for the abolition of the Housing Executive but also for a better grant system for those who build houses. The qualification for grant aid should be reduced to allow building to continue. There ought to be more financial assistance for co-ownership, which should be encouraged as a very valuable means of getting young people to purchase their first house.

In this motion we are deliberately encouraging the Government to take on tasks that are not within the remit of any state that I know of. We are also deliberately failing to facilitate sons and daughters in rural areas who want planning permission for homes. If that were included, we would have a well-rounded and radical motion with none of the claptrap about getting the Government to do this or that, and lamenting that they are not doing the other. I suggest that the other is not the Government's job. On the contrary, they should be encouraging private initiative by supporting housing associations and facilitating those who want to improve their homes with a better grant system.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** The Member says I am jealous of that speech.

**The Chairman:** I do not think that that is in order, Mr Smyth.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** I apologize, Mr Chairman, but the speech was so rewarding, and I felt so moved by it. It said everything about housing that we have ever wanted to hear.

**The Chairman:** I am sure that Mr Kirkland is suitably gratified.



**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** After that interesting rant I am more than happy to speak on the future of public-sector housing in Northern Ireland. This is, of course, a vital issue. It affects all sections of the community. The Labour spokesman talked about the seriousness of the debate. It is indeed a serious debate. The fact that it was carried over from last week demonstrates the seriousness with which Members wish to address these issues. Arguments and disagreements in such a debate are healthy. We have a responsibility to draw important and relevant matters to the attention of the public.

Those who are boycotting the Forum like to promote their caring credentials. Some even suggest that they are of socialist persuasion. How is it that when we are debating such a desperate social issue they are not here to draw attention to the social needs of the people they represent? The fact that they do not use the platform provided by the Forum indicates clearly that they do not care about the social issues we are addressing.

Before dealing with the substance of the debate I want to back up some of the comments of my Colleague Mr McKee. I am glad that Mr Hugh Smyth is now in the Chamber, because I would hate to slag him off behind his back. Last week — I refer to pages 50 and 51 of the Record of Debates — he made disgraceful comments, which must be answered. He claimed that he had single-handedly fought the battle to preserve the Shankill. He forgets that he did not represent the Shankill at that time. He should read the report carefully.

But may I take this opportunity to pay tribute to some of the members of my party who were active at that stage. I am thinking of the late Johnny McQuade, MP for Woodvale in the old Stormont, and Des Boal, MP for the Shankill, who affiliated himself to my party.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** Not until I finish the point.

I am thinking also of other Belfast councillors affiliated to the DUP at that time. Mr Smyth mentioned Mr Proctor. He forgot to mention Margaret Miskimmin. He also forgot to mention that my mother represented another part of inner-city Belfast — Sandy Row. I am thinking too of a man who still lives in the Shankill and who played an incredible role highlighting the needs of the area — Senator Charlie McCullough.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** He was not a member of the DUP.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** He was a member of the DUP. In 1971 he crossed the Floor of the old Stormont. The dates that Mr Smyth mentioned last week are completely at variance with the facts. If he wishes to rewrite history, that is his prerogative, but he did a very bad job last week.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** Let me remind the Member of a few things.

Firstly, Johnny McQuade was not a member of the DUP at the time I referred to. Secondly, neither was Charlie McCullough. So the Member is misleading the House. Charlie McCullough was not even a member of Belfast City Council at that time, and neither



was Johnny McQuade. If the Member checks history, he will find that Johnny McQuade resigned his seat. It was that seat that I fought and won and have continued to fight, successfully, over the past seven elections.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** I will remind the Member of the dates that he mentioned.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** When I have answered the point that has just been made —

**A Member:** On a point of order, Mr Chairman. This is not a party political broadcast on behalf of the DUP.

**The Chairman:** I am coming round to that view myself. May we leave the misfortunes of the Shankill, whether rape or not, for the moment.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** I am more than happy to do that, but it is important that an alternative viewpoint be put on the record. The version that we heard last week was incorrect.

They say that home is where the heart is. Perhaps it is, but the Government have torn the heart out of public housing and are doing a great disservice to those who want, and in many cases rely on, public housing. Many have fallen for the propaganda, pushed out by the Tory Government, that private ownership is the only way forward. That is a fallacy. A study of the statistics shows that the reason the Government are pushing private housing is that in the past year the number of Housing Executive new starts decreased by 40%. Private housing is being promoted because public housing is not available on the necessary scale. More important, house prices in Northern Ireland continue to rise. The average is £43,000, according to the most recent statistics produced by the Executive.

It is rather unfortunate that people think that private ownership is the only way forward. There is a need for public ownership. Even the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has bitten the bullet on this issue, promoting its own sale. Many senior managers whom I meet regularly see the eclipse of public housing on the horizon. As this motion states, the day when the Executive will become a regulator, and not a provider, is not that far away. Its 25th annual report is very quick to promote what I believe is a Tory agenda. It boasts about how everything is for sale. But this Tory glory of private ownership has, unfortunately, helped to alienate many vulnerable people.

I do not wish in any way to besmirch the good things that the Housing Executive has done — and there are many. I work with those people regularly. But it must be said that a section of the public is being starved of resources. The figure of £10 million has been denied. Imagine what could be done with £10 million in a new-build scheme. Unfortunately, we no longer have that.

The bare statistics — 67.8% of Northern Ireland housing is owner-occupied — give a false picture of how popular owner occupation is. The 25th annual report, right at the beginning, gives the mission statement. The Executive boasts — it has very noble aims —



that it wishes to meet the needs of the public and to promote high standards in new building and repairs. It says that it also promotes high standards of management and wishes to be the best. I am afraid that it has failed to live up to its promise of integrity.

There are more than 11,000 people in Northern Ireland with urgent housing need. The Housing Executive has, in my view, helped to create ghettos in many areas, accentuating social depravity and crime. Estates have been turned, by mismanagement, into what are unofficially called sin-bins, and people believed to be problem clients are put there. Many Members have made the important point that good tenants have been alienated by failure to implement the charter that tenants are encouraged to sign. People see their rights being flouted. The alienation of good tenants must be addressed seriously. Many people who keep the rules are penalized for doing so. If they want a modernized bathroom or kitchen, or if they need adequate modern heating or lighting, they are told dismissively to wait for a scheme. And they have to keep waiting. Yet they watch wreckers in other areas smash up their homes and then get refurbishment grants that they cannot get.

*11.30 am*

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Does the Member accept that many of those he has described as wreckers are young people, to whom I referred in my speech — teenagers, who seem to have nothing better to do?

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** In a few minutes I will point out who the wreckers are. Mr Rodgers is just trying to salvage some respect after the flippant comments he made this morning.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Will the Member give way again?

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** When I have answered the point I will give way. The Member should recognize that his comments were ageist, that not all problems in Northern Ireland society flow from young people. Nor do all problems flow from single-parent families. Some of the cases that come to me concern people who are married, people who are in stable relationships. There are even old people who create terrible problems for their neighbours. I do not want to go with Mr Rodgers down the road of arguing that it is all the fault of young people or of single parents. Let us recognize the problems, but let us not tar everybody with the same brush. Mr Rodgers unfairly targeted young people and single parents.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** My comments were not flippant. If you talk to the Executive or the police they will tell you that the vast majority of problems in housing arise, regrettably, from young people. Of course there are many good young people in this community — and thank God for them — but there is an element that is bringing the whole country down, and we must do something about it. Perhaps Mr Paisley thinks that I am referring to his age group when I talk about young people.

**The Chairman:** I think you are both young.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** There is no incentive to be a good tenant. A good-tenant points scheme — something that was mentioned last week in the debate — must be adopted by the



Housing Executive. Good tenants should be given priority with regard to allocation, refurbishment and new-build schemes. The point I am making is particularly true of rural areas. Conditions in rural housing are amongst the poorest in the United Kingdom. Indeed, even the Housing Executive knows that to be the case. It has identified the problem in every single report for the last 25 years. I believe, however, that it has failed to address the problem. The condition of rural housing is poor. There are many houses in rural areas that have never had a modernization scheme since they were built more than 40 years ago.

The picture I am painting must not be taken out of context or exaggerated. There are a very many good rural schemes, but it is important that we place on record the fact that our rural housing is amongst the worst in the United Kingdom. In 1991 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive produced a report called 'Rural Housing Policy', which enunciated seven key principles. I wish I had time to go through those principles and give examples, for it is my view that the Housing Executive has failed to live up to any of them. It would be a good thing for Members to study that report and its key principles and then look at the facts of delivery of service on the ground.

The upkeep of public homes was further diminished, in my view, when the direct-labour scheme was withdrawn. People had a service. They could go to the DLO and have some repairs carried out. That service is no longer available. Even minor things could be patched up so that a major scheme could be delayed for a short period, allowing houses in a particular area to be dealt with all in one go. The Housing Executive, when it lost the direct-labour organization, lost a very good and worthy service.

Some housing estates in rural areas have had major refurbishment. I am thinking in particular of two estates in my own constituency, which have been refurbished twice in the last 25 years. Yet I know of five other estates that have been in existence for 40 years but have never had a refurbishment scheme. Only this year, in November, will a scheme be undertaken in Crosshill View in Kells — the first in a very long period. Houses in Dervock have never been touched by the Housing Executive since they were erected. I think of Bushvale — another rural housing enclave which has a very poor electricity scheme, a very poor toilet system and the most backward of heating systems. The Executive should get its finger out and start to pump money into areas where it is needed.

With regard to homelessness, the Government's strategy has failed to deal with those in desperate need. There are many myths about homelessness. Some say that people make themselves homeless to jump the queue. Undoubtedly there are people on the fringes who do that, but homelessness is a real issue, and it has got to be dealt with. The reason we cannot deal with it adequately is that the Housing Executive is not building enough homes.

It is also said that young people leave home on a whim and declare themselves homeless. One or two people may do that, but there are some very good, genuine reasons. One of the myths about single parents is that young girls get pregnant deliberately to get a home. Maybe there are people who do that, but the vast bulk of single parents do not, and they deserve more credit.

Another myth is that homeless people should go out and get a job, that if they were to get a job they would not be homeless. Of course, there is no job provision in the areas of



many of these people. We have to be very careful not to target people who are in need, not to think that they are the trouble-makers or the cause of the problem. They are the symptom of a problem, which is that there has been a lack of provision.

I do not know how the Northern Ireland Housing Executive can boast of being the best, or even of striving to be the best, when it has already bitten the bullet on privatization. Public housing is a public good, but in many areas it is badly managed. If the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is to live up to its noble aims and its mission statement, it must be given more public resources to provide the kind of service that the public deserve and require.

Another problem is the administration of housing. This is a point that we debated a few weeks ago with regard to education. The administration of education is being changed for what I regard as purely political reasons. I believe that the Housing Executive too will soon be under threat and that the administration will soon be changed, for purely political reasons — to provide jobs and to move jobs from certain areas east of the Bann to areas west of the Bann to satisfy certain political parties that are not in the Forum. That administrative problem will have to be addressed. We have got to draw attention to it.

I am happy to support the motion and some of the changes that have been suggested. It is important that we have had an opportunity to debate this emotive issue, which touches all our hearts. Let us put the heart back into housing. Let us encourage the Government to give the Executive the money and other resources and, indeed, the policy required to build more homes.

**Lord Alderdice:** A number of folk have patted all of us on the back for the tremendous work we are doing here and for our thoughtful debates. I think we should be a little more self-critical. We should examine some of the things we have been saying, because, they just do not stack up.

We have had Committees looking at education and at health and social services. We have touched on BSE, we are now looking at housing, and we shall go on to other issues. The Government are not putting enough money into housing. We have heard that this morning. The Government are not putting enough money into health and social services. The Government are not putting enough money into education. The Government need to put more money into dealing with the problems that farmers have over the question of BSE.

In every one of these areas there is a problem of Government funding. My Colleagues and I have spoken out —

**Mr Snoddy:** Is this debate about housing or about the work of the Forum?

**Lord Alderdice:** Perhaps if the Member sits down and listens, he will hear.

**The Chairman:** Are you going to come to housing now?

**Mr Snoddy:** Perhaps the Member could get to the point.



**Lord Alderdice:** I will get to the point. The point is that what is coming from the DUP is completely incoherent drivel. It is not a one-man party. It is not a one-policy party. It is not even a one-policy party in respect of housing. One person says, as party Leader, that we have to protect the Housing Executive, and another member says "Let us abolish the Housing Executive."

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

**Lord Alderdice:** No. I want to point out the incoherent nonsense that is coming from the Gentleman's side in particular on the matter of housing.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr is right in saying that it is not legitimate simply to blame bored young people or all one-parent families or all unemployed people for the problems. There are difficulties in all those areas, but it is not fair simply to castigate the people concerned. I agree with Mr Paisley that we should be careful about cutting back on public-sector housing, because it is a major social need.

Where is the money for all those things going to come from? There are two possibilities. One is to increase taxation, and there is a case for that. It was discussed briefly at the Health Committee yesterday. We talked about certain possibilities. What would happen if the DUP were to get into power? *[Interruption]*. Sit down and listen for a minute.

**A Member:** On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

**Lord Alderdice:** It is not a point of order. I am criticizing the DUP for being proud of the fact that Castlereagh Council has cut the rates. The only taxation over which councillors have any power is rates, so what do they do? They cut them, and take pride in doing so.

**Mr Cedric Wilson** *rose*.

**Mr Chairman:** Mr Wilson, are you asking to intervene?

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** Yes, Mr Chairman.

**The Chairman:** Lord Alderdice, are you prepared to give way?

**Lord Alderdice:** No. It is not a point of order. We know perfectly well that Mr Wilson, as an ex-councillor in Castlereagh, wants to make a point on behalf of the DUP.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** I do not wish to do any such thing. Mr Alderdice is attempting to read my mind.

**Lord Alderdice:** That is very easy.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** He does not have his couch with him today. He is in a different role, so he need not try to analyse what I may or may not mean.



**Lord Alderdice:** This is quite clearly not a point of order.

**The Chairman:** I agree.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** I should like you, Mr Chairman, to rule whether Lord Alderdice's comments are acceptable for a debate in this Chamber. In the Business Committee yesterday we discussed your intention to rule very heavily on the use of unacceptable language.

**Lord Alderdice:** This is not a point of order. It is Mr Cedric Wilson, as usual, butting in.

**The Chairman:** Lord Alderdice, will you sit down for the moment and let us hear the expert on points of order, in the shape of Mr Cedric Wilson.

**Mr Alderdice:** At your request, Mr Chairman, I certainly will.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** I thank Lord Alderdice for giving way.

**Lord Alderdice:** I did not give way.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** Mr Chairman, I should simply like you to rule on whether the comments made by Lord Alderdice to Members on the other side of the Chamber — not members of my party — are acceptable to you as Chairman. I understand that you have a new hearing aid. You probably heard the comments. What is your ruling on them? Are they acceptable as being gentlemanly? Are they acceptable in this debating Chamber?

**The Chairman:** I have said already, and I now rule, that we have to accept that there is a certain cut and thrust in political dialogue. There are times when it is quite useful, for example, not to bother to mention my hearing aid. I should like Lord Alderdice to continue.

**Lord Alderdice:** My point — I make it again in case there are folk who have not been listening carefully — is that if we want to be taken seriously politically, and if there are people here who want to exercise real control and power in Northern Ireland, whether at local council level or at the level of a regional Government (and everybody knows perfectly well that that is the kind of thing I want to see), we have to be serious and we have to be for real. There is no point in saying "Yes, if we were in charge, with a certain limited budget and with probably no tax-raising powers" —

*11.45 am*

**The Chairman:** I shall have to stop you there. You told us you were going to get to housing in a moment. That moment has been extended.

**Lord Alderdice:** There are demands that more money should be put into housing, but there is no explanation of where the money is to come from, unless people come right out and say "Let's increase taxation" or say "Let's introduce some more private-sector funding into public-sector housing". If we simply say that the Housing Executive should be kept as it



is, we will not succeed. We all know that the Government will not pump more money into 100% funding for public-sector housing. That is the unfortunate reality. If we simply keep along this line, the Housing Executive will be reduced to the level of a regulator. And all the parties here have said that that is not what they want to see.

There is only one possibility (and it is not a high possibility): that we can intervene by saying to the Government "Look at the question of funding for housing. You have accepted that housing associations can raise some private funding." If we are saying that the big problem is that the Housing Executive requires 100% funding — and that is what the Government are saying — and that we do not want things to be run in that fashion, then, rather than simply make a plea to the Government, let us ask them to look at the question of funding, instead of reducing the Executive to mere regulator status. And I do not think that a Labour Government will operate any differently on a whole raft of issues, including housing.

If it has been accepted — and, regrettably, it has — that private funding has to come into the health service through PFI, as in the case of the railways, then one possible way of retaining the Housing Executive not merely as a regulator but as a proper facilitator of public-sector housing would be to accept that it has the capacity to bring in more private-sector funding, to lever in funds for housing. It is one area where serious private funding could come in. The Government are even looking at it in terms of housing for the defence forces. Real money might come in from way outside Northern Ireland — perhaps from outside these islands. What I am saying is that if we do not start to put forward realistic proposals, we will be dismissed as people who are useful for folk to make their complaints to but not useful in terms of what any Government, whether Conservative, Labour or other, will take seriously. That is why I ask Colleagues to seriously consider adding to the motion.

I support the motion, with the amendment proposed by Mr Speers, but we should also call on the Government to investigate the funding of public-sector housing. We need to maintain that sector, including increased provision for funding. Increased provision is needed in the private sector also. We might like it to be otherwise, but if we ignore the realities we simply will not be listened to.

*Amendment made:* Leave out all the words after "The Forum" and add

"notes the Government's intention, as stated in the housing policy review 'The Way Ahead', to remove the provider role from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and to move the responsibility for public-sector housing provision to a mixed-funding housing association project, leaving the Housing Executive with the diminished role of regulator, and calls upon the Government to withhold any decision as to the implementation of this policy until after the forthcoming general election." — [Mr Speers]

*Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

The Forum notes the Government's intention, as stated in the housing policy review 'The Way Ahead', to remove the provider role from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and to move the responsibility for public-sector housing provision to a mixed-funding housing association project, leaving the Housing Executive with the diminished role of regulator, and calls upon the Government to withhold any decision as to the implementation of this policy until after the forthcoming general election.



## DISABILITY

12.00

**The Chairman:** Before calling Mrs Parkes, who is the first Member on my list, I would like to say a couple of words about disability from my own experience. I was delighted to see that Monica Wilson, whom I had a lot to do with in my Housing Executive days, received an award from Lisburn Council two days ago for being an unsung heroine. That was absolutely right and proper. We are indebted to her and Disabled Action, which she runs, for producing the material in the briefing papers.

**Ms Parkes:** I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum calls for effective legislation to outlaw discrimination against people with disabilities. Furthermore, this Forum, while recognizing the progress that has been made, calls for the setting up of a body, with legal powers, to enforce such legislation and to champion the rights of people with disabilities.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this vitally important subject, and I am pleased that the Forum has given it the priority it deserves. However, it is disappointing that Members from other parties are not present to take part in the debate.

In today's society, people with disabilities face discrimination in many ways and in various areas of their daily lives. They have difficulties with access to the transport system and to buildings, as well as information needs. They are often restricted in their choice of housing and employment. Northern Ireland has a higher rate of disability than any other region of the United Kingdom. One in six of the population is affected in some way. Disability cuts across all divides. It is cross-community — it does not take any account of religion. It is cross-age — it affects both young and old. It is cross-class — it can hit the poorest and the richest. And it is cross-profession — it goes from skilled to unskilled.

In Northern Ireland — and I will try not to bore Members with too many statistics — 201,000 adults have a disability. Of these, 83,000 are men, and 118,000 are women. Approximately 14,600 children under 16 are affected. Of these, 8,600 are boys, and 6,000 are girls. And 3,000 children under five are disabled.

Disability affects people in many ways. For example, 109,000 have mobility difficulties, 88,000 have hearing problems, and there are 73,000 with personal-care disabilities. These figures give some indication of the extent of the difficulties faced by disabled people in Northern Ireland.

After considerable pressure from the disability movement and other interested parties, the Government were forced to introduce the Disability Discrimination Bill on 8 November last year. For the very first time we have an Act of Parliament which addresses the issues of discrimination against people with disabilities. Perhaps I could take a little time to consider some of the key issues with which it deals.

First, it defines a disabled person as one having a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. The definition of "disability" is based on the word "impairment",



which does not cover all disabilities. As I have said, disability affects many people in many different ways, and this will protect only those who can meet the definition laid down in the Act. This is unsatisfactory because it is not only people who have sensory, mental or physical difficulties who are likely to be discriminated against. A person who has recovered from cancer may well be treated in the same way when attempting to find employment — depending on the potential employer's attitude.

Secondly, the Act deals with employment. It makes it unlawful for employers with 20 or more staff to discriminate against employees with a disability. It requires employers to take reasonable measures to avoid discriminating against disabled people. Firms will have a duty to consider what changes or adjustments, within reason, they might make to the workplace, or to the way in which work is done, to accommodate a disabled person. Now, what constitutes a reasonable measure? What is within reason? Will firms be given enough financial support to ensure that these measures can be taken, or will they be hit with the full cost of making the necessary adjustments? Furthermore, the 3% quota — and I know that it is not of much use to people with a disability — and registration are to be abolished. There will therefore be no requirement for employers to take a person with disabilities.

A key deficiency that the Act fails to address is that the employment criteria do not apply to firms with fewer than 20 people. This is particularly relevant in Northern Ireland, where 98.2% of employers come into the category. The vast majority of employers here are entirely exempt. The exemption is totally unjustifiable, particularly as we have a higher rate of disability and a higher proportion of small firms. The Act deals only with direct discrimination. It is flawed in that it does nothing about indirect discrimination. It only requires employers to make reasonable efforts to cater for people with disabilities.

Thirdly, the Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful for people who provide goods, facilities or services to the public to discriminate against the disabled. It calls them service providers. The providers must treat disabled people in the same way as they treat other people. They must also take reasonable steps to reverse discrimination. What are reasonable steps? Again, this is open to interpretation.

The Act enables the Government to make regulations, known as accessibility regulations, to ensure that all new public-transport vehicles, such as buses, coaches and trains, are accessible. Clearly, this applies only to land-based new vehicles. Shipping and aviation are excluded. Originally, only buildings such as bus or train stations were covered by the Government's proposals, so a person with a disability could get into a bus or train station but could not get on the bus or train. The Bill was amended to give the Secretary of State power to lay down standards of accessibility for buses, trains and taxis. Since the Act will not become effective, in a practical sense, until November or December of this year, the timetable for areas of concern, such as transport, accessible premises and goods and services, means that there will probably be no effect for at least 10 years. This long-term strategy is certainly welcome, but it does nothing to meet the needs of people with disabilities in the short-to-medium term.

Fourthly, there is no provision in the Act for education in Northern Ireland. Many children are denied access to mainstream education and are obliged to be taught in special schools. Children with disabilities are segregated from an early age, and, while those parents



who wish to choose this method of education should be allowed to do so, many want their children integrated into ordinary schools. The fundamental question is one of choice. People with disabilities must be integrated into society as early as possible. This approach would bring disability to the consciousness of the community — and with education and awareness will come acceptance. The disabled must be enabled and encouraged to integrate with their non-disabled peers.

I have here a copy of the disability manifesto, published by the disability manifesto working group. It is a comprehensive document that the DHSS should consider adopting, not only to educate the public about the problems that disabled people face, but also to introduce a quality of life to which each one of us, whether disabled or non-disabled, is entitled. The Government could take its recommendations on board.

Another matter that merits special attention is benefits, particularly those that affect disabled people. In Northern Ireland 75% of the disabled rely on the social-security system for all or part of their income. At present there is a large range of benefits available: disability living allowance, incapacity benefit, attendance allowance, to name but a few. It is still difficult, if not impossible, for many disabled people to go through the long-drawn-out process of deciding which benefit they are entitled to and then complete the numerous forms.

*12.15 pm*

Finally, and most significantly, the Act establishes a National Disability Council and a Northern Ireland Disability Council to advise the Government on the effectiveness or otherwise of the legislation. There are major problems with the Disability Discrimination Act and the Council. The legislation was drawn up in a very short time in an attempt to save the face of the Government, who had deliberately sabotaged the efforts of Labour MPs to introduce the Civil Rights For Disabled People Bill in 1995. That Bill was modelled on the Americans' disability legislation, which makes discrimination against disabled people illegal. The Government claimed that it would be too expensive to implement, and — many would say to save face — they rushed the Disability Discrimination Act through.

The Northern Ireland Disability Council has no investigative or enforcement powers, as in the case of other areas of discrimination, such as fair employment and equal opportunities. It is illegal to discriminate against a person on the grounds of his or her religion or gender, and the Equal Opportunities and Fair Employment Commissions exist to ensure that employers comply. Disabled people have a right to similar consideration. Surely this is a case for parity of esteem. Unlike a commission, the Council will not be able to represent an individual or organization which is being discriminated against. It will be unable to investigate indirect discrimination. It will not have authority to compel organizations to provide relevant information, nor it will have the ability to provide financial or legal support. Disabled people require a commission with the same powers as the Equal Opportunities and Fair Employment Commissions.

I trust that this debate will serve, in some way, to highlight the needs and rights of disabled people. The Disability Discrimination Act is a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, it does not go far enough in redressing the problems. What is needed is full and comprehensive legislation outlining the rights of disabled people, together with an



effective means of enforcement — that is, a commission. The Act lacks teeth in this respect. This negates many of the beneficial points. Recognition needs to be given to groups campaigning on behalf of disabled people, such as Disability Action and the Rights Now Northern Ireland movement, for highlighting the need and the problems. Only through these support groups can we in the wider community appreciate the difficulties and concerns of disabled people.

I trust that the Forum will send a clear message to the Government that, while some progress has been made — and it is very welcome — there is still a very long way to go.

**Mr Gardiner:** Before speaking on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party in support of the motion, I want to congratulate Mrs Parkes on her contribution in respect of such an important subject.

I support the setting up of a body with legal powers. Indeed, it is long overdue. I will not repeat what Mrs Parkes said, save to make the point that disability is no respecter of persons. Every family in Northern Ireland is affected in some way. Therefore, I welcome the fact that we are urgently pressing the Government to set up a body with legal powers to demand and safeguard rights for disabled people.

The disabled have a right to work. It has often been said that there are horses for courses. Well, there are disabled people who can be filtered into industry and can do a good job. I have personal experience of working with disabled staff. They are very conscientious and very dedicated. They want to make a success of their jobs and a success of their lives. Although limited in what they can do, they are determined not to let that get in their way. They want to live a full life and play a full part in society.

Accommodation is a matter for great concern. There is not adequate accommodation for disabled people in Northern Ireland. I am fortunate to be not just paying lip-service but actively involved in the Leonard Cheshire Foundation. I am vice-chairman of Cheshire Mews in Lurgan. We have a home in Belfast and one in Londonderry. More such buildings should be erected, and people encouraged to use them. They are designed mainly for disabled people.

With regard to public awareness and public areas, I am sad to say that the DOE's Roads Service is lacking in — as the Leader of my party said on one occasion — getting the finger out. Despite requests, many footpaths, highways and byways have not been suitably adapted for wheelchairs and people with disability problems. The Government must rise to the occasion and make a greater effort to ensure that the necessary work is carried out effectively and promptly. The Post Office too is failing. Disabled people go to post offices to collect their benefits. In some instances, the postmaster has to come to the street to carry out the transaction. That is deplorable. I hope that the Post Office will speed up its renovations to provide access for people in wheelchairs.

I am critical of mobility allowance, now known as DLA — disabled living allowance — because, in some cases, it is abused. Cars provided under DLA are being used for the benefit of people other than the disabled. I have heard of one being used for a taxi service. In another case, a fellow visits his disabled mother once a week, on Sunday, and



takes her out for a short drive, but during the rest of the week the car is used for his work. Some cars have been examined and found to have had the clocks turned back because of the high mileage. Disabled people have a restricted mileage allowance. DLA cars with about 9,000 miles on the clock can have bald tyres. Either someone is raking the countryside, or the clock has been tampered with. You would like to get more than 9,000 miles before having to replace the tyres. I understand that a set of tyres normally does between 20,000 and 28,000 miles. I know of a woman who gets a car allowance but whose granddaughter uses the car day and night. The only contact occurs when the granddaughter collects the paper and drops it through the woman's letter-box. That is not a service for the disabled.

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

**Mr Gardiner:** No. I want to finish, and I shall be as brief as possible.

That is not a service for the disabled. There is abuse, and those who are responsible need to look more closely at what is happening.

Disabled people are suffering because of the cuts that the Government are making. I know of one disabled person whose home-help comes in to put her to bed at 8 o'clock at night. She has to stay there until after 8 o'clock the next morning, when the home-help returns to get her up and dressed. There is one call at night and one in the morning. This situation has got to be rectified.

I have to pay tribute to those who provide care. Some problems do not come to light. Many people grieve as they support disabled relatives, with no recognition from the Government or anyone else. They live a private life, excluded from the rest of the world, but because it is a relative who is disabled, they are quite willing to put up with it. That is not a real life. The Government should step in and do something more positive for the carers. These people should be given more financial support. A body needs to be set up to monitor the service efficiently and effectively so that the needs of the disabled may be met adequately and promptly.

The way forward is for the Forum to support the motion. My party is behind it one hundred per cent. We will do all that we can to support disabled people. As I said at the beginning, disability is no respecter of persons, and it crosses the divide.

I support the motion.

**Mr Peter Robinson:** Since entering the House of Commons 17 years ago, I have supported a number of attempts — all of them with cross-party support — to pass legislation on discrimination against disabled people. We were told, as time went on, that such legislation was not required. Then people moved from that defence to tell us that legislation would be totally unworkable or would be too costly to enforce. Their last line of defence was it is not the best way to deal with discrimination against the disabled, that it would be far more effective to try to educate and persuade people.

Those kinds of arguments fell to the ground when a Labour Party Private Member's Bill got very significant support. When it became clear to the Government that the House of



Commons was going to turn against them they decided to obviate the need for the Private Member's Bill by indicating willingness to bring forward a Bill of their own. Of course, their intention was to provide a weaker measure, in the hope that it would buy off a number of our supporters in the Tory Party.

After successful lobbying by representatives of people with disablement, we eventually got the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Anybody who has looked at that Act might well welcome the fact that it contains recognition that there is discrimination against disabled people. That is a start to the process of addressing the problem. But there are obviously weaknesses in the legislation. It is inadequate in many respects. Indeed, many of us find it unacceptable in its present form. It is littered with exemptions and qualifications which allow continuing discrimination. For instance, as has been indicated by Mrs Parkes, it exempts all businesses employing fewer than 20 people. The statistics are well known. In Northern Ireland there is a plethora of small businesses — almost 98% of firms. People with a disablement are hardly going to think that some massive concession has been made to them simply because 2% of businesses will come within the scope of the legislation. It simply is not good enough.

In addition, of course, the Act does nothing to improve the accessibility of education to young people with a disability.

*12.30 pm*

The definition cited by Mrs Parkes excludes many disabled people. Both Mrs Parkes and Mr Gardiner referred to the fact that the Council that has been set up does not have the power of a full-blown commission. Let us look at the areas in which it is claimed there was discrimination and at what the Government have done about them. There is the Fair Employment Commission, which can take up a case on behalf of an individual, and we have the Equal Opportunities Commission. But it is just as hurtful to be discriminated against because of disability as to be so treated because of one's politics, religion or gender.

It is sad that many people who go round this province beating their chests about matters relating to fair employment or equal opportunities are prepared to close their eyes to the fact that massive discrimination is going on day and daily against people who have a disability. Until we have a body that has real teeth — a commission with power to take appropriate action — we will not change the situation. The Disability Discrimination Act, needless to say, is regarded by many, including those who are most directly affected — the disabled people themselves — as being far from what disabled people need to protect them from denial of basic civil rights and liberties that non-disabled people take very much for granted. Any meaningful legislation must deal with some of these matters.

I recognize the time constraints, so — I was going to say that I would flag some matters up, but we are no longer allowed to use that language in the Forum — I will put markers down, and in the fullness of time, I hope, we can go into them in greater detail. A broader definition needs to be used when indicating what comes within the scope of the legislation. A commission that not only could advise and educate but also had the power to take concrete action to counter discrimination against disabled people is also required. We must ensure that most, if not all, employers are brought within the scope of the legislation.



Certainly we must reduce the number of employees from 20 per firm, to bring in an overwhelming majority of businesses in Northern Ireland.

We must be able to guarantee the full participation of disabled children and students in schools and colleges across the United Kingdom by ensuring proper access to all educational facilities and to the curriculum.

All forms of public transport should be made accessible to people with a disability. Some people may find my raising this matter strange. They may think that it was addressed in 1995 legislation. In fact, it was not addressed properly.

It is not only anti-discrimination legislation that needs to be addressed, but also access to the political process. Disability benefits must be reviewed. We need to look at community care, education and many other areas. It is not possible today to look in detail at each of these, but in laying the marker down I want to say that the principle which must guide us all in this matter is that disabled people must be allowed to have the greatest possible control of their lives. Insofar as possible, they should be empowered to be independent citizens. Minimum standards of community care must be introduced. It must be laid down precisely what those minimum standards are, and they must be fully funded by the Government. All people with a disability should have the opportunity to purchase their own care. In this regard, the Government should ensure that adequate technical and communication support — for instance, electric wheelchairs, text phones, transcription services — is available.

I have mentioned disablement benefit. Seventy-five per cent of adults who have a disability rely on state benefits as their main source of income. There must be incentives for employers to introduce a programme to assist people with disability into work. Some form of grant or subsidy must be available to make it attractive for an employer to take on a person with a disability. The social-security system should provide an income adequate to cover all the extra costs of disability. I am sure that many of us have seen in our constituencies people who have to overcome disablement. They are the ones who need more money, because it costs them more to live. Yet the state discriminates against them in terms of benefit.

With regard to the health service, I wish to make two points. There must be comprehensive disability training for health professionals. There is no proper provision at present. There is some, but it is not adequate. All screening and diagnostic services, including eyesight and dental tests, should be free to people with a disability.

Children with disabilities still do not have the right to be included in mainstream education, and are likely to leave school with fewer qualifications. It is believed that only 0.3% of the students in higher education in Northern Ireland have a disability. That is a very low figure indeed. When it is compared with the number of people who are disabled, as given by Mrs Parkes, it is very clear that those people are not fully represented in the education system. Clearly, there is discrimination — or there are blocks, if you do not like the word “discrimination” — in the system. Disabled people who want an education are not able to get one. There are many different reasons. All children with a disability should be entitled by law to an education appropriate to their needs. More funds must be made available to improve access to schools, colleges and universities. Only about 10% of the schools in Northern Ireland are accessible to the disabled. Thus, such people are denied a



proper education. The number of further education places for students with a disability must also be increased.

Let me move on from education to employment and training. There should be a national programme of disability equality training for employers, so that they can meet the problems faced by disabled people by opening work-places up. There should be statutory rehabilitation leave for people who become disabled at work.

A proportion of all new public-sector housing should meet accessibility standards. I want to put it clearly on the record that the Government have a responsibility to provide houses for people in need. The transfer of this responsibility to the private sector will seriously disadvantage those in need, such as the disabled. It simply is not good enough to ask them to make do with ordinary accommodation. We must have properly adapted housing built to the necessary standard and specification. Housing associations and the Housing Executive must set funds aside to ensure that a proportion of all new starts can be adapted properly.

Disabled homeless people should not have to go through the same channels as others. They should not be required to go into hostel or other non-permanent accommodation. They must be fast-tracked into permanent housing. You cannot ask a disabled person to go through the rigmarole of changing from one place to another. That simply is not fair.

The fast-tracking that I referred to should apply to adaptations also. There are people who are regarded by the occupational therapists as requiring changes to their properties owing to disablement. But the requests go into the normal queue so far as the Housing Executive is concerned. I have been pushing the Executive and the Minister — with some success, I think — for a fast-tracking system that will allow such cases to go to the top of the queue. Clearly, there is a greater impact if the property is not up to the proper standard.

Transport and mobility are more obvious areas of discrimination. It will be claimed, of course, that the 1995 Act addresses that issue. It does, but inadequately. It deals with transport on land, but other means of transport, such as planes, ferries and hovercraft, are exempt. These must be brought within the scope of the anti-discrimination legislation. The Government must set firm dates by which all new buses will have to be accessible to disabled people, and all inaccessible transport taken out of service. The same, of course, needs to happen in the case of railways. Bus stations, train stations, and so forth, must be adequately staffed with capable and qualified people to provide whatever assistance is required. Travel can be a very traumatic experience for disabled people.

Eyebrows were raised when I talked about political accessibility. One might expect a politician to take this under his notice. It is a matter that I confront regularly in East Belfast. I am sure that most of us, particularly at election times, are brought face to face with it. One matter that constantly comes up is the fundamental right to vote. Disabled people should be guaranteed the same right as other citizens, yet the figures show that at the 1992 general election — the last Westminster election — only 12% of polling stations in the United Kingdom were accessible to the disabled. So these people have to use the postal voting system, which is far from adequate. First of all, it requires people to make their decisions much earlier. They do not have a chance to hear or read all the election addresses on



television or radio or in the press. They may not even have received all the election literature. They will not have had the canvassers at their doors. Maybe that is not a disadvantage in real terms, but, as politicians, we like to believe that it is. Obtaining a postal vote involves cumbersome procedures, such as getting a doctor's signature. There is also the logistical problem of sending the vote off. Polling stations should all be made accessible, but, if that is not to happen, clearly we need to improve the current postal voting system.

*12.45 pm*

It would be very sensible to have election literature printed in Braille. One of the minor parties did this at the last election. Others might like to take note. Indeed, ballot papers should be available in Braille, and for those who are partially sighted, there should be larger-print versions. The Government should be able to arrange all without too much difficulty. It would undoubtedly be in their own interests to do so.

In a very short time I have tried to highlight a number of issues, but there is one matter that comes up at my constituency advice centre more than any other — the embarrassment suffered by so many disabled people when they attempt to enjoy some entertainment or leisure. They go to a cinema or a theatre but are told that they are a fire risk — that if there were a fire in the building, they would not be able to get out. They are literally turned away. One of the great stalwarts in the fight for people with a disability is Kim Morton, who heads the Thalidomide campaign. She herself was turned away from a cinema in the city centre. She had to suffer the embarrassment of being watched by those in the queue as she was wheeled off because she was considered a risk. We must overcome those difficulties. If cinemas do not have adequate means of access and egress, the people who own the buildings should be required to bring them up to standard.

I have listed many matters that need to be addressed. The very length of the list indicates the inadequacy of the present legislation. These matters have not been properly dealt with, and they need to be. As Mrs Parkes said, the Forum has done well in highlighting this matter today. I hope that it will not stop here. There is a Committee dealing with health matters. As a result of discussions in the Business Committee, it is likely that the Health Committee will have another title before long. Whatever its title, it should be given the responsibility of looking at these issues. It should take evidence and see what the Forum can do to make life easier for the disabled. If this Forum were to fail in everything else, but do something in that respect, it would have an achievement to be proud of when the curtain finally fell.

**Mr McMichael:** I congratulate Mrs Parkes for her very comprehensive remarks in introducing the motion.

Discrimination against people who are disabled is an issue which has not received adequate public attention — and we are all guilty. Failure adequately to acknowledge the plight of people with disabilities is a charge that can rightly be levelled at successive Governments, at the media, who have largely ignored the issue, and, indeed, at public representatives.



As Mrs Parkes said, there are 201,000 disabled adults in Northern Ireland — at almost 18% of the population, a much higher proportion than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Disabled people are three times more likely than others to be out of work and to be unemployed for longer periods.

In 1994 the Government sabotaged efforts to put the Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill through Parliament, and this year they opposed attempts to reintroduce it. They fobbed disabled people off when they introduced the Disability Discrimination Act, which is vastly inferior to the Bill and inadequately addresses the needs of people with disabilities. The Act provides for the establishment of a Disability Council, whose remit is to advise the Government on a strategy for disabled people, prepare proposals and review codes of practice. While the DDA goes some way to address the plight of disabled people by, for example, making it illegal for employers to discriminate against them, it is not comprehensive. As Mrs Parkes said, quite clearly it does not go far enough.

Disabled people in Northern Ireland consider the DDA to be flawed. They see the Disability Council as a paper tiger — ineffective and incapable of enforcing the current legislation. Unlike the Fair Employment Commission, the Disability Council will not be able to take up a case on behalf of an individual or of an organization. It will not be able to force organizations to provide information to the public. It will not be able to provide legal or financial support for those who wish to pursue discrimination claims. This makes it almost impossible for people with disabilities to enforce their rights.

The legislation itself is grossly inadequate. Firms with fewer than 20 employees are exempt from its provisions. In Northern Ireland, 98.2% of businesses fall into that category. This is quite clearly far from satisfactory.

The definition of disability is too narrow. The great many who are discriminated against because they are perceived as being disabled are ignored. Timetables for compliance with the regulations on access in particular, specifically relating to public transport, are not definite and represent no more than mission statements. Current provision for addressing the plight of people with disabilities is far from satisfactory. Every person in Northern Ireland has a right to be treated equally, regardless of race, religion, gender or disability. The UDP stands firmly by that right. The Government should review the current legislation and should take decisive action to establish a commission with real powers of enforcement. The “Out of sight, out of mind” policy applied to disabled people should be abandoned. It is not acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland, and it is certainly not acceptable to those with disabilities.

I support the motion.

*The meeting was suspended at 12.52 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.*

**Ms Sagar:** A number of problems concerning the Disability Discrimination Act have already been highlighted. I hate repeating what people have said, but that is what I am about to do. I will try to be extremely brief.



The number of disabled people in Northern Ireland has been mentioned. In previous debates we talked about the cut-backs in the health service, the education service, and so on. Housing was mentioned this morning. Yes, there is a serious shortage of fully accessible housing for disabled people. While I am on the subject I would like to ask the Government why they are not encouraging builders here, as in other areas of the United Kingdom, to provide homes suitable for disabled or able-bodied people. An ordinary family can live in such a house, and if one member becomes disabled, or if a disabled person moves in, the house can be adapted quickly. It is not difficult, as the house is on one level. The Rowntree Foundation is encouraging many builders to rent and to sell such houses. This is something that we should consider more closely.

The subject of public transport has been raised. Trains and buses have been mentioned, but there are problems with ferries and aeroplanes too. It is very difficult, if you or a member of your family is disabled, to go on holiday. You have problems getting on board a plane. You have problems with certain hotels. Normally when you think of holidays you panic about how much it is all going to cost, how cheaply you can get the tickets — and that is it. If you are disabled, however, you have to look at many things: how you are going to get there; how much the tickets are going to cost; whether the aircraft is fully accessible; how to get into and out of airports; and whether the country you want to go to has facilities, even within the hotel, for disabled people. It is all extremely difficult.

I find it even more difficult, being an able-bodied person, to defend the rights of disabled people. Perhaps a human-rights bill would include rights for disabled people. It saddens me to think that in 1996 people, whether able-bodied or disabled, are still deprived of rights. The chairperson of the North East Forum on Disability, Mrs Mary Mulholland, feels that disabled people do not want to be a special case. They are full members of society, useful citizens, and should be treated as such. We are all equal. Part of our problem — this comes back to the education system — is that disabled children cannot go to mainstream schools. Therefore we are breeding ignorance of the problems of the disabled. As an able-bodied person, I find it difficult to put myself in the position of someone who is disabled. And I do not know many disabled people.

If the education system were to change and we were to encourage better funding for schools, maybe we could put disabled people in the mainstream system. In that way everybody could get a good understanding of disablement. There are so many types of disability. That is part of the problem. People tend to clump the disabled into one category.

Jobs have been mentioned. Most people who are disabled are in low-paid or low-skill jobs even if they are highly intelligent. If a person is in a wheelchair it is assumed that he does not have the brainpower to do certain things. That is totally wrong.

Our education system really needs to change in this respect. Disability impinges on health, education and housing — subjects that have been debated in the Forum. Our MPs, elected Members here and others in the community must highlight the needs of the disabled. It is good that different parties are doing so today, but unfortunate for me the points that I wanted to make have been made already. Much needs to be looked at. Unfortunately, most of us did not have sufficient time. A week is not long enough to go out and look at everything. We can read reports, but that is not enough. It is necessary to go out and meet



people and find out what they think their true needs are. Unfortunately, the person writing a report always puts his own opinion in it.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition totally agrees that the Disability Council does not have the means properly to enforce this Act. It is just not possible. The Council cannot force employers not to discriminate against disabled people. That would be extremely difficult, and there is not the manpower to do it. What good is a law with nobody to enforce it? It seems fruitless to put a law in place with enforcement powers. We need a body with power to make sure there is no discrimination against people with disabilities. With regard to disabled people who want to go to law, not all courts are accessible. Nor are all churches accessible to people with a disability. Such places will remain not truly accessible to everybody despite the laws that are being put in place.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition supports this motion. We were very pleased to see it coming forward. This is an issue on which we intend to work quite a bit. We want to remind everybody that discrimination relates not just to work but also to political, economic and personal culture. It is very important to remember that the disabled are people and not always to look at the disability. Everybody should be classed in the same way. It is inclusion, as opposed to exclusion. We tend to exclude people who are disabled and to think that we have to do this and we have to do that. In fact, we should treat the disabled as normal members of society — which they are. Losing an arm, a leg or an eye does not make you any less a person. We are all worthwhile, and I would like to see people being treated as such.

**Mr Foster:** I rise to support the motion and to concur with many things that have been said, especially some very pertinent points made by my Colleague Mr Gardiner.

Certainly there is a thrust these days to ease problems for the disabled, but I am not convinced that the intent is fully followed through by actual provision. In my opinion, more effort is required to meet a very important need. There are some very important phrases in the motion — “effective legislation” and “legal powers to enforce”. The word “disability” makes us think mainly of the physically disabled. But there is a whole range of disability to be concerned about. For instance, there are the learning-disabled — formerly known as the mentally handicapped — and, of course, the mentally ill. Many handicapped people live in the community, with support from family practitioner services and various statutory bodies and voluntary organizations. A major aim must be at all times to ensure that such support is maintained and developed so that the physically handicapped — indeed, all handicapped people — are able to live as full and useful lives as possible in the community, going to hospital or to residential or nursing accommodation only when their physical condition makes this necessary.

Whilst there is good intent and some commendable work is being done at the moment, often it is too hard to reach because of the many changes in the structure and in the designation of staff in the system. I have found in other spheres that changes come all the time and make situations and provision very complex. In social-services departments, the purchaser/provider split has led to new job titles and new systems for care in the community. Many users find the results confusing. Gone are the days when designation would give an indication of a person's job. Titles like area controller, purchasing officer and service manager convey nothing to people outside. They make social-services departments less



accessible and may also contribute to the incidence of complaints, as users do not understand the roles and limitations of staff or how the management systems work.

Lack of thought, not just on the part of the Government but on the part of society in general, abounds. I work with a person in social services in Enniskillen who faces problems because of a physical disability. Of course, we sympathize and, indeed, try to empathize. Through this young man I have seen the joy that somebody who is physically disabled feels when something is provided for him. On one occasion I accompanied him to Coventry to help him to get a four-wheel motor car — he had used three-wheelers. His first drive around the outskirts of Coventry was monitored. When he came back he said to me "Sam, this is the greatest day of my life. I have driven a four-wheel vehicle for the first time." It was a specially adapted vehicle with tiller steering. That is what he has now, and it gives him great independence.

That young man — a person actually experiencing the difficulties — made some points to me about people's preconceived ideas concerning what disabled people can do and what their aspirations are. He said that disabled people are the same as able-bodied folk and can achieve, despite tremendous difficulties. There is the "Does he take sugar?" syndrome — referring to people who talk around the disabled instead of directly to them. This often happens accidentally or because of a lack of understanding, but it is important to realize that it takes away from a disabled person's self-esteem.

*2.15 pm*

Access to buildings, whilst improving, still presents problems. For instance, steps inside or outside buildings are difficult for wheelchair users and people on crutches. Too many items on a shop floor make it difficult for disabled folk to move around. High counters in banks and shops are another matter the young man mentions.

The environmental problems that these people encounter include insufficient dropped kerbs, car-parking spaces that are not wide enough, shop signs in the middle of footpaths, telephone boxes not wide enough for wheelchairs — or too high — and hole-in-the-wall cash points that are too high. Some new town-centre schemes can present problems. Poles and railings of bad colour contrast make life difficult for the visually impaired. For severely disabled people confined to wheelchairs, transport is a problem. As we all know, the lack of accessible buses, apart from social-services and education vehicles on organized routes, in rural areas is a long-term problem. There are not yet any Ulsterbus low-floor or tail-lift buses in rural areas. Most taxis, the young man states, are small cars, and drivers are not at all familiar with disabilities of varying degrees.

He refers, too, to the care services for the disabled — home helps, domiciliary care, and so on. While I contend that the situation here may have improved in the last few years, he states that it is hard for some disabled people, especially in rural areas, to get private agencies' help when they need it. It depends on where they live, in terms of distance. Overall, he thinks, people must learn to consult with the disabled before planning, designing or making policy. Disabled people differ, he states, just like everybody else, although some have a tougher time than others, depending on how they cope with their disability. Those are some important issues, and lots of others have been mentioned today.



The following are some of the rights in the Disability Action charter with which I concur: the right to live an independent, active and fully productive life, regardless of the severity of disability, whether physical, mental, sensory or hidden, or any combination of these; the right to determine one's own future lifestyle and life choices; the right to define oneself and one's body image, free from limiting stereotypes; the right to personal privacy in all areas affecting one's intimate and family life; the right to have one's sexuality and relationships respected; the right to marry and to bear and raise children, and found a family; the right to appropriate assessment — this is very important — quality counselling, physical and mental health care and the equipment, assistance and support services necessary for a fully productive life; the right to make decisions about one's medical treatment and to access the information necessary to do this; the right to information, in a medium appropriate to the individual, enabling full, independent participation in society and underpinning the exercise of all other rights; the right to equality of opportunity; the right to educational provision; the right to personal mobility and to an environment free of physical information and communication barriers; the right to appropriate housing — this has been referred to — that meets one's need to live independently.

Insofar as adaptations to housing are concerned, quite often, in my opinion, the procedure is far too long and laborious. An application goes to the Housing Executive, then to the social services occupational therapists' department, which eventually does an assessment before returning it to the Executive. All this administration and documentation takes far too long. It certainly needs to be speeded up considerably.

Then there are the right to an income which provides for the necessities of life; the right to training and employment without discrimination; the right to challenge and seek changes in attitudes and perceptions which limit participation in all appropriate aspects of community life; the right to join a trade union and to have specific needs properly expressed; the right to legal representation and to equal protection under the law; the right to protection from discrimination in all areas of life, including the legal system itself; the right to participation in the political process, on both an individual basis and a collective basis — that is, for those who are willing to risk such a wholesome vocation!

We trust that today we can send a clear message to the Government and to society in general: the disabled must have the same rights as any other individual. I support the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** Disability plays a major part in my life and, indeed, in the life of my whole family. And I am sure that there are other Members who are equally involved. I hope that the subject will get everyone's attention and that this debate will help to improve the lot of disabled people.

This morning I was saddened by a remark — I am sure that it was not intentional — made by a Member to you, Mr Chairman.

**The Chairman:** Do not worry about that.



**Mr McCarthy:** What I am saying is that the public attitude towards the disabled is most important. The days of accepting such remarks, witting or otherwise, are over. I speak as the parent of someone who knows about the problems of disabled people. Such a snide remark is totally unacceptable.

Unfortunately, Northern Ireland also has self-appointed groups who continue to contribute to terrible disability by recurrent punishment beatings and other activities. Let us all hope that these will cease immediately.

I agree that disability affects everyone. There are no religious, political or racial barriers. I certainly support the motion. For far too long the needs of the disabled have been largely ignored. These members of the community were left to fend for themselves.

I — like Members generally, I am quite sure — salute all the disabled people who have got together in various groups up and down the country to campaign for the same quality of life as is enjoyed by every other member of society. Disabled people should not have to campaign for anything. They should be treated the same as everyone else. Their needs should be provided automatically. Unfortunately, to date, disabled people have had a raw deal. Some of us, as I said earlier, have direct family experience of the needs of the disabled. We are at the coal-face. Day in and day out, we see the problems. Society simply must remove all barriers to total equality.

There have been improvements in many aspects of the life of my profoundly disabled daughter. The motion acknowledges such improvements. I pay tribute to the local organizations mentioned earlier for their part in bringing this about. However, there is still much work to be done, and the motion should be supported whole-heartedly because it deals specifically with the problems of discrimination against all disabled people.

A few years ago, when progress was being made to put half-decent legislation through Parliament, a one-time Minister in the Northern Ireland Office deliberately and unashamedly obstructed the Bill. That action resulted in the watered-down and inadequate disability-discrimination legislation that we now have.

Thank goodness there is a growing number of disabled people and carers in Northern Ireland who are no longer prepared to quietly sit on the sidelines. They are determined to overcome the problems. We in the Forum should support them to the hilt to secure proper safeguards.

Under the new Act, there is a Disability Council. That body will not be able to take up test cases. Indeed, it may be restricted by lack of resources. The basic problem is that the Council will be a mere talking-shop. It will not have the massive powers that the Government gave to the Fair Employment Commission. Why can the same powers not be given to the body that looks after disabled people? They must, in my opinion, have equal status.

The Act is also inadequate in that employers are required to make only changes which are deemed reasonable. One might well ask what or who defines reasonableness. Also causing concern is the fact that a firm with fewer than 20 employees is exempt from the



employment provisions. Public transport is included only to the extent that the Act provides regulations to be made at some time in the future. Amendments do not have a definite timetable, and they will be limited to land-based public transport and new vehicles. Private coaches, shipping and aviation are not included. Education is another aspect that has got to be improved.

The Act attempts to define disability, but the definition is rather narrow and will not cover all disabled people. Many of the disabled demand a definition which recognizes that discrimination is based on attitudes and social practices, and not just on the name of a medical condition. The disability-discrimination legislation is inadequate, as it does not tackle the real problem of almost daily discrimination that many disabled people experience. Sympathy alone is not enough.

Today I call on Members of the Forum for support, and I expect that there will be unanimous agreement that the needs of the disabled community should be met. What is needed is a disability commission, with real powers, to ensure that anti-discrimination legislation is enforced in exactly the same way as the FEC operates in the case of religious or political discrimination. Perhaps we in Northern Ireland sometimes forget that civil rights cover not just politics and religion but also the needs of the disabled community. We in Alliance, along with the other parties in the Forum, will not only be campaigning for changes in legislation but also be pressing for changes in people's attitude towards the disabled.

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland fully supports the motion. This Forum has not only a right but, indeed, a duty to call on the Government to use the full resources of the state to help people with disability.

**Mr Dodds:** It is very timely that we are having this debate today, given the launch of the Northern Ireland Disability Council on Tuesday. I want to congratulate Mrs Parkes on the way she introduced the subject. It was an excellent speech. Indeed, there have been good and well-informed contributions from a large number of Members. I do not want to go over ground that has already been covered very adequately, but I have to say that I fully endorse the motion.

The reality is that progress has been made over a number of years, though certainly not to the extent that we would have wished, and a lot of work still needs to be done. Some Members have referred to the history of this legislation. Everybody knows that it was brought in because the Government were under tremendous pressure in the House of Commons, where there was cross-party support for a really effective Bill to give proper civil rights to people with disabilities.

2.30 pm

Mr McCarthy referred to the Minister with responsibility for the disabled, Mr Scott, whose performance was criticized even by his own daughter. We remember the disgraceful tactics of Tory Back Benchers in the House of Commons, who deliberately stymied the debate, talked the Bill out, in order to kill the chance of giving real civil rights to disabled people. The Disability Discrimination Act and the legislation that applies in Northern Ireland indicate a half-hearted attitude on the part of the Government. They can salve their



conscience by pointing to measures that are in place but do not deal comprehensively with the issues that disabled people are concerned about.

As the father of a young boy with a severe physical disability, I too speak with direct personal experience. When you are faced with the reality of a disabled person in your own family you talk to other parents in the same boat and to other people with disabilities, and you begin to realize exactly what the issues are. No matter how many reports you read or how many briefings you get, it is only when you, or somebody very close to you, actually face the problem that you begin to understand the reality and what needs to be done. And you get very frustrated at proposals and legislation that will not properly deal with the difficulty.

Compare the situation here to that in the United States of America. The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law by President Bush in 1990 or 1991. The arguments against that legislation were similar to those now being used by Tory Back Benchers, businessmen and other parties with vested interests. Reasons were given for not having proper, comprehensive legislation which would give full rights to people with disabilities. In the United States the evidence suggests that the doom and gloom that were forecast have not come to pass. The legislation has not led to the enormous additional expenditure that business was worried about. But it has changed things. I have been there with my son, who is confined to a wheelchair. It is like going to a different world. Disabled people are treated with respect. They are not made to feel inferior by people saying "There you are. You will feel better for having that given to you by those of us who are better off." Disabled people are treated as if they too have rights, inherent rights. That is the difference between the approach in our country and that adopted in the United States. There, people are treated with respect. They are treated as human beings. Americans do not see the disability so much as the person behind it. That is why I am so annoyed and frustrated about the new British legislation.

I must pay tribute to those Members of the House of Commons, particularly on the Labour side, who have put forward Private Members' Bills to try to get effective legislation in place. Support was forthcoming right across the House of Commons. I also pay tribute to my own party Leader, who, with the support of other MPs, tabled and argued for a Private Member's Bill along the lines of the Harry Barnes Bill. This would have done so much for disabled people in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the steps that have been taken. Things are better than they used to be, but we still have a long way to go before people with disabilities have their own right recognized.

I agree that the legislation is fatally flawed. Now that the Act and its mechanisms are in place, I am worried that the Government and others will say that there is no need to campaign for rights for people with disabilities as it is now illegal to discriminate. But people do not realize how flawed the legislation is. That is why this debate is important. It is essential for the campaigning to go on so that people may be given the facts, the deficiencies highlighted, and the current situation changed. We must have proper enforcement procedures. We have to dispense with all the exemptions.

I do not want to repeat what has already been said, but I do want to emphasize the general point that people with disabilities are not looking for patronage. The disabled do not



want to be regarded as some sort of special category who are given favours because people feel sorry for them. They simply want the right to be treated as equal citizens with equal opportunities, and they want the freedom to choose. That should go right across the board.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Most of the 26 district councils in Northern Ireland are represented in the Forum. At least, they were until a few weeks ago. I should like to put a few pointed questions today to those who are council members. The introduction of these measures is most important, but a look around our council chambers and the buildings used for meetings which are open to the public will reveal that they are not always accessible to people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities. I am pleased to say that, once again, Belfast City Council has led the way in spending an enormous amount of money to make the city hall much more user-friendly to people in wheelchairs and others who are not, like ourselves, able-bodied. A total of £170,000 has been spent on the provision of two ramps at the front of the building.

When the new environmental scheme was being implemented — believe it or not — one of the measures that were forgotten was the provision of ramps. For many years there was a portable ramp which, according to many disabled people, was not satisfactory. Some council members are naturally concerned at the amount of money spent, but I think it was worthwhile, and I am sure it will be welcomed by all those using the city hall who need a ramp. We are also making major improvements inside the building. During a recent inspection we were told by the disability organization that the buttons in our lifts were much too high, that people in wheelchairs simply could not reach them. Councillors should get their own houses in order. They should give a lead to the rest of the community by ensuring that their buildings are made wheelchair-friendly.

A major problem for many employers is the need for financial assistance to improve their premises for the disabled. There is no mention in the Act of any financial help. Many companies employing 20 people or more, to which the law applies, simply do not want to spend what can amount to a large sum of money.

It is good that when this building was being designed, thought was clearly given to the need for ramps and for door handles and lift buttons within easy reach of people in wheelchairs. I have publicly criticized the cost of providing this accommodation, and I have not changed my mind, but I will give a pat on the back to all those involved in making sure that it is user-friendly for disabled persons. It is leading the way in Belfast.

I have mentioned my concern about how the Government announce changes during the peak holiday season. In this case they gave only two months for a response. The announcement was made in June a year past. Now, June, July and August are traditionally holiday months. Was it done deliberately? The whole business was rushed through. We should continue to pressurize the Government into making improvements because in Northern Ireland the number of disabled people is increasing. For instance, there are those maimed by the terrorist activity of various Loyalist and Republican organizations. When you talk to people who were mown down by terrorists and are now in wheelchairs, they tell you that they did not appreciate their health and strength. There is a lesson there for all of us. We should all be more conscious of those who need our help. I am pleased to see some disabled people in the Gallery today. We welcome them and sincerely hope that what we are saying



will please them. They should realize that all the parties in this Chamber, despite religious and political differences, are at one in pressing home the point that we need a body in Northern Ireland to oversee what is happening in this field.

Reference has been made to the Labour Relations Agency. We all know that the agency does not have enough staff to do the necessary work. I hope that the Northern Ireland Office will realize that more people must be appointed pretty quickly.

I support this very important motion. Let us hope that people outside will realize that, despite the bad press that the Forum and the talks have been getting, we are attempting to do something worthwhile in the interests of all the communities in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCartney:** My party fully supports the motion. I have listened with great interest to the speeches of Mr Foster, who brings a wealth of knowledge to the debate, and of Mr Dodds and Mr McCarthy, who bring a considerable amount of experience not only of public service but also — and perhaps this is the most important type of experience in relation to those who are disabled in some way — of personal contact of the most intimate kind.

I do not intend to expatiate upon this subject — much of the central material has been covered by others — but I would like to enter a caveat about one aspect of the claiming of rights by disabled people and of the fulfilment of those rights.

*2.45 pm*

There is a wide range of disabilities, both physical and mental, but let me dwell for a moment on what are termed “those with learning disabilities”. Learning disabilities cover an enormous range of handicaps. There are those with learning disabilities who can almost pass for normal. I am sure many people in the Chamber have met them. There are, of course, those who are gravely handicapped. But one aspect of modern legislation and of social regulation that has always fascinated me is the new range of language employed by people in the social services. There is a great deal of what can only be described as gobbledegook. When one examines this language in detail and parses it with care, one discovers that it is very often put in place not to advance the cause and requirements of the disabled but to cover a fudge of Government policy, the real intention of which is to withdraw funding and facilities and to limit the equipment and manpower available to the disabled.

Let me give one example. The new attitude in the social services to learning disabilities is to break up institutions — in-house care, as it were — and push a philosophy of care in the community. Now, many of those involved in this aspect of disability see it as financially driven by Government policies cutting back the amount of money that is committed to care. This manifests itself in a variety of areas. Many people have noted, for instance, what is happening in the case of schizophrenia. People discharged out of care into society commit the most hideous crimes. There have been several such cases.

We also have those in an institution or hospital such as Muckamore Abbey, where there are long-term patients with the most grave, fundamental and comprehensive disabilities. The latest policy of some health boards is to take such people out of in-house care and have



them dealt with through what has become known as care in the community. The philosophy is often supported by sociological phrases about rights. Everyone has the right to be in the community; everyone has the right to have transport; everyone has the right to vote. Every disabled person has a variety of rights that are shared by people who are not under any disability.

The truth is that while some of these people could exercise those rights, a vast number, by reason of comprehensive infirmity, would not even understand what is being claimed on their behalf. The purpose of the language is to disguise the policy for discharging such people from in-patient care into the community.

Care in the community has some benefits in some cases — there is no doubt about that — but one must first be absolutely certain that the funds, the equipment and the manpower necessary to make it truly effective are in place. In very many cases “care in the community” is an empty phrase for emptying hospitals and other institutions, for the sake of economic efficiency. These great, wide libertarian expressions are used as a cover for a policy of sending out into the community people who very often are incapable of enjoying such rights without comprehensive back-up for care.

So, while fully endorsing provision of the greatest potential and opportunity for enjoyment of rights by the disabled, where they are capable of exercising them, the Forum must be careful to ensure that any legislation that is put in place is truly for their benefit. If there are to be changes in the arrangements for looking after them and for enabling them to achieve, within the community, the greatest possible potential of the abilities that they retain, the necessary funds, back-up and manpower must be put in place.

I have no doubt whatever that the Forum should make every effort and use every power at its disposal to ensure that all citizens who suffer from a disability of any kind are given the greatest possible opportunity to make full use of those faculties and capacities that they enjoy.

**Mr Eric Smyth:** I rise to support the motion.

As one who has two kids, one mentally handicapped and one physically handicapped, and as one who is dyslexic — people forget that dyslexia is also a handicap — I know something about this subject. Many people do not recognize the disadvantages that I have, and there are many thousands who have the same problem. It affects people in different ways. There is not time to explain it, but I can say that going through school was a nightmare. Many times, as a young boy, I wanted to commit suicide because nobody understood why I could not retain English, maths and other subjects. The only thing I was good at was sport. My parents did not understand. The schools did not understand. Nobody wanted to know. And so I was left in limbo, coming out of school at 14 years of age, unable to read or write. I was completely illiterate.

Thank God for the day when I came to know Christ as my Saviour. I believe that it was the turning-point in my life when I sought help through the Lord and I found it. I cannot get up and read a speech, as Mrs Parkes and other Members have done. I have to operate from the little brain that God gave me, and do the best I can.



This subject is dear to my heart, because we live in a society that is very hurtful. A few weeks ago I made my comments about boycotting, and I was slain — and I am willing to take that — by a bishop. But he also made a comment, reading between the lines, about my ability. This came from a bishop — a man who should know better. I am willing to argue or debate with people on any subject, but I hate those who make sneering remarks about the fact that I am not able to put words together or say things that many learned people here are able to say.

I am not stupid. I have done well in life. There are many educated people who have not come as far as I have. I am the minister of my own church. Indeed, I built the church and am now in the process of building a Sunday school complex, which I planned myself. So I am not stupid. But I do not have the ability of many here. Reading council minutes takes a long time. Sometimes I do not grasp what they are about, and I make a fool of myself. I have to live with that.

At the last elections, when I topped the poll in my area, two politicians said “Look at the vote that illiterate man got.” Another man heard them and told me. That hurt, and it still hurts. My answer was that the people of the Shankill Road had returned the man they wanted — the man who had who worked for them.

Since I was Lord Mayor and since the book I wrote was published, many people have come to me and asked how I coped with being dyslexic. I am able, thank God, to help people who have children with this problem. I have talked to them and explained how to cope with it. The other day, in my constituency, I was stopped by a young girl in a terrible state. She said “Mr Smyth, I have a son and I believe he is dyslexic, but nobody wants to listen.” Some Members have mentioned the education boards and the schools. This young lady went to the headmaster and the teachers and asked for her child to be assessed. They said “No, your child is not dyslexic.” They had become experts all of a sudden. The authorities do not want to admit that certain children have problems because it would cost extra money to help them with one-to-one teaching. That is what is wrong. Maybe if they had done that with me when I was a youngster I would be better educated today. We have got to encourage the Government to provide the finance to educate these children.

I have a daughter who is dyslexic, like me. I argued with the school, but nobody wanted to know until she went to the Girls' Model. Thank God they listened, took the problem on board and gave her one-to-one tuition. In two years she had caught up with the rest of the children and passed all her ‘O’ levels and ‘A’ levels. Young people can be helped if the education authorities have the money.

I do not know if I will get support for the suggestion that the Forum set up a committee to deal with this subject separately and take submissions from organizations fighting for disabled people's rights. There are so many bodies, but they are all going in different directions. They are all fighting for the same thing, but in wee groups. I would like the Forum to appoint a committee to hear views and make a report. Then we could go to the Government and show them what the people of Northern Ireland want for the disabled. Disabled people ask for no more than any of the rest of us. They want to be treated in the same way as everyone else. I am not asking for privileges.



3.00 pm

I ask Members to listen to me and to understand my plight. It is sad that many people do not. Some Members sneered when Mr McCarthy commented on this. I would have been hurt if I had heard Members sniggering when he talked about people who are normal but have educational problems. It hurts because I am as good as anyone else here. Maybe I do not have what some others have, but I have qualities that they may not have. God has given all of us talents, and we use them in different ways. I would like the Forum to set up a separate committee to look at this subject on its own. It would not be side-tracked; it would hear the views of all interested bodies and would bring them all together so that we could educate the people out there.

My wife and I were out shopping one day. My eight-year-old daughter is mentally handicapped, but she is a very loving child. She would talk to anybody. Everyone in the city hall knows her. She is very friendly and wants to hold people's hands and give them hugs. When we were walking through the town she grabbed a man's hand, and he pulled it away. Well, I had to count to 10 or he would have been on his face. This is the type of thing that people do not understand, and it hurts. We have to educate the people out there. My daughter may be mentally handicapped, but she can give me a lesson in love and in many other things. She has her qualities, and she has ways to teach us, including me, her father.

We are not too old to learn something new. I have a son who is paralyzed from the waist down, but mentally he is powerful — smarter than his dad. He asks me some questions that I cannot answer, and he is only five years old. He is a very intelligent boy, but what I like about him is his determination to get on. I have no worries about when he grows up — he will make his mark.

We have got to look at education, but also at the Housing Executive. Currently I am dealing with cases of people with handicapped children who have applied for grants. People with money can change their homes to suit their handicapped children, but there are families who cannot afford to do that. They have to apply for a grant and go through all the rigmarole involving social workers, plans, and so on. Getting all these things done takes maybe two or three years. I know of one person whose application was passed but had to wait another year, and the work started just a few months ago. That should not be the case. The Housing Executive told her that she might not have to pay anything, but in the end she had to borrow £5,000. These are issues that we need to consider seriously.

Let us set up a committee and ask Mrs Parkes to take it on. Let the committee consider these matters thoroughly and bring a report back to the Forum. We could then put pressure on the Government. Or am I out of order in asking for this? I look for your guidance, Mr Chairman.

**The Chairman:** My guidance is simply that you have made a most eloquent and very moving speech, and I am certain that the Business Committee will consider what you have said and come back to you.



**Mr Hugh Smyth:** May I, in supporting the motion, first of all pay tribute to Mrs Parkes, who brought the subject before us, for the adequate way in which she dealt with it. Those of us who are acquainted with her father-in-law know that he would be very proud of her.

As one who has been to America a few times, I agree with what Mr Dodds said about attitudes. Americans do not have to fight for these rights. They are in place; they are there as God-given rights. That is the difference between the attitude of the Government of the United States and the Government — whether Labour or Conservative — of the United Kingdom. I agree with Mr Smyth, who, in his fine speech, said that it is attitudes that will have to be changed.

I do not agree with Mr Rodgers. None of us in local authorities have done enough. Let me tell Mr Rodgers — for he was not a member at the time in question — that the Belfast City Council failed miserably. I recall, as I know some other Members can, that the only time we in the council ever did anything was when one of our members, Mr Sammy Millar, was shot. Previously the council had done absolutely nothing. Even then, all that we did was install a lift and erect a ramp at the front of the city hall — and it looks like the Sphinx in Egypt. We spent £150,000 or £170,000 — hardly a big deal for a council with a budget of £51.5 million. So I stand here accused, along with any other Member from the Belfast City Council, of failing to do more.

In fairness to Mr Eric Smyth, I should say that during his term as Lord Mayor we had many fine debates on disability. A young lady called Kim Morton came to visit us and shamed us all by her attitude. Her wonderful outlook on life made me feel very humble — to say the least.

Every Forum Member who is a member of a local authority should ask himself if he could have done more.

Mr Dodds mentioned travel. Have our airports done enough? What about city-centre stores. Thanks to his good wife, Mr Dodds knows about this. What must be done in the run-up to Christmas? Stores should be closed to the public to enable handicapped people to shop. It is an indictment that only with the help of people like Mr Dodds's wife, who, along with other helpers, takes them out, are the disabled able to do their Christmas shopping. It is a shame. The same applies to cinemas. Are they doing enough? And what in pubs and clubs? The fact that you are disabled does not mean that you cannot go out and enjoy yourself. Can anyone who has been in pubs or clubs tell me of any facilities whatsoever for the disabled? No. There is a multitude of things that should be done.

There is one more matter that I do not think has been covered today. Bodies like the Fair Employment Agency tell us that our employment figures, where possible, must reflect the balance of the community. In Belfast you expect that to be 60/40. But nobody ever seems to examine or even care about, how many disabled people are employed by councils. If the law states that the balance of employment should reflect the community balance, surely councils should be forced to take a percentage of disabled people, based on the figures that Mrs Parkes gave. Belfast City Council has perhaps a better record than most. We do employ some disabled people, though we could employ more.



I would like to know how many handicapped people are employed by the Forum. We could all do more. Mr Smyth is right: we will pass this motion, and we will leave and say "Wasn't that great?", and nothing will happen. Although I am Chairman of the Health Committee, I stand by what the Member said. If a committee were formed to deal specifically with these issues, it would have my full support. We should continue to ram our message down people's throats until they listen, and those of us on various local authorities should again ask how many handicapped people those bodies employ. Let us start from somewhere to see what we can do. And you, Mr Chairman, should do your bit by seeking the information that I have mentioned with regard to those servicing the Forum.

Finally, I come to a point that is personal to me. I have a young niece who attended Fleming Fulton School from the age of three to 19 — she left just last year. She cannot speak or hear, but I refuse to call her deaf and dumb. She may well be deaf, but she is far from dumb. She went away on holiday with children from all over the United Kingdom and Southern Ireland — I am not talking about kids from Spain or anywhere else — and when I went to meet them I was horrified and amazed to find that they did not have a common language. Surely there should be a language that is common to all those who are deaf. I understand that there may soon be some development on this. I am not fully versed in it, but I think that at long last someone is trying to do something. I appeal to those in responsible positions to take action in respect of this indictment against society. Kids go away together, but they cannot even communicate. They all have the same difficulty. It is entirely wrong, and something will have to be done.

My party and I fully support the motion.

**Mr Clarke:** Mr Eric Smyth has brought to the fore the fallacy that disabled people are not intelligent. It has been proved that such people can be very intelligent — and that includes those who are dyslexic. This should be recognized. I pay tribute to Mr Smyth for his courage and for what he has achieved. Many people are equally affected by this disability. Everyone should be encouraged to draw them out and give them every opportunity. Some progress has been made by way of the Disability Discrimination Act, but that legislation does not cover all that disabled people require. There is no commission to see that its provisions are properly implemented. There should be such a body to ensure that legislation is effective and to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. It should set out a code of practice, and assistance should be given to people with individual complaints.

*3.15 pm*

The current legislation is totally inadequate. In the absence of a commission, few disabled people are prepared to take legal action. In any case, as I understand it, they would not receive legal aid. The Act has other seriously flawed parts, including the definition of disability, and there is a lack of comprehensive provision on education and transport. It is important to note that the vast majority of employers in Northern Ireland favour the introduction of effective equality legislation for disabled people. A report published by the Employers' Forum on Disability outlines research which demonstrated that over 80% of employers support the introduction of civil-rights legislation for people with disabilities. And



two thirds of them support the establishment of a disability commission with enforcement powers.

We live in a society where disabled people are not getting a fair deal. We must work to see that they are not discriminated against. Progress has been made, but it is clear that the battle against disability bias must be fought. We must continue to put pressure on the Government, in the hope that changes will be made.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** Does the Member agree that one of the ways in which the Government could do what he is suggesting is to stop wasting resources on futile organizations like the Fair Employment Commission? Does he agree that they should establish a real commission to deal with real issues, such as fair employment for disabled people, instead of focusing on side-issues, such as political and religious discrimination? Surely money should be channelled into something sensible, like action against discrimination on grounds of sex or of disability?

**Mr Clarke:** Anti-discrimination provision should be broadened out to include people with disabilities. The disabled have a lot to offer. They should be permitted to play a full part in society and to develop their full potential.

I support the motion.

**Mr McKee:** My party asked me for possible topics for debate in the Forum, and disability is the one I suggested. I am glad that a subject so worthy of debate was taken up.

In common with Mr Dodds, Mr McCarthy and others, I know something about the disabled, as I have a brother who had his legs blown off by a bomb placed under his car. I know what it is like to see people disabled, to see what they have to cope with and how their lives change.

We in this country are especially aware of those with disabilities. We think of all the IRA bombs which have exploded and of the many policemen, UDR members and others who are permanently disabled, not by accident but deliberately. Politicians and those on the fringe have made some fine speeches about disability as a result of violence, and, while I am not suggesting that they themselves are involved, I hope that they will use their influence to effect.

In Northern Ireland we have a lot to be ashamed of when we consider the many people who have been disabled by knee-cappings, the hurley bat, the baseball bat and the concrete block — people who are permanently trailing their legs or are on crutches or in wheelchairs. There should be a body to outlaw discrimination against the disabled, a body with the law behind it and with real muscle, so that something permanent can be done.

Under the terms of the present legislation a business with fewer than 20 workers is not obliged to employ any disabled persons. The majority of employers in Northern Ireland fall into this category, and this limits the scope of the disabled when looking for a job. Disabled people have the same rights as others. They are entitled to work, to have a home and to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience. Why are they being treated



differently? Shame on this Government for treating fellow human beings in such a way. Something has to change.

Some adaptations have been made in public transport, but for many it is too little too late. They have had to live their lives handicapped — rather, disabled (the disabled are not handicapped; they are not brain-dead; they can think for themselves, and it is an insult to call them handicapped).

I have two young nephews who have cystic fibrosis, so I know a bit about disability. More should be done for the disabled. Mr Robinson made a very valid point when he said that all forms of health care — dental treatment and eye treatment, for example — should be free. It is wrong that the disabled, many of whom have only their benefit to live on, should have to pay for such services.

Another area where the Government fall down — in many cases, I think, deliberately — is that of home adaptations. My mother suffered a stroke and became eligible for home adaptations, but they had not been carried out when she died. That is a disgrace. I think that the Department deliberately waits for a period to see if it is worth spending the money — to see if it is going to get value for money. Shame on an uncaring, unsympathetic Government that treats people in such a way.

I support the motion. I support what Mr Smyth said. I hope that if a Committee cannot be set up, the present Health Committee will take this issue on board. We are grateful for the opportunity to discuss the question of disability. I hope that something good will come out of the debate.

It is interesting to look around the Chamber and see how many Members are absent. Some left after making their speeches. Others, like the Nationalist and Labour representatives, lectured us on not getting down to the bread-and-butter issues. Who is instigating these debates? Who takes part in them? Those of us who were previously criticized. Some Members may smile and laugh, but they do not participate very much. Give them an old issue — Loyalism or Unionism, or the defence of Republicanism — and they are on their feet squealing blue murder, but when it comes to these issues, they say very little.

**Mr McCarthy:** Disability knows no borders or boundaries. It is not appropriate to introduce the matter of political or religious differences into a debate on disability.

**Mr McKee:** We are lectured so often by these people for not having debates on real issues. What debates are they instigating? When Unionists and Loyalists debate important issues, where are they? They are strangely silent.

**Lord Alderdice:** I did not intend to speak in this debate, but I want to voice strong support for many of the points made — and made very well — by people who have personal experience of disabilities and to respond to what has been said about two issues in particular.

Mr Hugh Smyth and Mr Dodds said that in the United States of America there is a different attitude, because it is accepted there that disabled people have a God-given right to certain things. I wish that were the reason why things are different in the States. It is not.



Like every other human being, disabled people do have God-given rights, but the fact that God gives us rights does not necessarily mean that those rights are respected by other people.

The rights of the disabled were not respected more in the United States than anywhere else. Disabled people themselves and others who were concerned worked extremely hard to have human-rights legislation put in place — legislation that protects the rights of the disabled, not just on one or two issues, but on a wide range of matters. That is one of the reasons I and my Colleagues so strongly support this motion. We want to see human-rights legislation for the disabled put in place. I am beginning to feel that, rather than lots of different commissions and lots of different sets of rights for different groups of people, we want something larger that deals with the rights of everyone. It should not be a matter of separating us into different groups — groups which, as Mr Eric Smyth very movingly pointed out, are often scapegoated in one way or another.

All of us have rights, whatever background we come from. At some point we might look more closely at the question of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland and at how it might be implemented. It will never be perfect, but it is important to point out that many of the reforms that have taken place in the United States came about precisely because human-rights legislation that encompassed the disabled, as well as others, had been put in place. We should like to see something similar here. We could then be more proud of our community, knowing that everyone was protected.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** Does the Member agree that one of the best ways of achieving something concrete is for disabled people to attend ordinary state schools where possible?

**Lord Alderdice:** Yes, indeed.

That takes me on to the second issue, which was raised by Mr McCartney. I agree with him about the need to inject resources into community care. At present the opposite is happening. Most of the parties represented here have gone to see the Minister and have made other representations. They have said and done all that they can, but still there are 3% cuts this year — cuts that apply not just to hospitals but also to care in the community. And we have been told that there will be similar cuts next year and the following year. There is no point in pretending that you can have proper community care with less and less money, let alone with the same amount.

*3.30 pm*

However, I disagree very strongly indeed with Mr McCartney's description of references to care in the community as just a lot of sociological gobbledegook. It is not. It is true that the Government have used the concept of care in the community to cut hospital resources and reduce bed numbers, but that is not what community care means. What community care means is exactly as was stated earlier — namely, that people do not have to be put somewhere just because they are disabled, handicapped or unwell. We should do what is necessary to ensure that, as far as possible, they can live as the rest of us live in the community.



Last year I saw some of the most moving things that I have ever seen. Just before Christmas I went to visit a number of folk in my own area who had been in long-term care and who would be described as mentally handicapped or, in the new terminology, as suffering from learning disability. People had said "These folk are not capable of looking after themselves. They will only make a mess of themselves." Yet some of them are now living in their own houses or flats. Somebody calls every day to make sure that things are going all right. When I went in, they were so proud to show me their kitchens and their bedrooms. Their homes were immaculate — even beautiful. They had a great sense of pride. They were able to manage, and their self-esteem and health had improved, with the result that they were able to contribute to the community.

I think of people who say "No, no, no. Most of these folk cannot manage at all. Keep them in some institution, for if you let them out they will only commit terrible crimes." That is not true. Research has been done on people with mental handicap — or, as we now call it, learning disability — and people who are mentally ill. I am referring to individuals who had been in hospital on a chronic basis for a long time. Over a five-year period almost every one of about 1,200 was followed up, and not one was found to have committed a serious crime. None of them were homeless, and only three, I think, were no longer in contact with appropriate services.

Of course, in other parts in Northern Ireland — the United Kingdom as a whole, in fact — there has not, for various reasons, been the same level of care, with the result that horrible things have happened and people have been homeless. But, as we rightly criticize the Government for cutting resources, let us not forget the tremendous work that has been done by many community psychiatric nurses, district nurses, GPs, social workers, people in domiciliary care, domestic assistants and all sorts of others who have gone to great lengths to make sure that folk are able to move out into the community to participate in leisure events and take part in educational projects of various kinds.

That has happened because this community, despite all the horrible things we do to each other, has a sense of concern for the disabled. We know this from charitable giving, from the preparedness of people to foster and adopt children, and from the willingness to look after folk in the community. While I agree entirely with Mr McCartney about the question of resources, I emphasize that it is wrong to suggest that promoting the notion of caring for people in the community is nothing more than an attempt to cut funds. Those who really believe in it and work for it want all our people to have the opportunity to be together in the community, to work with each other, and not to be set aside if they have certain kinds of disability.

There are those whose disability is so serious that they have to be in institutional care of some type. But can we not try to make sure that whatever institution they are in is not so far away that the family cannot visit? It should not be so inaccessible or expensive to get to that people who want to keep in touch are, in effect, cut off.

That is what community care is about, and if the Government have prostituted the term by making it a determinant of money, that is no reason to throw the concept out. We in the Forum should commit ourselves to making sure that community care is properly funded



and supported and provides the requisite standard and quality of life, whatever people's disabilities may be. As has been said by Mr Smyth, we all have our own disabilities.

**Mr Tom Robinson:** We are all grateful to Mrs Parkes for having opened the debate and produced the relevant figures. One does not realize the extent of the problem until one sees the figures. About 17.4% of the adult population of Northern Ireland have some form of disability. I am led to believe that that is the highest rate in the United Kingdom.

I greatly welcome the Disability Discrimination Act. Many people will say that it is too little too late and that it is flawed in many ways, but, in my opinion, it is better than no legislation at all. Having discussed the matter with a number of disabled people before coming to the Forum, I know that many of them have reservations about the Act. None the less, they consider it a step in the right direction and a good foundation for further legislation. I have no doubt that our colleagues at Westminster will continue to press for better provision for the disabled.

As Mr Robinson or Mr Dodds said, this was not the top priority in the Government's legislative programme. The Bill was introduced because Members of Parliament and other public representatives, out of a genuine desire to help the disabled, continued to embarrass the Government. We have reason to be grateful to councillors and other public representatives who, together with our Westminster colleagues, kept the pressure on the Government.

Many people have a misconception of the term "disabled". They are inclined to think only of someone who has lost a limb. As has already been pointed out, disablement has a much wider definition. Many of us take for granted the fact that we have no difficulty with mobility. That we are all going to walk out of here today is something we take for granted. But it can be difficult for the able-bodied to relate to the everyday needs of the disabled. This is a tremendous problem.

Most people who are disabled are not looking for pity, but they want the same opportunities, rights and privileges as the able-bodied. Mr McKee referred to a severely disabled person whom I know very well. I admire his zest for life. He is a shining example to all of us. His tenacity is a credit to him. Perhaps those who have physical disabilities themselves are in the best position to appreciate the needs of the disabled and to speak on their behalf.

I hope that the Government will not rest on their laurels, saying that they have done their bit for the disabled. It has been pointed out by Member after Member that the legislation is flawed. We all accept — as, I hope, will the Government — that amendments will be required to provide additional rights for the disabled. The Government have been very quick to highlight the need for legislation in respect of religious or racial discrimination. It is a great pity that, once again, they had to be coerced into taking action on behalf of the disabled. This may have had more to do with votes than with a genuine desire to help those who are less fortunate.

Reference has been made to those parts of the Act that do not go far enough. I do not intend to go into them in great detail, but I want to highlight three. It is regrettable that the Northern Ireland Disability Council has been given only limited powers. I understand that



the legislation does not cover indirect discrimination, and, as has been pointed out, not all employers are included. I have no doubt that there is employment discrimination. I am not saying that it is deliberate, but I believe that, human nature being as it is, a person who can employ someone who is not disabled will go down that road. Also, the legislation must be extended to employers with fewer than 20 workers.

Disabled people are entitled to every bit of assistance that society can give them. They have enough problems without having to cope with undue obstacles. Mobility is undoubtedly a problem for people who live in urban areas, but more so for those who live in rural areas. There is also a mobility gap between people with unlimited access to a private car and the financial means to satisfy personal travel requirements and those who just subsist. Well, the problem is multiplied many times in the case of disabled people who happen to live in rural areas. I accept that lack of mobility can result in loss of independence and self-esteem, and even in poor health. We have not just a moral but also a legal obligation to ensure that those who are disabled are not destined to spend years in isolation, unable to get out of their homes because of mobility problems. This is especially important in the case of those who have no private transport.

Most relevant matters have been very adequately covered. There is just one point that I would like to make, in order to finish on a positive note. I wish to congratulate those involved in setting up the Belfast shopability scheme. There may be Members from the Belfast area who are more familiar with it than I am, but I understand that its purpose is to provide a means of transport for people with limited mobility. We still have a long way to go — such schemes, I am led to believe, having been set up in the rest of the United Kingdom some 17 years ago. There are 150 in Britain. I understand that the Minister, Mr Moss, has authorized the financing of a feasibility study.

I am sure that the motion has the support of all Members. It is a step in the right direction, but Northern Ireland has a long way to go in the area of helping the disabled.

3.45 pm

**The Chairman:** As it is exactly a quarter to four, and we have six more contributions, I suggest that we extend the sitting briefly and ask those Members to confine themselves to five minutes each. That would bring us neatly to quarter past four. Does that seem a good idea?

*Debate suspended.*

*Resolved:*

That the meeting be extended to 4.15 pm. — [The Chairman]

*Debate resumed.*

**Mrs Beattie:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this very important debate. As a member of the newly formed Health Committee, I hope to gather some useful information from Members' comments for future reference.



My first point — and one that should be highlighted — is that the vast majority of people with a disability live in the community, but services are traditionally based on systems rather than on people. On the specific matter of the adaptation of homes, I consider the service provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the DHSS to be fine, but both decide what is necessary. People with a disability need to be in partnership with them; they need to be involved in the design process and to be represented by a consumer panel. This might go some way towards a vision of a society where people's differences are valued. Everyone will agree that it is wrong and very sad that disabled people are often excluded from areas of life that the rest of us take for granted — for example, public transport. The Disability Discrimination Act enables the Government to set minimum standards for new public transport, including taxis, buses, trains and coaches. People in wheelchairs will eventually be able to hire a taxi on the street or at a rank. Not enough attention is paid to areas earmarked for wheelchairs. Often cars are parked in such spaces.

I conclude by joining Disability Action in welcoming some of the provisions in the Act. However, the legislation could go much further by providing for equal access to all resources. Society should be inclusive.

I too support the motion.

**Mrs Steele:** Like the other May, I am a member of the Health Committee and, as such, anxious to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland who suffers from any type of physical or mental illness or disablement has a good opportunity for treatment and is not hampered in any way by the actions or words of the able-bodied. Like others, I am in the fortunate position of not having any close relative or friends with a serious disability, but I have much experience of their problems through the Ulster Unionists' advice centre in East Antrim. Many Members have aired many problems, and I congratulate them for having done so.

If you talk to anyone with a physical disability or ask the people who care for those with a mental disability you will find that the most common complaint concerns the attitude of many able-bodied people. It was, I think, Mr Foster who called it the "Does he take sugar?" syndrome. That describes it very well. Some people are cruel in their attitude: they do not speak directly to those in wheelchairs. Restaurants, cafes and various transport facilities do not make them welcome. I have some special knowledge of this from a friend who took a handicapped uncle to a very well-known beauty spot and was not welcome in the café.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member agree that most restaurants, cafés, hotels and other eating places have no facilities for the disabled? Disabled people have the same food likes and dislikes as the rest of us.

**Mrs Steele:** I certainly agree. In this case the property was suitable for the disabled, with wheelchair access, but the attitude of the staff, including the Manager, was not good. In fact, the family left, thinking that they were being treated so badly because of the mentally handicapped member. They were very annoyed.



Then there is the problem of name-calling by children. This stems from ignorance of and lack of thought towards those less fortunate than themselves. We must change the hearts and minds of people. We need to educate society in general, but the young in particular. There should be a better understanding of disabled people's problems, and more compassion should be shown towards them. In Larne some progress is already being made in this direction. Robinsvale Special School has a programme of interaction with nearby mainstream primary schools so that their students may be enabled to relate to those with disabilities in a school setting. This leads to greater knowledge and better understanding. It is practical education for the able-bodied and the disabled alike, and a pointer to good citizenship in adult years — something that could be developed further.

Anyone who does not support the motion cannot be aware of the many stumbling-blocks — I mean that quite literally — in the path of the disabled in their daily struggle through life. Sometimes I think that it would do us all good to spend a day in a wheelchair or be blindfolded or have very effective earplugs inserted. That would give us some idea of what our less fortunate brothers and sisters have to contend with every day, and might shake us out of our complacency.

Mrs Parkes and Ms Sagar underlined the need for the disabled to be allowed to attend mainstream schools. Where this is possible, I support the idea completely. But we must foster greater awareness among able-bodied people, adult and young alike, of the problems. I advocate a programme of education for us all. This could only benefit the disabled by helping to eradicate the discrimination that they undoubtedly face.

I support the motion.

**Mr Bolton:** It is indeed a serious indictment of those who govern us that we are hearing today about so much discrimination against the disabled. Most comment has been about physically disabled adults, who are, incidentally, represented in the Chamber today. As that sector has been covered adequately, I shall refer to young people with moderate or severe learning difficulties.

For many years, as all Members know, these people came under the umbrella of the Department of Health. In recent years responsibility was transferred to the education and library boards. I have no desire either to prolong the debate or to be parochial, but I want to refer to a burning issue in the area that I represent. It concerns the North Eastern Education and Library Board. We have identified a need for two new schools for young people with moderate or severe learning difficulties — one in Antrim and one in Coleraine. Both have been up and down the priority list for a number of years, and the gestation period still rumbles on. In supporting the motion, I want to draw attention to the need for those two schools.

**Mr Calvert:** I rise to support the motion.

Today's debate on this very important subject proves, without a shadow of doubt, the worth of the Forum. Despite the views of the Alliance Leader, Lord Alderdice, and the SDLP's boycotting of the Forum, nothing could be more important than a debate on the whole question of disability. Only when one becomes disabled does the message get home.



The Disability Discrimination Act, which received the Royal Assent in November 1995, was, as I understand it, a hurried response from the Government to pressure from disabled people and their allies for appropriate anti-discrimination legislation.

Disability can happen to anyone at any time, perhaps through an accident at home, on the roads or at work. I am reminded of two such cases. A constituent of mine — a young man in his late teens — decided to do a charity cycle ride. During the event he was involved in an accident with a car, receiving serious spinal injuries, and he is now confined to a wheelchair. I am glad to say that he is happily married to a lovely young woman, but his case brings home to me how thankful we should be for our health. The other case is that of a former workmate of mine. He was a junior manager in Belfast Rope Works when I worked there. He was leaving one Friday, having given in his notice as he was leaving to start up his own business on the next Monday. On the Saturday between he was playing rugby, and in a tackle he received spinal injuries, which confined him to a wheelchair.

Mr Rodgers mentioned the measures that Belfast City Council has taken to improve access for disabled people. We in Lisburn Borough Council have spent over £25,000 on access provision for the disabled. We have put in a new lift for access to the council chamber, and new ramps have been provided at the front of the civic building.

May I, at this point, congratulate the Chief Executive of Disability Action, Monica Williams. On Wednesday 25 September, at a gala sponsored by Lisburn Borough Council and Saville's, the local Vauxhall dealer, she received a Making a Difference to Northern Ireland special award for her services to the disabled — a fitting tribute to a great campaigner for the disabled. Disability Action should be supported. The Disability Discrimination Act is weak and ineffective. We need to combine to campaign for comprehensive, enforceable legislation. I am very concerned about the difficulties experienced by the disabled when seeking planning permission for new homes. Planning policy is too strict. Many disabled people in my constituency live in an area of special control, where an applicant has to prove need. Even with consultants' reports, doctors' letters and social-services reports, they are being turned down, and representation to the director of planning makes no difference. This is just not good enough.

Some years ago, a lady who had just bought one of those motorized three-wheel cycles — they were quite new then — came to me and asked if I, as a councillor, could do something about getting the footpath dropped to enable her to ride up the kerb. I must congratulate the Roads Service — certainly in Lagan Valley — for providing dropped kerbs. Work has been carried out on many footpaths, and this is helping the disabled to become more independent. We must make changes, where necessary, in many other aspects of their everyday life.

I fully support the motion. I hope that this debate will give encouragement to the disabled by showing that the Forum takes their needs seriously. But the Government must pay attention to what has been said and make the necessary changes to the Act.



4.00 pm

**The Chairman:** Thank you, Mr Calvert. You have all been so succinct. Mr Poots, you have 15 minutes, but you do not have to take all of it.

**Mr Poots:** This subject is very close to my heart. My oldest brother was mentally handicapped at birth. Mr Eric Smyth talked about disabled people being sneered at, and I know how he feels. I remember travelling past Muckamore Abbey Hospital, where my brother was, and hearing the sneering remarks of children in the bus. It was very hurtful. Sadly, you expect that from children, but you do not expect it from adults. Some people treat the handicapped in an inappropriate way. Perhaps the media, particularly the press, could help. For example, they could run a series of articles on disabled people and the problems that they face and make the point that more should be done to integrate them into the community. More could be made of the fact that we are all equal.

One Member was critical of the motability scheme. There may be people who abuse that scheme, but I know that 95% of those involved are grateful for it and do not abuse it. Although the Government supply finance, money is taken out of the disability living allowance. Car and insurance companies also put up funds. It is a superb scheme, particularly for people who live in rural areas, and I want to put on record my support for it.

Government funding for NICOD amounts to about £190,000 — a paltry sum, given the work that the body is involved in. The assisted living scheme is particularly good. It helps those who want to live in the community to set up home. Like Lord Alderdice, I believe that NICOD is worthy of more support. It is also involved in training centres, accommodation, community-challenge programmes, foundation training, vocational training, social and life skills, job support, work placement and integration development. I commend its work to the Forum.

All public buildings should be accessible to disabled people. A friend of mine has spina bifida. He and his wife went to a cinema and were turned away because, being in a wheelchair, he was regarded as a fire risk. That is insulting. A row of seats could be taken out to provide space for wheelchairs.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member agree that at certain outside sporting events there are facilities for the disabled? For example, the Northern Ireland football team and some local teams have made provision at the edge of the pitch for the wheelchair-bound spectators. Does the Member agree that that is a step in the right direction and that it should encourage other sporting organizations to do likewise?

**Mr Poots:** Yes. I am sure that people greatly appreciate the opportunity to enjoy or participate in these events.

I also support the idea of inclusive education. Educating disabled people in ordinary schools is a means of integrating them into the community. As far as possible, the disabled should have full access to social and public life.



I support the motion, and I commend Mrs Parkes for the way she put it forward. It was a well-thought-out and well-researched presentation.

**The Chairman:** I have two more people who want to fill the 10 unforgiving minutes that remain.

**Mr Cedric Wilson:** I want to develop one comment made by Mr Eric Smyth. Prior to my election to the Forum and to the talks team, I worked daily with people who have a wide range of handicaps and disabilities. I could speak at some length about the difficulties that those people experience, but I will simply identify with the motion and congratulate Mrs Parkes on introducing it. Many comments on the debate have been most helpful. The disabled will probably be very encouraged by the fact that the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland have some understanding of their situation and want to see it improved.

When this matter goes back to the Business Committee — as you, Mr Chairman, suggested, in response to Mr Smyth's comments, it should — a small working party should be set up to consider the question of legislation. It is with the best of intentions that Forum Members express their views about those with disabilities, but a working party could co-opt disabled people, who could play a full role in preparing a report.

I am very pleased to identify with the motion.

**Mr Casey:** I am grateful for the opportunity to support this motion. I did not intend to speak on the subject — if you come in at the end, there is very little left to say — but, just in case Mr McKee thinks we do not have any contribution to make, I shall say a few words.

In the past, disability was looked upon as something which made a person different and, indeed, inferior to those of us who think we are normal. This was expressed very well by Mr Eric Smyth when he talked about his own disabilities. When we hear someone speaking like that, about things that affect him personally, it hits home. It makes the situation more poignant and gives us a better perspective of disability. But, as Mr Smyth said, if we lose in some areas, we gain in others. He gave as an example the love exuded by the little child. We could all benefit from a share of that love. There are blessings which come with affliction.

We should congratulate people like Monica Wilson. I have known Monica for quite a while. She was employed with the Disability Action Council and with organizations which encourage adequate provision for people with disabilities, such as the William Keown Trust and the SHARE complex in Fermanagh, which was set up to provide holidays and respite for people with disabilities. As another Member pointed out, what the disabled and their families have to endure is brought home to us when our own families are affected. I lost my son-in-law a couple of months ago, and I have a grandson of 22 who is confined to a wheelchair, so I know, at first hand, something about disability.

The people who make the longest and most eloquent speeches do not always have the greatest involvement in their communities. I am involved in a very substantial way in providing training and employment and — in a new venture — housing, I hope, for young



people with disabilities so that they can be integrated into the community. It is wrong to jump to conclusions about whether people have a contribution to make. The body that bears the greatest responsibility for the failure to provide facilities and finance for the disabled is the very Government that introduced this legislation, as other Members have said.

There is a song which goes "Little things mean a lot." The little things that we enjoy but to which the disabled do not have access are food for thought.

**Mr Robert John White:** I would like to speak on behalf of the oldies, but I will not quadruplicate anything that has been said already.

In 1977 a number of people involved in local councils and I wrote to the DOE and many other people. Their response was that what we wanted was impossible. Such things take time — sometimes 20 years. Much has been said about rights. God-given rights have been mentioned. God-given rights are very few, and the Government restrict them. Their motto is "Dieu et mon droit" — God and my right. That, I think, we accept. Rights are, in fact, privileges conferred by society — all of them, except one. God's salvation, which is free when you ask for it properly.

But rights cost money. We have debated at length. We have talked about everything. We have made suggestions to the Government, but are we prepared to follow them through? Are we prepared to say "Yes, we as taxpayers will meet the cost"?

I support the motion and in its entirety, but are we saying to the Government "Do the job, and we will pay."?

**The Chairman:** Thank you, Mr White. You have given your Colleague Mr Hussey about 30 seconds. He tells me that he has a point of such moment that it must be expressed.

**Mr Hussey:** I shall be very succinct. I support the motion and, in so doing, simply say that I do not recognize disability. I recognize fellow human beings. My best friend is a 35-year-old man who is regarded by some as mentally retarded. I have no hesitation in saying that he is the best friend I have ever had.

I support the motion.

**The Chairman:** Mr Brewster too has a world-shaking point to make in 30 seconds.

**Mr Brewster:** My point has nothing to do with the debate. I should like, on behalf of my party, you, Mr Chairman, to remind that tomorrow is Ulster Day and to wish you, however you and your Colleagues choose to celebrate it, a happy Ulster Day. I am sure that the other parties will do the same.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very much.

I shall now put the Question.



**Mr Hugh Smyth:** What about Mr Eric Smyth's request that we send the matter back to the Business Committee?

**The Chairman:** No.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

This Forum calls for effective legislation to outlaw discrimination against people with disabilities. Furthermore, this Forum, while recognizing the progress that has been made, calls for the setting up of a body, with legal powers, to enforce such legislation and to champion the rights of people with disabilities.

### FORUM: BUSINESS

**The Chairman:** Finally, the Business Committee will be looking at the suggestion arising from Mr Eric Smyth's speech, supported by Mr Hugh Smyth. We shall also be discussing the matter of the Christmas recess — when it should be and what we should do about it. Perhaps you would give some thought to that.

Have a nice weekend, especially tomorrow, Ulster Day.

*The meeting was adjourned at 4.15 pm.*