

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 13 December 1996

The meeting was called to order at 10.04 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: This is the last meeting of the Forum in 1996. At the close of business today we shall adjourn for the Christmas and New Year period, and we will reconvene on 10 January 1997. May I take this opportunity to wish all Members and their families a happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

FORUM BUSINESS

The Chairman: The business before us today is outlined on the Order Paper. You will note that the Business Committee, at its meeting yesterday, decided unanimously that the time set aside for a special Adjournment debate be devoted to a motion on the public-expenditure cuts announced by the Secretary of State last Tuesday. In view of time constraints, I propose that speeches be limited to five minutes. Is that acceptable?

It was so decided.

The Chairman: I intend to close that debate at noon so that preparations can be made for the reception at 1.30 pm.

BOYCOTT OF BUSINESSES

The Chairman: Last week Mr Cedric Wilson, Chairman of Standing Committee A, referred to the inaccuracy of a report in the media which attributed remarks about the Committee's review of the boycotting of businesses to a member of the Women's Coalition. I wrote to Ms McWilliams on this matter and had a meeting with the Women's Coalition this morning. Ms McWilliams and her colleagues have assured me that the view expressed in the newspaper as to why the debate had been postponed did not come from them. In addition, the newspaper concerned published on Saturday evening the correct version of events. In these circumstances I am content to let the matter rest.

MR MALACHI CURRAN

The Chairman: On behalf of the Forum I wish to express sympathy to Mr Malachi Curran. I was told that he was very ill, but I have been in touch with the family, and it seems that he is not quite as bad as we feared. Indeed, he is now home from hospital. I am sure that several Members will join me in wishing him a speedy return to good health.

Several Members: Hear, hear.

BOYCOTT OF BUSINESSES

Mr Cedric Wilson: I beg to move the following motion:

That the Forum adopts the report on the review of boycott of businesses prepared by Standing Committee A (Public Order Issues).

In view of the goodwill that has been so apparent among all parties that participated, and bearing in mind the comments made to me by Members who have read the document, I have little doubt that this report will be adopted by the Forum. Then you, Mr Chairman, will have to come to a view as to whether the report would command cross-community support. Unfortunately, several very worthwhile resolutions that united all the parties participating in the Forum have had to be negated on the ground that, in your view, they would not command cross-community support. That is a regrettable feature of this body. However, Mr Chairman, I do not believe that you will face such a difficulty at the end of this debate. Any reasonable and sane person in Northern Ireland who is aware of the problems faced by traders in relation to the matter of boycotts would have no difficulty in fully endorsing the report's contents, including the recommendations.

As I have indicated, the Committee had a great deal of work to get through. We took evidence from a wide range of bodies. I apologize once again for the delay in presenting the report. It was indeed an exercise in democracy to take part in the Committee's deliberations and to work with all the parties that participated. Regrettably, Committee A, like other Committees and, indeed, the Forum itself, suffered from the action of those who decided to boycott it. Tribute is due to the Vice-Chairman, Mr Jeffrey Donaldson, to the Clerk, Ms Gail McKibbin, and to all others who took part in the exercise.

Unlike the Committees that have produced reports on educational, agricultural and economic matters, Standing Committee A deals with issues that are potentially difficult politically. We did not attempt to duck the issues, though there may be a temptation in the Forum and its Committees, during this period when we are trying to get the body rooted, to produce reports on the basis of the lowest common denominator with a view to securing the endorsement of all parties. We will always attempt to achieve broad consensus, to bring as many people as possible with us, but it will be difficult to deliver all the parties all the time. However, the atmosphere and the working relationships that we developed will stand the Forum and its Committee in good stead.

There were differences of opinion, particularly when it came to putting the report together. Sometimes we found ourselves discussing whether a particular word was appropriate. Only at the very last minute did the Women's Coalition say that they were not happy with the report. They made no attempt to change anything until we reached the last chapter.

I have no doubt that anyone considering the report in a dispassionate and fair manner will find nothing objectionable in it. It is just a statement of facts.

I pay tribute to all those bodies that took the time to come and give evidence — the Association of Small Businesses, the Federation of Small Businesses, the chambers of trade and commerce, the RUC, community-relations bodies and Business and Professional People for the Union. Their evidence was striking, and their views are reflected in the report.

This is not a one-sided or lopsided report. It looks at all the issues. In some cases drawing conclusions would have been very difficult. We received conflicting evidence as to the extent of the boycott and how it continues to affect traders, particularly in the border counties. On one hand, the Federation of Small Businesses believed that there was an improvement amongst the members they had canvassed. On the other hand, Business and Professional People for the Union, which I commend for working very closely with traders in the border counties — it was they who initially drew attention to the difficulties those people were facing — reported that traders, particularly in Castlederg, continue to suffer. Maybe information was coming from people with different experiences.

Thus it would have been improper for us to conclude that boycotting is still widespread. Instead, we have presented both views in the report and leave it to Members, who have experience in their own areas, to develop the matter. We suggest that monitoring of the situation continue, in the hope that in the new year we shall be able to inform the Forum that this nasty piece of sectarian evil is beginning to abate.

10.15 am

I want to deal briefly with the contents of the report. Members have had at least a week to read it, and I look forward to hearing their contributions. The section on the effects of boycotting describe the practice as a social evil. Strong support for this view was expressed by all those who made submissions.

The first conclusion is that the campaign was indeed orchestrated by the Nationalist or Republican movement in the border counties as part of an ongoing war of attrition against the Protestant communities there. That was the view not just of myself and many other members of the Committee but also of the RUC, the community-relations people, the Federation of Small Businesses and all the others, and anyone who says otherwise is misinforming people.

In our first recommendation we ask those who are engaged in this campaign to stop immediately. Secondly, we say that the Committee should continue to monitor the situation. Thirdly, we recommend that Government bodies and agencies be lobbied about what they can do for the traders. Fourthly, we recommend that law and order continue to be enforced in these areas. Our fifth recommendation is that political leadership be provided and that those

in positions of influence in their areas ask people to go back to shopping with Protestant traders.

The final recommendation concerns the media. Some people express concern that the media may cause further problems for traders by hyping up the situation. I want to pay a special tribute to the 'News Letter', and to Donna Carton in particular, for the series on communities in conflict. That was reasonable, responsible and good journalism, laying out the facts, and not a case of burying one's head in the sand. People here may tell us that we should not discuss this matter. Well, the last thing that the traders who are feeling the effects want is to be ignored.

Looking forward to 1997, I hope that the message going out to the traders still feeling the effects of boycotting will be that they have the support, understanding and sympathy of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. We look forward to next year, believing that the only answer to the problems that surround us will take account of the fact that the cancer of terrorism must be removed before the healing process can begin. And the healing process can best be nurtured, enabling the community to grow together and bridge the divide, if all people are equal under the law and equally subject to the law.

Mr Carrick: May I first express the wish to be associated with the remarks of the Committee Chairman, Mr Wilson, in acknowledging the work done by Committee members and staff and pay tribute to the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman for their efficient and orderly conduct of business.

Boycotting is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it dates back to the nineteenth century. It is used as an economic weapon to impose a political agenda foreign to the wishes of the targeted party, group or community, usually on the basis of class, creed or culture. Responsibility for this latest social evil and for the disastrous downward spiral in community relations in the affected areas can without doubt be laid at the door of Sinn Fein/IRA. Sinn Fein/IRA's hand-wringing and ritual denial of responsibility for orchestrating the boycott of Protestant businesses, as recorded in paragraph 2.7 of the report, rings hollow when one remembers their defence of this social evil as a legitimate form of protest. Sanctimonious statements from Republicans are as lacking in credibility as is the notion of camels skating on frozen desert sands.

Those who have experienced the callous and cruel methods of Sinn Fein/IRA barbarity have no illusions about the Republican intent of the current boycott. The whole thrust of the evil campaign is to drive Protestants out of certain areas by economic deprivation. While some Members may have difficulty in recognizing that this is just a further tactic in the war of attrition against the Protestant community, the hard-pressed victims and their families have no hesitation in testifying to the blatantly sectarian weapon that is being wielded against them.

There can be no fudging or watering down of the irrefutable evidence gathered from reputable individuals, responsible organizations and the RUC. Those who seek to skirt round the issue or who fail to face up to the reality of Republican sectarian boycotting do a disservice to the entire community. While there was some limited evidence of attempts in

Protestant areas to boycott Roman Catholic businesses, these were not sustained by the Protestant community as a whole. They had no support and thus petered out.

If there is any difficulty in accepting this report, I refer those who are in doubt to the victims at the coal-face of boycotting. Those people and their families know all about the smile that gives way to the stab in the back, the handshake that gives way to putting the boot in and honeyed words that give way to actions of war. We have heard some prevarication, but there can be no ambivalence on this matter. There is no ambiguity. The issues are clear. This is an attack upon the Protestant community. The promoters and organizers must be ostracized by all who reject this antisocial and pernicious weapon.

I commend the report to The Forum, and I trust that the Women's Coalition Members, who have had some doubts and reservations, will stand back and reflect. I appeal to them to speak to the grannies, mothers and daughters of those who have been intimidated. Let them face up to the real issue and stand for what they believe in — civil and religious liberty, not just for the Nationalist community but also for the Protestant community.

Let there be no whingeing and no carping about this matter.

Sir Oliver Napier: I support the report. I should like, first, to get some definition of boycotting. We all have a right to prefer one shop over another because, for example, its prices are lower or its staff more pleasant. If I am stopped at an illegal barricade on the Queen's highway and recognize there my butcher, baker or greengrocer, I am quite entitled to say "I will never darken your door again." The evidence available to the Committee indicated that there was an organized boycott against some Protestant traders in some areas. On the basis of the evidence that I heard and read I can come to no conclusion but that it was carefully orchestrated and, in some cases, apparently enforced by intimidation. That is morally wrong. It cannot be justified, and I deplore it on behalf of my party.

Such activity is incredibly bad for community relations. It divides communities. The evidence I am talking about came from bodies like the Federation of Small Businesses, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which have no axe to grind. Evidence was given by people on the ground. I am sorry that the RUC did not feel able to allow us to attach its evidence to our report. It would have helped.

I read in the press that there was some imbalance. Fortunately, that report has now been corrected. I deplore politicians saying "I condemn this, but you must see what the other side has been doing." That is not balance. Where something is wrong, people should come out and say that it is wrong, rather than say "On the other hand, look at what they were doing to us." If something is wrong, let people condemn it. This was wrong, and I condemn it.

If I were to pick out one of the recommendations that my party goes along with, it would be the one contained in paragraph 6.5, where the Committee says that it recognizes the need for clear leadership by those in positions of authority and responsibility in the community. The Committee says that such people should stand up against this kind of thing. That means the people in this Forum. It means elected representatives throughout the country, from all parties. We must all stand up against this and other evils. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with people who are experiencing injustice.

A recent survey by the Federation of Small Businesses puts boycotting into perspective. I hope that it is correct. That body got a 7% response when it asked its members if there was active boycotting of businesses. None said that it was severe; 5% said that it was moderate; 2% said that it was light; and 6% said that they thought that business was returning to normal. I hope that the situation is indeed returning to normal. The sooner that happens, the better for this province.

The Chairman: I am sure that those words about a return to normal will be echoed right across the province.

I have Mr Hugh Smyth next on my list. I treated him so roughly last week that he has decided not to come today. Will he be here later?

A Member: He is boycotting!

The Chairman: My friend Hugh is no boycotter, whatever else he may be!

Mr McMichael: I am not a member of the Committee which produced this report. However, Mr Joe English represents us, and I would like to thank him for his contribution.

I want to thank also the Chairman, other members and staff of the Committee for working so hard in examining what is a very difficult and divisive issue. It is clear that there are divisions even among Committee members.

10.30 am

Ultimately, as Sir Oliver Napier has said, individuals have a right to choose where to shop or where not to shop. At the same time those businesses that are directly affected by boycotts have a right to exist. They are entitled to trade normally, without having commercial sectarianism directed against them. And sectarianism is essentially what this is. It is no more or less deplorable than the sectarianism of denying people the right to march on certain routes or to go to their places of worship, and it is no less deplorable than acts of vandalism against churches.

This type of division, sectarianism and intolerance has been re-emerging in the province over the last couple of years, despite our hopes for the evolution of new circumstances in which it would diminish. Indeed, it is starting to escalate. It is unfortunate that we have to focus on issues such as this, but we have a responsibility to give leadership to people whose rights are affected. Unfortunately, the more we do so, the higher becomes the profile of these issues, and the greater their momentum. That is a serious dilemma.

We must provide intelligent leadership, not just in dealing with this issue but to ensure that sectarianism generally is diminished and ultimately eradicated. We encourage people to realize that this is not the sensible way forward. The public representatives in this Forum, as well as those who by their own choice are not here, should take the lead. There is no point in trying to hype up the situation. That will only cause it to flare again.

I am glad that the evidence appears to suggest that the level of boycotting is diminishing, but that is not much consolation to anyone losing business. I therefore support the adoption of this report, in the hope that the situation can be resolved in an intelligent fashion.

Mr Robert John White: Like the Committee Chairman, I believe that you, Mr Chairman, will not have any difficulty in respect of the outcome of this debate. You will no doubt deem the resolution acceptable. As Mr Cedric Wilson said, there is no bias. The report is an attempt to present the facts as we found them. There is no fudging, though the language is softened in a number of places in an effort to make the report acceptable to everybody. The use of language is excellent, and we must commend Ms McKibbin for that. We have described the situation as we found it. I hope that the problem is subsiding.

I want to highlight a particular incident. A former colleague of mine was delivering some medicines in a white plastic bag to an old people's home. On the way there he found himself in front of a blockade. The participants seemed friendly, and he handed the plastic bag over for delivery. As a result of this little contretemps he was accused of bringing food to the people manning the blockade. That, of course, was not his intent at all. Such situations probably arise in other parts of the province.

Mr Stringer's updated report, dated 22 November 1996, says

"So far as an update of the situation is concerned I should advise we had a meeting of all Chambers in our network only two weeks ago. The general tone was that boycotting was reducing now that it was disappearing from the headlines. I am confident that there is a good chance that that pattern of reduction will continue."

I hope and believe that that is true.

Mr McKee: I am pleased to support this report and to recommend it to all Members. I would like to pay tribute to the Committee Chairman. He deserves credit for his fairness and for the courteous way he dealt with those who came to give evidence. I also commend all the witnesses, whose contribution we appreciate. The Secretariat too deserve our thanks. They went to a lot of bother.

After listening to much of the evidence, I was left with the clear opinion that Sinn Féin/IRA were behind this campaign. The Unionist and Protestant people having, after 25 years of murder and mayhem, refused to submit, the terrorists opted for a new tactic — to drive them out by denying them the right to make a living in their own areas. All this happened in loyal Ulster, and I was shocked at the lack of outcry and disappointed in the Roman Catholic Church, from the Cardinal down, for its failure to condemn. These people put their opposition on record, but there was no real force or drive behind their attitude to the boycott. The SDLP did not give a lead when it should have been directing the Roman Catholic and Nationalist community away from this sectarian campaign.

What would have happened if the shoe had been on the other foot? What would have happened if there had been a massive boycott across the province against the Nationalist community? There would have been an outcry throughout Ulster and across America — across the world, indeed — about the poor, down-trodden people being under the jackboot

again. As it was the Unionist and Protestant community who were affected, however, the condemnation was muted.

I was disappointed at the Women's Coalition's attempt to water down the report. But it did not work. The evidence of the unfortunate businessmen and others enduring the campaign was taken on board, and members refused to knuckle down to the suggestions of the Women's Coalition. I pay tribute to the Committee for that.

Indeed, I pay tribute to all the parties that took part in compiling the report. I commend the UDP for its role. Mr Joe English played a very valuable part and put forward some very good points, which we were able to take on board. I am very disappointed, however, in the PUP. Mr Hugh Smyth was going to speak in this debate. How could he have the cheek when his representative walked out of the Committee because the Chairman was alleged to have made a press statement that would offend the Nationalist community? His position had become untenable, and he could not sit under such a Chairman. What about the sensitivities of the poor Protestant community? Have they no rights?

I am surprised that Mr Ervine left the meeting, that he could not make a case for the Protestant and Unionist people who are being boycotted and driven out of their homes and businesses. No wonder Mr Smyth has not turned up today, though it is a duty of every public representative to speak out against this evil. We have got to brand Sinn Féin/IRA for what they are — murderers and thugs now embarked on a campaign against the Protestant business community. But I believe that the campaign will fail. The people are made of stronger stuff, and they will see it through.

I am happy that the Committee undertook this project. Members tackled it well and delivered the goods. People in Ulster and across the world now know that there is intimidation, that there are boycotts and injustice. And the target is the majority in this province. Let the Women's Coalition search their conscience and recognize that Protestants and Unionists do matter and must be supported if they are being driven out of their businesses or homes, as is happening in border areas. Let the Women's Coalition fight for the rights of those people just as they would fight for the rights of the Nationalist community. When I hear that message loud and clear I will be able to say that there is a spark of compassion. But I very much doubt it.

Ms Sagar: The Women's Coalition opposes the motion as it cannot agree with the report presented by Standing Committee A. Let me state our reasons.

We believe that the form and tenor of the report are contrary to the duty of the Forum to promote dialogue, understanding and consensus. The report's conclusions are not based on evidence. Perceptions, assumptions and hearsay are given weight over logic and facts. While perceptions are important, they are no substitute for proper investigation. We believe that Standing Committee A was unable to decide whether it was investigating the matter of boycotting and presenting reliable evidence or was merely passing on stories and the opinions of others.

I would like to turn to the evidence that was presented to the Committee. One lot related to overviews by representative business organizations. First, the Federation of Small

Businesses gave evidence from a survey of some 120 organizations, representing 9% of its membership of 1,400. Evidence showed that 93% had experienced no boycotting, 2% light boycotting, 5% moderate boycotting, and none severe boycotting and that 99% indicated a return to normal.

Secondly, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry carried out two telephone surveys of its extensive membership. In the first — a survey of 31 member chambers (a typical chamber, by the way, has a membership of 150 to 200) — seven made reference to significant boycotting, four indicated a lower level of boycotting, and five indicated only rumours. In the second survey, and at a meeting of all the chambers in November, it was found that boycotting was reducing now that it was disappearing from the headlines.

The RUC and these organizations, as well as others with no political axe to grind, share the view that boycotts do exist but are not widespread. Stories in the media have the effect of exacerbating the situation. Responsible reporting would improve it. The extent of boycotting is diminishing. All these organizations want the politicians and other leaders to act responsibly to help defuse the situation.

10.45 am

Views were also presented to the Committee by small numbers of traders from Castlederg, Pomeroy, Lisnaskea, Bryansford and Portglenone. These people provided a useful insight into perceptions and experiences. The traders believe that the boycotts are orchestrated. They are experiencing a downturn in business, and there is intimidation. Their views were supported by Business and Professional People for the Union. This organization gave no indication of its size. It has been described as a pressure group. We believe that it should be noted that the Chairman of Standing Committee A is associated prominently and publicly with it. While this should not debar him from participation in the Standing Committee, a conflict of interests ought to be noted.

It is unfortunate that the Committee received so few submissions. This is a matter of concern. We believe that it may be indicative of how the Forum is perceived by the wider community. We are not surprised, as it seems to us that the form and tenor of the report simply add to the divisions in society. Unsubstantiated allegations and political point-scoring do nothing to build parity of esteem, counteract myths and misunderstandings across the community or improve community relations. It is unfortunate and, we believe, potentially harmful that the Standing Committee's report should elevate hearsay to the status of evidence and then use it to attack the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Nationalist community in general.

We would like to pick up a point made by the Federation of Small Businesses, which recognizes and respects the right of each individual in our democratic society to purchase goods and services where and from whom he chooses and acknowledges that many wish to exercise their right as a legitimate form of peaceful protest. There are many examples across the world of people using boycotts as a peaceful and moral expression of opposition. For example, many people joined the boycott campaign against South African goods because they objected to apartheid. It is therefore untenable for the report to claim that such action is inconsistent with the wish to be regarded as being committed to exclusively democratic means. People have every right to choose, on an individual basis, to boycott. However, there

is no place in a democratic society for a boycott which is enforced by threat or intimidation. In the divided society which is Northern Ireland, boycotts in themselves are regrettable and add to division. After the divisive events of this year we need to rebuild community relations.

I would like to return to the objective of the Forum — to promote dialogue, understanding and consensus. We believe that Standing Committee A's report is contrary to that. Hearsay is used to attack others. This brings us all into disrepute. We have little confidence in the way Standing Committee A produced its report, which we believe does a disservice to community relations, to the economy and to those who have been boycotted. It has the potential to do further damage, and we believe that it should be withdrawn.

We are also extremely concerned that the Committee is now turning to the issue of parades. We hope that it will consider this matter in an even-handed, careful and balanced way, that it will not just accept hearsay but will undertake a proper investigation, as it should have done in this case.

Yesterday we asked the Business Committee if we might produce an official minority report. Our request was refused. We have therefore produced an unofficial report drawing attention to the points that I have been making. This is available to all Members who wish to read it. We have taken this course because we wish to protect the objectives of the Forum. We oppose the Committee's report in the form in which it appears. The Chairman of the Committee said that the Women's Coalition had made its objections known, through its representative, Barbara McCabe, only at the last minute. In fact, we objected as soon as we had our first copy of the draft. Our objection was stated repeatedly but was ignored.

We ask you, Mr Chairman, to indicate, under Rule 13(1), that in your opinion Standing Committee A's report could not reasonably be deemed to command support across the various traditions in Northern Ireland.

The Chairman: There are four more Members who would like to speak, including Mr Hugh Smyth, who has returned.

Do you want to speak, Mr Smyth?

Mr Hugh Smyth: Not on this subject, Mr Chairman. I have already made my views known.

I understand, however, that someone criticized Mr Ervine for leaving the Committee. Mr Ervine made clear to Standing Committee A and to the Business Committee why —

The Chairman: Yes, but —

Mr Hugh Smyth: You called me to speak, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: You said you did not want to speak.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I changed my mind.

The Chairman: We are a little pushed for time.

Mr Hugh Smyth: That is why I am going to be very brief.

The Committee Chairman was aware that there were difficulties as to how Mr Ervine saw the Chair. I am not going to get involved in that matter. As a Committee Chairman myself, I know how difficult the job is. Anyway, it is unfair to criticize Mr Ervine without looking into his reasons for leaving the Committee.

Only last week the Committee Chairman criticized the Women's Coalition for breaking confidentiality. Mr Ervine's reasons for pulling out may not be quite the same, but the Chairman went on radio to give interviews before the Committee was set up. There are many wrongs on both sides, and I dare say that at some time Mr Ervine will explain his actions.

In any case, I appreciate the hard work that the Committee has put into this report, and it has my full support.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Members of the press and of the public have once again been subjected to an allegation against me. The Forum accepted that I had no control over the BBC in its introduction of me as the Chairman of the Public Order Committee. I took part in that programme as a member of the United Kingdom Unionist Party.

The Chairman: You have made that quite clear.

Mr Cedric Wilson: But I would like to have it logged. I feel that I have a right to defend my position whenever this is raised. I did not speak on behalf of the Committee on that occasion.

The Chairman: Now let us get on, because we have to deal with the very serious matter of £140 million being taken away from the province.

Mrs I Robinson: In commending this report to the Forum, I wish to add my voice to the congratulations that have been expressed to the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman for the excellent way they conducted the meetings of Standing Committee A. They did so in a fair, impartial and level-headed way.

Boycotting is a social evil. It is like a tap that can be turned on or off, depending on the political climate. There is no doubt in my mind that we are witnessing an orchestrated campaign. It was initiated by Sinn Fein/IRA, but unfortunately it appears to be filtering down to ordinary Catholics — people who would in no way support Sinn Fein/IRA but, because of intimidation, are now frightened to be seen using certain Protestant-owned businesses. If there is ever to be normality in Northern Ireland, public representatives must guard against using language that could be interpreted as encouraging this social evil. It is my prayer that the Protestants most seriously affected by boycotting will be supported by all right-thinking folk and that hard-pressed business people will get help from Government agencies.

Is Ms Sagar seriously saying that Mr Laverty and others who, because of fear for their lives and their families' well-being, could not come forward are a figment of our imagination? The more I hear from the Women's Coalition the more I believe that they are another arm of the pan-Nationalist front. They are doing their best to destroy anything that smacks of Unionism or Protestantism. I can come here today and accept the wrongs of Harryville, but they cannot accept the wrongs perpetrated by Nationalists against Protestants. That is a shame. It is a sad position to be in. Thank God only 7,000 idiots voted for these women. I hope that those 7,000 will have their eyes opened and will vote differently next time.

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No.

They say they are a cross-community party, but I have yet to see the Unionist part surface.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. When a Member is attacked in the way that Ms Sagar has been attacked —

Mr Peter Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. This is not a point of order from Ms McWilliams. If a person has been attacked, is it right for somebody else to demand the right to defend that person?

Ms McWilliams: I represent the Coalition, on whose behalf Ms Sagar was speaking. Mrs Robinson would not give way for an alternative viewpoint.

The Chairman: Let us get on. We have a very important subject to discuss after this debate.

Mr Hussey: Like others in this Chamber who realize what is going on in the country, I welcome this report. The situation started with the Nationalist blockade of the Garvaghy Road. Contrary to what other Members have said, in small communities where support for businesses has worked both ways it is not a figment of their imagination that some people are suffering as a result of the initial blockade of the Garvaghy Road.

Businessmen have found themselves in a dilemma: should they make the situation known, or should they keep quiet and hope that it will go away? I am glad that this report has highlighted their plight. Contrary to what someone said today, the boycott is not unsubstantiated. I live in Castlederg and do business with traders there. I know that people are no longer in those shops, despite what others try to tell us. This is not unsubstantiated; it is not a figment of the imagination. It may not be as big a matter as the media sometimes say it is, but in the areas affected its localized nature increases its effect.

I praise the report for highlighting the fact that those who have been affected are to the fore in opposing any reciprocal boycott. They are to be commended for that attitude. And

I know from personal experience that they are totally supported by their elected representatives.

One area of the business world which could have been touched on in the report but is not — perhaps because of fear about coming out in a situation of this type — concerns people who have to go into certain areas to make deliveries. In my constituency some have been affected tremendously. Intimidation on the streets has prevented the purchase of coal, milk and other commodities from them. Perhaps the Committee could take that matter on board.

Rev William McCrea: Does the Member agree that the businessmen of Castlederg, Pomeroy and other parts of Mid Ulster will find the statement of Ms Sagar very annoying and insulting and that their wives too are affected? If certain people were aware of the facts maybe they would not make such stupid remarks.

Is it not a fact that remarks such as we have heard are hurtful to wives and children?

An elderly Roman Catholic gentleman who defied the intimidation by going into a Protestant shop was viciously attacked in a public house. His arm was broken and he had to withdraw his allegation.

11.00 am

Ms McWilliams rose.

Mr Hussey: I will not give way.

I thank Mr McCrea for his information.

Another factor in the area I come from is that business withdrawn from Protestants has not gone to local Catholics. The fact that people are going out of the community is evidence of intimidation, of which they want no part. This has a knock-on effect. Cash is being taken out of the local community. People are scared, so they go to the bigger towns, where they can be more anonymous.

Apart from the great annoyance and the great fear, it is very hurtful that the pattern of trade in many small communities has been broken. A new pattern has been established. Unfortunately, this is becoming institutionalized. Worried traders wonder how they are to get back to the way things were. And these people were not involved in any of the incidents through the summer.

The Chairman: Mr Donaldson, will you please wind up as quickly as you can.

Mr Donaldson: As Vice-Chairman of the Committee I should like to add to the expressions of thanks to the Chairman and the other members, but especially to the Secretariat, and in particular Ms Gail McKibbin, who has been of tremendous assistance.

I cannot avoid referring to the comments of the Women's Coalition, whose unofficial minority report I have read. I want to touch on a few aspects of that report. Some things

need to be brought out as they were not mentioned in Ms Sagar's comments. In the background section of their report the Coalition say that the boycotts are a result and should be set in the context of the events over the summer. Once again the stand-off at Garvaghy Road is being blamed for all the social ills and evils in Northern Ireland.

The report lists a number of things that have happened — the boycotting of businesses, the picketing of churches, the burning of schools and churches — but there is no mention of the illegal activities designed to prevent lawful procession or of the burning of Orange halls. Why? Because the people and places concerned are Protestant. Like other Members, I ask the Women's Coalition when they are going to start criticizing those who attack Protestants. When will they stop being sectarian? They are perceived as a sectarian organization. Why does their report not mention the burning of Orange halls or the attacks on legal demonstrations? Why do they have to refer specifically to activities that they perceive to be directed against the Catholic community?

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mr Donaldson: I will not. The Lady had ample opportunity to speak.

The Women's Coalition say that the Committee's report attacks the Nationalist community. They say that no submissions were received from that community. Why were there no submissions? Because the SDLP are themselves boycotting the Forum. The Nationalist community refuse to engage in the Forum because it is an elected democratic body representing the political entity that is Northern Ireland. When will the Women's Coalition condemn those parties that refuse to participate fully in the political process here?

But the most worrying and damning aspect of the minority report is its allegation of factual inaccuracies in the evidence. It suggests that the traders giving evidence were somehow involved in this and that cases need to be carefully checked. That is a slur on the integrity of the witnesses from border areas who are facing boycotts. I ask the Women's Coalition to withdraw their allegation. Nowhere in their report do they say what the inaccuracies are. If they are accusing people of telling lies let them say so. Where are the factual inaccuracies?

A Member: Get to your feet now.

Ms Sagar: If the Member gives way I will answer that. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: We can do without these comments.

Mr Donaldson: If Ms Sagar is prepared to indicate —

Ms Sagar rose.

The Chairman: I cannot allow you to speak except with the permission of the Member on his feet.

Ms Sagar: That is why I asked.

The Chairman: Have you agreed, Mr Donaldson?

Mr Donaldson: If the Member is going to specify the factual inaccuracies in the evidence provided by the traders, I will give way.

Ms Sagar: We have already said that the Committee accepted hearsay, unsubstantiated evidence. I can tell people anything I choose. How they perceive it is up to them. Everything that is said should be investigated if there is to be a complete report.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Will Mr Donaldson give way?

The Chairman: You are taking up Mr Donaldson's time.

Mr Cedric Wilson: It is an important point. The RUC are conducting investigations and intend to prosecute up to 11 people for intimidation.

The Chairman: I think we all agreed that there would be no mention of the RUC's evidence. Please bear that in mind.

Mr Cedric Wilson: This Lady has said that those who gave evidence — including the RUC, by implication — were fabricating. This is not fabrication; it is fact.

The Chairman: Let us be very careful. If a body like the RUC ask us, as they are entitled to do, that evidence given by them be treated as confidential, we must be scrupulous to avoid not just direct but also indirect reference to it. I am sure that everybody here agrees.

Ms McWilliams: May I take it, Mr Chairman, that you ask Mr Robinson to withdraw his earlier remark?

The Chairman: I have already done that.

Mr Donaldson: Ms Sagar's comments are astounding. To suggest that these men, many of whom are known personally to Forum Members, would come here and tell lies about the impact of boycotts on their businesses is an astonishing accusation, and I regret that the Women's Coalition are not prepared to withdraw it.

This report has much to commend it. With regard to the comments in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week, the Women's Coalition have attempted to undermine the evidence by making the spurious point that Business and Professional People for the Union is a one-sided, sectarian organization and that we gave undue weight to its evidence. I refute that on behalf of the Committee. We gave due weight to all the evidence. The manifesto of Business and Professional People for the Union states that it is a non-sectarian body. However, the fact that it happens to be in favour of the Union probably makes it sectarian in the eyes of the Women's Coalition.

I commend this report to the Forum. Despite the Scrooge attitude of the Women's Coalition, let us hope and pray that at this Christmas time good will prevail and that the men

and women who are suffering today as a result of these boycotts will be given some relief. Let us hope that this social evil will be eradicated. I repudiate the assertion that boycotting is a legitimate form of democratic action. The Women's Coalition say in their so-called report that it is not inconsistent with democratic methods to engage in an orchestrated boycott. Well, I say that such action is inconsistent with democratic methods. And that is not just my opinion but also the opinion of many of those who gave evidence to the Committee.

Let us hope that in the spirit of this season we will see a return to normality in Northern Ireland. The traders who are suffering and their families should have the support of local communities. I urge the people to support those who are in need, and I hope that all parties in the Forum will support this report.

The Chairman: Do Members want to take a vote?

Ms McWilliams: Yes, we do.

The Chairman: Would a show of hands be sufficient?

Ms McWilliams: It would be sufficient if it were recorded.

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: I addressed the question to Ms McWilliams. Would a show of hands be sufficient?

Ms McWilliams: As on every other occasion, we would be perfectly happy with a show of hands.

Several Members: A recorded vote.

The Chairman: In which case the names of those disagreeing would be recorded.

Several Members: Yes.

The Chairman: But that could be done by a show of hands.

Several Members: No.

Ms McWilliams: We would be content with a show of hands, which would demonstrate the opposition in terms of parties or numbers, but we do not object to a recorded vote.

Question put.

The Forum divided: Ayes 55; Noes 2.

Ayes: Antony Alcock, Lord Alderdice, May Beattie, Eileen Bell, Thomas Benson, Robert Bolton, David Browne, Cecil Calvert, David Campbell, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, James Clarke, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Jeffrey Donaldson, Sam Foster, Sam Gardiner, Joseph Gaston, Oliver Gibson, John Hunter, Derek Hussey, John Junkin, Peter King, Trevor Kirkland, St Clair McAlister, Steve McBride, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Jack McKee, Gary McMichael, Ken Maginnis, Oliver Napier, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Ian R K Paisley, Ian Paisley Jnr, Joan Parkes, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Peter Robinson, Thomas Robinson, James Shannon, Eric Smyth, Hugh Smyth, James Speers, May Steele, Des Stewart, Robert Stoker, John Taylor, Peter Weir, John White, Robert John White, Cedric Wilson.

Noes: Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar.

The Chairman: The Ayes have a majority far in excess of 66%.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Forum adopts the report on the review of boycott of businesses prepared by Standing Committee A (Public Order Issues).

Ms McWilliams: Mr Chairman, may we have your ruling under Rule 13.1?

The Chairman: I was just about to give it.

I have read the report carefully and have listened carefully to the matters that have been discussed, which could, subject to the resolution, have the potential not to command support across the various traditions of Northern Ireland. I have listened carefully to the points for and against the report. It is my view that, despite the inevitable difficulty in getting reliable information about this matter, the Committee has produced a report that is as objective and even-handed as possible. Although it is difficult to be certain, I conclude that there is nothing in the report that gives me cause to regard it as not capable of commanding the support required under Rule 13.1.

PUBLIC EXPENDITURE

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move the following motion:

That this Forum condemns the public expenditure cuts across Northern Ireland public services which were announced by the Secretary of State on 10 December 1996.

Much could be said, but as I have only five minutes I will concentrate on two statements made by the Secretary of State this week. He said, first, that long-term unemployment and youth unemployment are falling. That statement was made in the context of the public expenditure cuts. Does the Secretary of State fully appreciate the impact of unemployment here? Northern Ireland is the region with the United Kingdom's highest rate of unemployment — twice as high, in fact, as that of the best region. We also have the highest level of permanent unemployment. And it is people in that position for whom it is most difficult to find new jobs. In addition, we have the greatest dependence on public-sector expenditure.

Mr Benson: The Member may be aware of the £66 million for schools that was announced by Gillian Shephard this week.

The Chairman: Surely this is not relevant to the motion. Is it?

Mr Benson: It is relevant. The £66 million over three years refers only to England, Scotland and Wales, despite the fact that, after the Dunblane incident, it was said that Northern Ireland would be included. In my board area there was a serious incident involving a flame-thrower.

This is a very important point, which is why I am making it now. This financial provision should apply to Northern Ireland, and I ask our MPs to take the necessary action. There is great concern —

The Chairman: Mr Nesbitt, you are running out of time. I will give you another 30 seconds.

Mr Nesbitt: It can't be 30 seconds.

The Chairman: I am trying to give some form to this debate. If Members who are allowed to intervene make speeches we will not get the business done.

Mr Nesbitt: I have covered the first point and will move very quickly to the second. The Secretary of State, when making his announcement, talked about the IRA and the events of last summer bearing

“a heavy responsibility for this public-expenditure virement.”

As Sir Oliver Napier said this morning, when something is wrong people should say that it is wrong. This was International Human Rights Week. Five of the major human-rights organizations challenged all parties to make emphasis on human rights their central theme.

I say to the Government that there are certain fundamental principles of human rights. One of these concerns accommodation of groups. As I have often said, the Governments who are trying to secure a way forward in Northern Ireland do not abide by the law. When something is wrong let them say that it is wrong. When our Government, in the context of money, talk about a heavy responsibility this is the question that comes to my mind: who bears the heaviest responsibility for the money that will be spent over the next year or two?

I hope that that was brief enough, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: It was, and I am most grateful.

Mr McAlister: I support the motion. It is very worthwhile in that it gives us an opportunity, before the recess, to deal with these matters.

It is said that these cuts will mean that some people cannot look forward to a happy family Christmas. One thinks in particular of people involved in agriculture, transport and housing.

I agree with everything that Mr Nesbitt has said. It is not my intention to dwell on individual cuts and their effects. What always worries me is the knock-on effect. I am thinking not just of the loss of £120 million or £140 million to the economy but also of the effect on sub-cultures — corner shops and various people down the line. This is bigger than £140 million, and it will be lasting.

We have got to attack the basic problem, which is that the Government have mismanaged the economy. There is also the question of gross dishonesty. The cuts are now being blamed on the IRA. No doubt that is a factor, and has been for many years, but why have the Government never before condemned it so strongly? It happens to be convenient now.

Of course, we have the old Drumcree syndrome. I am beginning to think that the next report from scientists will tell us that the hole in the ozone layer has been enlarged by Drumcree. We blame everything on Drumcree. The fact is that the Government are applying here standards that they do not apply to any other part of the United Kingdom. For instance, when major rioting and destruction in Toxteth involved a vast amount of money the Government did not say to the people there "You've been bad boys and girls, so we are going to cut your social security." They did the very opposite: they poured money in to solve the problem. It is a question of basic dishonesty on the part of the Government.

We are told that the police have to get an extra £77 million. Is this because they have been under-funded in the past? The Government tell us that this money is needed for the next three years. On one hand, they are looking at a pessimistic security situation; on the other, they are telling us that everything in the garden is rosy and we can expect peace soon. What are the Government playing at? Either we are going to have peace or we are not going to have peace. What is the £77 million for? The Government have been totally dishonest. The new Labour MP for Bolton made an interesting comment this morning. He said of the Government

"They think it is all over. It is now."

Not quite yet, but it soon will be.

If the Government want to make savings, I can give them one instant way. Demolishing quangos would account for a considerable part, if not all, of the £140 million. Let the current Government and any future Government accept that mismanagement is to blame for the cuts. But a convenient whipping-boy is to be found in Drumcree and those associated with it. The Government could save money by reducing or even abolishing quangos and returning proper democracy. With proper local government and a Northern Ireland Assembly we could manage our own affairs.

I support the motion and hope that others will do likewise.

Lord Alderdice: The decision by the Government to redirect Northern Ireland block-grant money from social and economic matters to security and compensation will undoubtedly result in very serious disadvantage for our people. There is no question about that. As a doctor, I have to say that I and colleagues in all the professions of the Health Service have found it pretty demoralizing recently to be asked to think about dismantling services that we spent years building up. There are few things more demoralizing to people in any service — not least, health — than to be asked to think about taking to pieces the very things they spent years putting together.

In these services the standard of our people is very high. The Ulster Hospital, for example, has gained two Charter Mark awards in the last week or two, despite not having the funding to keep things going in terms of operations and very routine procedures. So there is going to be a very real problem. We are going to have difficulty in many areas.

But we must all consider whether we bear any responsibility for this redistribution. There is no question that the Republican movement — Sinn Féin and the IRA — bear responsibility. There is no point in saying what a shame it is that there is not enough money for education or health services when schools that have been damaged have to be repaired and the time of doctors and nurses goes into mending bodies smashed by paramilitary gangs.

There is hypocrisy here — profound and deep hypocrisy that must be addressed. Responsibility has to be borne by all of us. During the past week I have been saying to press people that they must be careful that the words they use do not in any way imply justification of what the paramilitary organizations claim is a degree of rough justice in their communities. Their justice is no justice at all.

I have been saying to business people in the past week that it is not enough to keep their heads down and make as much money as possible. We must all do what we can to create a stable community of which everyone can feel a part, and in which business people can do what business people do best: create wealth for the community as a whole.

We as politicians must also shoulder our responsibilities. People ask why such a financial decision was taken at this time. They ask why money was put into Toxteth and

other places. Let us look at the reality. Money was put into Northern Ireland for a long time — even during the worst years of Thatcherism — but something happened to justify a position that was taken a long time ago by David Owen. In his book 'Face the Future', published in 1981, he says

"Northern Ireland politicians have the right to remain intransigent, but they do not necessarily have the right to maintain that all of the rest of us should pay for it."

You cannot run away from responsibilities. I fear that events, particularly of the past summer at Drumcree, made many people in England look at the situation and say —

Mr Nesbitt: Will Lord Alderdice give way?

11.30 am

Lord Alderdice: No.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you.

Lord Alderdice: The Member would have been well advised not to give way to his own Colleague. That way he would have had more time to make his speech.

The reality is that many people in England looked at the situation and said "That behaviour is not the sort of thing that we would accept in England, and we are not prepared to agree that more money should be put into Northern Ireland to deal with the policing of those places." This is also true of the situation up in Harryville, where the police are being put in an impossible position by irresponsible people.

All of us must bear responsibility for our actions. If, as I very much hope will happen, we could reach agreement which enabled Northern Ireland people to take responsibility for their own affairs — if this were no longer merely a Forum but a Northern Ireland Parliament working on a power-sharing basis — would the block grant be able to address these matters? We would have to face not just IRA attacks — those would undoubtedly continue — but also the reality that policing events like Drumcree and Harryville would take out of the budget money which would otherwise be spent on health, social security and education provision and on meeting the requirement of farmers for financial assistance to help them through the BSE crisis. Those are important issues, and we have got to bear that responsibility.

I do not want to hear silly comments about the issue of the IRA. Everybody knows perfectly well that I have placed responsibility primarily on the IRA, which is where it ought to be. But that should not make people here feel that they can leave things to others. It has been made quite clear by the Chief Constable, by the Police Authority and by the Government that money has had to be spent on other issues. We must all be serious about our responsibilities.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I will be brief. Whilst agreeing with much of what Lord Alderdice has said, I do not think that his argument stands up. Does he really believe that the people of

Manchester or the people of London, where one bomb alone, I understand, cost something like £500 million, would accept such treatment? I am certain that the budget for those areas was not cut — and rightly so.

The Government preach to us about the great joys of peace. We were promised all sorts of things as a result of the two-year cease-fire — a year and a half from the Provos — but I do not see any signs of the peace dividend in the area that I represent. I believe that at a time when they are trying to get people, particularly the Provisional IRA, to call another cease-fire, at a time when they are preaching the great benefits of peace, it would not have been too much of a task for the British Government to find the £140 million that they have stolen from the people of Northern Ireland.

Do not let anyone underestimate the difficulties. I have listened to Baroness Denton. Last month she made great play about unemployment being down to its lowest level for 15 years. I believe that what the Secretary of State announced on Wednesday will wipe that improvement out. Just look at some of the facts. We are going to lose something like £29 million under the ACE scheme — 2,000 places. A further 2,000 will be lost in Jobskills. I dare say that I speak for every person in the Forum this morning when I say that the only hope that some kids have is for a job on an ACE scheme. The cut-back in the number of places has come just as we were looking for an increase and for an extension from 12 months to 24 months.

Let us look again at something which will have a vital bearing right across the board — the Housing Executive's budget slashed by £22 million. As a former Executive Chairman, you, Sir, will know a lot about this. Many responsibilities are to be transferred from the Executive to housing associations, which may not even be capable of carrying out the duties. We will again see unemployment created in the construction industry. Already under great pressure, it will suffer enormously by this slashing. Also, people already having to wait more than 12 months for repairs will face even longer delays. The two-year wait for people who apply for grants will be increased to three to four years. So these cuts will have a detrimental effect on many people in Northern Ireland.

I turn now to the youth service. The Government are biting into the very area that they should be trying to encourage. In addition, the teacher-training budget is to be slashed by approximately £14 million — and this at a time when we in working-class areas have probably the worst-ever record for passes in the 11-plus.

Of course, we can and should blame the Provisional IRA. And we will not run away from our responsibility in respect of those who called people onto the streets during the Portadown affair. But, whilst deploring that — every person in the Forum deplored the violence and the destruction — I believe that the Government have used the events post-Drumcree to blackmail the people of Northern Ireland. It is the innocent who are paying the price in areas like my own. I am sure that in saying so I speak for many people. Some of our country brethren have an unemployment rate of 60% or 70%. Unemployment was gradually getting to a level that might be acceptable to the British Government but is certainly not acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland. As another Member pointed out, we still have the highest unemployment in the whole of Western Europe.

I support the motion and congratulate those who brought it forth.

Ms McWilliams: We too support the motion, as some Members may be delighted to hear. We are very concerned about these public expenditure cuts. The one thing that we particularly looked forward to was the £8 million that was supposed to come for nursery education. That has now been postponed. Forum Members should constantly be reminded that oftentimes a child out of a nursery is a woman or man out of a job. It is with great disappointment that, once again, we have to wait for the nursery provision in this country to be brought up to the standard that people in the rest of Europe, including Great Britain, have come to expect. We still have the worst provision in Europe. Our Government representatives should be ashamed to have to bring us the news that, once again, having taken cognizance of the statistics and the research about how valuable pre-school provision is, they have decided not to give Northern Ireland its well-deserved £8 million.

We support the comment of the teachers' organizations that we are losing the money that should be spent on classrooms — on the damp mobiles that we expect primary schoolchildren to be taught in. In my child's school 34 children per class is currently the standard. That cannot augur well for the children. Money must be spent on young people, particularly children at primary-school level.

We believe that the work that voluntary and community groups have been doing in Northern Ireland is extremely valuable. It has come as a terrible blow to them to learn that they are going to lose members of their organizations — vital members who have been contributing over the years in the action and community employment schemes.

Why is it that Europe can recognize Northern Ireland as a special case but the Conservative Government do the opposite? And how much longer will Northern Ireland Members of Parliament bolster the present Government? Actions speak louder than words. It will be interesting to see how long the Conservatives can stay in office.

Finally, we are greatly concerned that £22 million is to be cut from the Housing Executive's budget. How can such an organization sustain a reduction of that magnitude, which translates into 3,000 homes? We have not worked out how many repairs could be done for £22 million. Housing in Northern Ireland, particularly in rural areas, is still below standard, so something serious will have to be done in relation to the budget.

I welcome this debate, and we strongly support the motion.

The Chairman: I am particularly grateful that you, Ms McWilliams, and Mr Smyth have spoken about housing.

Mr McCartney: I fully endorse this motion. Perhaps it is the spirit of Christmas that infuses me when I find myself in agreement, to a degree, with Ms McWilliams, Lord Alderdice and even Mr Hugh Smyth. There is no doubt whatever that the people of Northern Ireland have been punished for the alleged misdeeds of possibly less than 1% of its population who did their work in East Belfast and in Londonderry post-Drumcree. I would like to make the general comment — here I differ from Lord Alderdice — that the events at Drumcree were really prepared for long beforehand. They are attributable to a

Government — indeed, two Governments — who unrealistically raised the expectations of the minority community by a policy of appeasement and, by the same policy, eroded the confidence of the pro-Union majority that their place within the United Kingdom was safe. They created a gunpowder magazine, and any spark could have resulted in a situation like Drumcree.

It is not without comment or notice that the Community Relations Council has reported that inter-community relations are the worst they have ever been in its history. This, of course, is a product of the peace process. The truth is that the Government, in appeasing a violent, extreme minority, have created an inter-community divide of terrible proportions. Then, of course, they deny all responsibility for the fruits of this policy and decide that there will be parity of esteem throughout Northern Ireland.

11.45 am

Catholic and Protestant mothers, Unionist and Nationalist mothers, with children who are sick or educationally disadvantaged or, as Ms McWilliams has very rightly and strongly pointed out, have the benefit of the worst pre-school provision in Europe — that is an undoubted fact — are punished equally for a policy which was undoubtedly going to result in what we have seen. It is quite wrong that a Government who created this situation should turn into a sort of holier-than-thou schoolmaster and say to the people of Northern Ireland “You are all going to be punished. You are going to be punished in your housing, you are going to be punished in your health, you are going to be punished in your children’s education, and you are going to be punished with long-term unemployment, because we set about creating a policy that would inevitably result in scenes such as we have had, which have cost a great deal of money in terms of security.” That is the real issue, and the real cause is unaccountable, irresponsible government.

Let us look at the difference between people who have accountable government and those who do not. In England there was accountable government when the general populace decided that the poll tax was iniquitous and unfair. They resented it. The resentment boiled over. Of course, a small violent element were responsible for the riots that caused enormous damage, which resulted in an enormous amount of public expenditure. But what was the result? Because the people involved in the riots were first-class citizens who could turn a Government out of office the law was changed. No one said that they were flouting the law or breaking the rule of law. There was no such holier-than-thou attitude. Folk said “Why are these people on the streets? They are protesting because the Government’s policies and laws are fundamentally flawed and we ought to do something about it.”

When 250,000 people on the streets of Belfast are ignored, yet the world turns its attention to 100,000 protesting in Belgrade about local elections, there is something very wrong with policy. It is to those fundamental issues that we should be turning our attention.

I welcome and endorse the motion. All the speeches that I have heard today were a real contribution and a credit to the Forum.

Mr McFarland: I was one of those sent this week to receive these glad tidings from the Secretary of State. I am extremely confused as to why the news was given to talks

representatives because, of course, they have nothing to do with current public expenditure in the United Kingdom. In the rest of the kingdom the announcement was made to Members of Parliament, yet among the group present the other day were some parties that did not have even a single councillor. I am confused and disturbed as to why in Northern Ireland we have a situation which, in England and Wales, would be the same as putting Conservative and Labour on a par with Screaming Lord Sutch.

These cuts are directly related to the Government's attempt to meet the Maastricht criteria. This is happening in Scotland, England and Wales, and, of course, we have the added cuts, the logic for which Mr McCartney has just referred to. It is difficult to understand why, at a time when we are told that Northern Ireland is on the cusp of an economic boom and that things are getting better, the Government are cutting back on training — trained people being the group we are going to need if all this comes to fruition.

The Education Committee heard yesterday about the vital need for nursery education. Of course, the voucher scheme has been chopped — a scheme on which the Committee intended to report by February. We are having to look a bit deeper into nursery education generally, and we hope to present a report to the Forum in due course. But it is not just nursery education — children's training — that is affected; teacher training, youth services and every other easy target, such as libraries, have also been aimed at. It is a well-known fact that in business when times get a bit tough the first thing to go is training, because it is an extremely easy target. We will reap the benefits or the losses down the line.

I support the motion.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Like everyone else, I think that there was some inevitability about these cuts. The real issue is the shock at their extent. We have all got used to the fact that the Tory Government cut services, but the way they put the boot into Ulster is a disgrace. Any anticipated saving that they claim is, of course, a lie. There is no question that during the IRA cease-fire there was no redistribution of police or Army money. The suggestion that funds now have to be taken from social programmes to be put back into security is just bluff. But it is bluff that people in Northern Ireland will not buy.

This is the policy of Scrooge, and it comes at a time when there is supposed to be some sort of goodwill. It really is an insult to the intelligence of the people of Northern Ireland. The sum of £120 million is to be redeployed from social need. The European peace package — the Delors money — is, in effect, no longer additional; it is now being used to subsidize where the Government ought to be spending. That too is a disgrace.

I would like to turn briefly to some of the cuts that have been announced. Most people were shocked at the impact these will have on the unemployed. ACE, for instance, will suffer a loss of more than £29 million. The Dundonald training centre, which offers very worthwhile and credible skills training for young people, is to be closed. We will see the loss of more than 4,000 jobs in the ACE scheme generally. When people realize how employment is going to be affected the Government will lose all credibility, and motivation will disappear.

I want to look briefly at the impact on agriculture — our biggest industry. It is to lose £3 million. That reduction will, of course, affect rural drainage. It will also erode the budget for flood-defence schemes. The necessary diverse measures will be extremely detrimental. We must demand that the Government look again at the impact of their budget cuts on the agricultural sector. The veterinary investigation centre in Omagh is to close. That will result in the loss not only of jobs but also of vital research into veterinary problems such as animal diseases. At a time when we have BSE, could that centre be more relevant?

However, I welcome the provision of £12 million in the form of the increased hill livestock compensatory allowance payments for upland cattle farmers.

I welcome also the decision by the Government to spend £48 million on the new Causeway Hospital. That is of great significance. The facility is long overdue.

These cuts in Northern Ireland's public expenditure programme, when taken together with the increase in fuel duty announced in the Chancellor's budget recently, amount to a serious blow to the entire community.

I cannot sit down without mentioning the comments made by Lord Alderdice. He has a very selective memory when it comes to how these problems are created. We never hear about the riots in 1995 when Lee Clegg was released from gaol — terrible riots — and the increase in police expenditure. We never hear about Dunloy. We never hear about the riots caused by Republicans on the Ormeau Road. All we hear about is Drumcree and Harryville. Some balance ought to be injected into the Alliance Party's approach.

What people in Northern Ireland really want to know is when the IRA will be made to pay. At the moment the community has to foot the bill. Instead of throwing money at attempts to talk to terrorists, the Government ought to be investing in their defeat. They ought to devise a policy to eradicate violence, instead of the silly policy of blaming the entire community for the troubles that the IRA created.

Mr John White: I welcome the opportunity to say something about the public expenditure plans for Northern Ireland which were announced by the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, on Tuesday. Owing to the limited time available to me, the breadth of my presentation will be restricted. I therefore intend to major on two broad aspects of the report — the additional £120 million allocated for security and compensation over the next three years and the loss of 4,000 places from ACE and Jobskills schemes.

When the IRA ended the cease-fire in February of this year the immediate effect was to reverse what had become known as the peace dividend. Supposedly money that would otherwise have been used for security purposes was, during the period of the IRA cease-fire, redirected towards education, health, housing, and so on. When Republicans reverted to type this money had to be used for the compensation claims resulting from their activities and for necessary heightened security measures. It is no exaggeration to say that the decision by Republicans to reactivate their murderous campaign had an immediate negative impact on the quality of life of every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland, yet the political spokespersons for Republicanism are the first to complain at the slightest reduction in expenditure on public services. Their hypocrisy and double standards are breath-taking.

I would be failing in my duty and ignoring an obvious reality if I were not also to refer to the drain on Northern Ireland's budget caused by the past year's civil disorder. I have no intention of dwelling on the rights or wrongs of any specific dispute, whether connected with a parade, with a football match or with people attempting to attend their place of worship. What I will say is this: the orgy of destruction throughout the province during the past year has had a heavy price. In terms of human suffering, damage to cross-community relations and purely financial consequences, the past year has been disastrous. We must all look into our own consciences and ask whether we may have contributed in any way to what has taken place and, if not, whether we did all in our power to prevent it. We, especially as elected representatives, must be conscious of the possible consequences of our own actions and of our public utterances. We cannot abdicate responsibility, wash our hands like Pontius Pilate, as a situation we may have helped to develop spirals out of control. There must be no more heaping of blame on convenient shoulders. Instead, let us all try to ensure that we do not have another year like 1996. For all manner of reasons we just cannot afford it. This society has enough problems trying to cope with the sectarian campaign of murder being mounted by the IRA, without having any additional stress placed upon it. We must not respond to the Republicans' calculated provocation. That is what they want us to do.

It struck me as rather ironic, if not downright hypocritical, that the Secretary of State should, on one hand, talk so grandly of his plans to continue trying to attract inward investment to Northern Ireland whilst, on the other, announcing plans for cut-backs in job training for the unemployed. The correlation between these two issues is obvious. One of the primary reasons that companies cite for choosing to invest here, rather than somewhere else, is our highly trained work-force.

Rev William McCrea: Had the Secretary of State introduced his remarks by stating that it was now Government policy to mount an attack on waste in expenditure or to remove a multitude of quangos that are wasting money, or had he said that it is vital that we attack the fraud that is going on, I could understand. But his announcement was simply an attack on the ordinary, decent citizens of Northern Ireland, and his public expenditure plans are public expenditure cuts.

12.00

The Secretary of State is to be condemned for what he has announced at this vital juncture in the history of the province. An awful lot of what he had to say smacks of utter hypocrisy. For example, he spoke about the community having to pay for trouble of the past year. Let no one try to excuse the Government. It is they who, by years of appeasement, created the situation in Northern Ireland. It was their responsibility to defeat the terrorists. There is no place whatsoever for terrorism. It is not acceptable in a democracy, and the Government must shoulder responsibility for it.

Let us remember the waste of money as a result of the poll tax fiasco and all the other blunders over the years. The situation is most ironic. It will be interesting to see what areas of expenditure are excepted. The Secretary of State says that the community will have to accept responsibility, but I believe that whatever money is available will be directed, as usual, to programmes in Republican areas. The people who cause the deficit are insulated from it,

and the rest of the community are made to suffer. With regard to the Garvaghy Road and the events there during the summer, let us remember that the trouble was caused not by Orangemen walking from their place of worship but by a group of people illegally blocking the road. That is where the blame ought to be put by the Secretary of State and the other Ministers.

If there were enough time we could talk about the disgraceful impact on ACE schemes and pre-school provision. Someone mentioned the closure of the veterinary research unit in Omagh. Three weeks ago Baroness Denton told the people there that the unit would not be closed, but the Secretary of State has now announced otherwise in this area of highest unemployment. It is disgraceful. The right hand of the Government does not know what the left hand is doing.

I want to refer specifically to the health budget. In the House of Commons yesterday the Minister for Health stated that we should be joyful at the 1.6% real increase in health provision. In the case of the mainland, according to the Chancellor, the real increase is 2.9%, representing an extra £1.6 billion. Why is 1.6% good enough for Ulster when the rest of the United Kingdom is getting 2.9%? It is an election stunt to buy votes. Unfortunately, Ulster has no votes to give the Conservative Party. There are no Conservative seats here. That is why 1.6% is good enough for us. The sufferers are the ordinary citizens in need of hospitalization. The Ulster Hospital, for example, will have run out of money after January. This is disgusting. We demand equal rights.

The Chairman: Mr Nesbitt, will you please sum up very briefly.

Mr Nesbitt: I have just one comment to make, and I make it with sincerity. Lord Alderdice said that Northern Ireland politicians are intransigent. He quoted words written by Lord Owen in the 1970s. There has been a big change since the 1970s. With regard to the accommodation of communities, I say without fear of contradiction that the party I represent advocates policies that are totally in line with the norms laid down by the international community. The politicians who are intransigent are not in this Forum. Nationalists, as I have said often, have not changed one bit since Lord Owen wrote those words.

Let me put our clear policy on record: we are in favour of accommodation. It is regrettable that some politicians give no credit to those in the Unionist community who are trying to achieve agreement in Northern Ireland. When Lord Alderdice was speaking, it struck me that the intransigence of politicians goes to the very heart of the problem. I asked earlier who is to blame. It is the Government. I ask now who is being intransigent. Certainly not myself and the party that I represent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum condemns the public expenditure cuts across Northern Ireland public services which were announced by the Secretary of State on 10 December 1996.

The Forum was adjourned at 12.07 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 10 January 1997

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: Welcome back. May I wish you all a happy new year.

Members: And to you, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: Thank you.

The turn of the year has not been a very happy period. In particular, I am sorry to have to tell the Forum that Mr Robert Bolton's son was tragically killed in a car accident on New Year's Day. I am sure you would want me to extend our profound sympathies to Robert and his family.

I have to report also that, despite early indications that he was on his way to making a good recovery, Mr Ernie Fowler died on 14 December. Ernie was a very active and useful participant in our Committee proceedings, and we shall want to extend our sympathy to his family.

On the wider scene too it has not been a good period, with a number of despicable and indefensible acts of violence, which we all deplore. I am determined that while I am its Chairman the work of this Forum will not be driven or diverted by those who use violence to achieve their objectives.

I do not want us just to respond to other people's dreadful actions, but there is one terrorist incident which we cannot ignore. The attempted murder of Mr Nigel Dodds whilst visiting his son Andrew in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children on the Friday before Christmas was particularly dreadful. The attack on Nigel is an attack on all of us as Members of the Forum and on what we and the institution stand for. We must deplore this kind of terrorist activity with all the authority of our democratic mandate.

I understand that Dr Paisley would like to say a word.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I would like to thank you, Sir, for the condolences that you have expressed to Mr Bolton and to the family of Mr Fowler. Also, Sir Oliver Napier, I understand, lost a brother, and we express our sympathy to him.

With regard to security in Northern Ireland, we have the worst situation ever, and it has come about simply because of the actions of successive British Governments and many politicians in Northern Ireland. Both Nationalists and Unionists have aided and abetted the