

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 31 January 1997

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FORUM BUSINESS

The Chairman: Today we have two items of business that are likely to be of great interest to many Members — a motion on the Action for Community Employment scheme and a motion, with an amendment, on the North Report. So as not to constrain discussion on either matter, and having consulted the Business Committee, I propose that if by 4 o'clock we have not exhausted the list of those who wish to speak, the debate on North be carried over to next week.

SCHOOL CROSSING PATROLS

The Chairman: Mr Eric Smyth wishes to mention an urgent matter. I am allowing him to do so on the basis of his undertaking that he will take seconds.

Mr Eric Smyth: I am sure that everyone has heard the sad news of the Belfast Education and Library Board's intention to sack all the lollipop men. I want to thank the Ulster Unionists, the Democratic Unionists and the independent councillor Joe Coggle, who fought the decision yesterday. Unfortunately we lost by two votes. We call on the Forum to press for the matter to be reconsidered urgently, and a meeting with the Minister sought, with a view to having something done. This issue will not go away. I have been inundated with requests for support, including several this morning at the school my grandchild attends.

I know that in asking for Members' support I have the backing of Mr Rodgers.

ACE SCHEME

JOBSKILLS PROGRAMME

Mr McMichael: Before proposing the motion I wish to thank Mr Smyth for bringing to the Forum's attention the important matter of the lollipop men.

I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum endorses community opposition to enforced reductions in the ACE scheme and to the curtailment of the Jobskills programme through unrealistic limits to their financial support; calls on the Government to reverse their policy in recognition of the strength of feeling on this matter; and recognizes the invaluable contribution these schemes have made to improving employment prospects and community development, particularly in deprived areas.

The introduction of the Action for Community Employment scheme — more commonly known as ACE — in 1982 was a major innovation. It proved to have enormous potential for growth in the voluntary sector, enabling organizations to consolidate their operations and expand their programmes. It also facilitated the emergence of new community-based organizations, which developed into major players with the respect of local communities. Notable examples are Dungannon Development Association, the Inner City Trust, Maydown at Ebrington in Londonderry, Springfield Charitable Association and Farset Youth and Community Development Limited, where I myself worked for one year in an ACE post. Through provision of the grant aid necessary to fund staff costs — the major overhead for any employer — voluntary organizations were enabled to develop a level of experience, professionalism and sophistication that they would otherwise have been unable to achieve.

Those born of ACE — so to speak — are today heavily represented in district partnerships, and they are a major part of the voluntary sector. ACE was created to provide jobs for the long-term unemployed. It was unique in that it was able to address social and economic issues at the same time because the funding was directed towards the voluntary sector. ACE created the means of addressing issues of social isolation and disadvantage, the lack of focus in communities and the lack of scope for interaction between the two main communities, while at the same time impacting on long-term unemployment, which is both a social and an economic evil. Now in its sixteenth year, ACE has facilitated the growth of a solid community infrastructure and has become the cement which binds the voluntary sector together — internally in individual organizations; organizations with each other; and organizations with the statutory bodies.

In the last financial year the level of funding for ACE was set at £39.8 million. The Government are reducing that by 28% this year, with the loss of more than 2,000 ACE places, and my information suggests that the cut will rise to almost 50% in the following year. This will obviously have a profound impact on existing ACE projects — and not just in terms of a percentage reduction in the number of places: in some instances projects falling below a threshold for core positions will fold entirely, which is what happened in Taughmonagh last year.

It is my view and that of the Northern Ireland Federation of ACE Schemes that it is the intention of the Government to totally dismantle the ACE programme in the next few years. This, together with the capping of the Jobskills programme, leads me to believe that the Government intend to funnel the unemployed solely through the jobseeker's allowance and, eventually, towards compulsory employment.

I want to outline some points that give me cause for concern with regard to Government policy in relation to ACE. In a strategy document produced in 1993 by the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, reference is repeatedly made to the need for Government agencies to consult with the voluntary sector. For instance, they should

"have regard, when new policies are being introduced or existing policies developed, to the need to consider whether any change will have a particular effect on the voluntary sector and, where it does, to ensure that the views of the voluntary sector are sought."

The document also states that the experience of local community groups can be a significant factor in the formation of social and economic policies.

In the spring, summer and autumn of 1996 the Northern Ireland Federation asserted its views on the prospective dismantlement of ACE, advising the Training and Employment Agency of the benefits of the scheme, the implications of its removal and the strength of community support for its continuation.

It is clear that the Government's commitment to the voluntary sector, as outlined in their own strategy, is absolutely worthless. Regardless of community feelings, they are cutting the ACE scheme — indeed, attempting to wipe it out. The reasons offered for the cuts have been varied and inconsistent. In 1995, when Baroness Denton announced the first round, it was decided that, as the economy was on the up and the number of the long-term unemployed had fallen, there was not the same need for such a scheme. The truth is that of the unemployed the proportion who had not worked for a year or more did not fall below 50% at any time in 1995 and, in fact, rose to 54% in 1996. It has to be noted that Northern Ireland's rate of long-term unemployment is consistently twice that in Great Britain and significantly above the European average.

Sir Patrick Mayhew has indicated that the increased security expenditure over the past year made it impossible to keep this year's funding for ACE at previous levels. ACE was developed through 14 years of the most severe violence and turmoil. It is curious that the Government were able to maintain adequate funding levels then, yet security demands were even greater than they are today. In a previous year we were told that the upswing in the economy resulting from the supposed peace dividend was a reason for ACE cuts, whereas this year it is said that the reductions are the result of the worsening security situation. The Secretary of State is using the undeniable security demands as a convenient smoke-screen behind which to hide the Government's clear predetermined policy to eradicate the ACE scheme at all costs.

Another anomaly is that, while ACE is being cut by 28%, Industrial Development Board (IDB) expenditure has been increased by 30%. I mention this because ACE is directed largely at areas of social need. In fact, 67% of funding for the programme goes to recognized

targeting social need (TSN) areas . Conversely, 63% of IDB expenditure goes to non-targeting social need areas.

The newly introduced jobseeker's allowance is said to be responsible for the most recent reduction in the unemployment figures. Strangely, the uptake in vacancies advertised by the Training and Employment Agency did not increase. The fall is more likely to be due to people's being scared off doing the double than to the creation of more employment.

ACE provides opportunities for those who would not otherwise be able to find a job. Because of the limit of one year, the programme may not have the scope to provide an individual with a high level of training for future employment. However, it helps to raise self-esteem, particularly in the many people who come from disadvantaged areas where there is a lack of confidence in the ability to develop skills and apply successfully for jobs.

ACE is regarded as a rehabilitation scheme for the long-term unemployed, helping to train people to be good workers, who can then be trained more easily for other jobs. Its social impact is enormous, and the advantage of ACE projects to the local community is tremendous. The programme was introduced as a temporary measure, but after 16 years local communities depend on it.

Many schemes provide essential services in communities neglected by the statutory bodies. An excellent example is care of the elderly. Farset in West Belfast, which is facilitated by ACE, helps the elderly in various ways. It supplements the service provided by home helps — and the implications of Government cuts there are obvious. The people involved light fires, run errands, make general visits, help with laundry, decorate homes and tend gardens. In addition, important environmental work — clean-up schemes and so on — is done in many areas. Members will have had experience of this in their constituencies.

ACE offers a vital training facility for offenders. For people who have been in prison for criminal or political offences, and therefore find themselves virtually unemployable, ACE is a natural avenue for training aimed at reintegration into employment.

ACE facilitates the development of community leadership in local areas. As I have said, this is evidenced by the emergence of experienced and assertive activists in the voluntary sector. The role they can play in partnerships is a result of the fact that ACE has clearly been a catalyst for community development.

The question is obvious: how could the dismantlement of ACE and the eventual dissolution of Jobskills affect the community in anything but a destructive and negative way? How do the Government propose to fill the deep hole that will be left? Apparently they do not care one jot for the traumatic implications of their policy.

Since its inception, ACE has put more than 40,000 people into work and, through community development, has created more than 1,000 new jobs. I implore the Government to reverse their policy. They ought to recognize the strong community opposition to their objectives. I am appalled by the callous attitude of an Administration motivated not by what is in the best interests of the people but by what is in its own interests. Perhaps the inevitable change of Government will alter all that.

10.15 am

I suggest that if this motion is endorsed by the Forum a copy of the Record of Debates be sent to the Shadow Secretary of State, Marjorie Mowlam. Perhaps she could inform us whether Labour intends to reverse the Conservatives' policy on the ACE and Jobskills programmes.

Mr Nesbitt: This debate is very timely. Yesterday the Forum's Economy Committee met representatives of the Northern Ireland Federation of Action for Community Employment — the body representing all the programmes in the province. The ACE people presented a very persuasive argument. We then sought an urgent meeting with senior Government officials to discuss the proposed cuts, and they agreed to meet us next Thursday.

One of the central problems with Northern Ireland's economy is long-term unemployment. As we have heard, this is a very fast-growing region — the second-highest in the United Kingdom league — and it will remain so until the next millennium, according to economic research. However, there is a bedrock of permanent unemployment. As Mr McMichael has said, the rate is twice that in the next-worst part of the kingdom. That fundamental problem of our economy is what the ACE scheme was designed to deal with, yet it is this area of Government policy that is facing cuts.

ACE provides not just work but also training for the long-term unemployed. As Mr McMichael has said, it is a community benefit throughout Northern Ireland. The funds come through the Department of Economic Development to the Training and Employment Agency, which is master, as it were, of the ACE operation.

One key matter that arose in the discussion yesterday was what the Northern Ireland Federation called core staff. These are the permanent officers who carry out ACE functions. There is one permanent staff member for every 20 people in employment. Yesterday we heard that the Government have spent more than £3 million on training to identify the needs of the long-term unemployed, yet these are the people who are to be cut right away.

What do we mean by "cuts"? This year cuts and last year's cuts will be implemented in April 1997 — eight weeks away — and November 1997 respectively. Together they will reduce ACE personnel by 47%. These people are the central infrastructure required to operate ACE. We all know how difficult it is to replace something that has been got rid of. One is reminded of the old adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

As Mr McMichael has said, the Secretary of State, referring to the cuts, said that the unemployment situation was improving. The Member spoke of how funding had to deal with the various security aspects. The unemployment situation is indeed improving — various things in Northern Ireland are improving — but the underlying problem of long-term unemployment needs to be addressed.

Let me give a few examples. Of the people on ACE schemes, 50% have been unemployed for two years or more, and 60% are aged between 25 and 50. So this is not just for young people or the temporarily unemployed. We know that it is people between 25 and

55 who find it most difficult to secure any type of employment. Thus ACE provides not just employment but a service for people demoralized — at the very least, demoralized — at the lack of employment prospects. This is a social service for people in that very important age group. I repeat that 60% of those finding employment through ACE are between 25 and 50.

What about the success of ACE? Of those who go through the scheme, 50% eventually find permanent employment — a very good success rate.

I shall conclude by referring to various matters raised yesterday that need to be clarified. The Northern Ireland Federation feels — justifiably perhaps — that the contribution that ACE is making to the Northern Ireland economy has not been fully recognized (not even by the Government). It wants to see clear recognition. We all hope that this debate will raise the profile of ACE and its contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. Members feel that they are not fully consulted, in this deliberative process, as to how to undertake secure employment measures. We have been told, for example, that a document produced following a review has yet to be published. The Federation would like it to be published, so that the issues it is being asked to address might be clear.

Like the Economy Committee yesterday, the Forum is saying today that, as a fundamental principle, the Government must be more accountable for what they propose to do in Northern Ireland. The Committee seek clarification next Thursday, and we trust that this motion will give added impetus to what it proposes.

Mr McAlister: I should like, first, to thank Mr McMichael for bringing this very important motion before the Forum and to endorse everything that he and the Chairman of Committee E have said. They have covered many of the points that I intended to make, and there would be no purpose in my going over them. We have heard some very valuable comments.

The core staff, to whom reference has been made, will be reduced from 530 to 280 if these cuts are implemented. In other words, a considerable number of people are going to lose their jobs.

This is about people who are in a very difficult situation. Action for Community Employment (ACE) provides real work opportunities and opportunities for further experience. It is a springboard for graduates who have difficulty in getting jobs, who have never been in the workplace. As Mr McMichael has said, the fact that it is very helpful for ex-offenders trying to get back to work, as well as for people with learning difficulties, must be taken into account. It gives hope where there was no hope — something that is very important.

I want to give two practical examples, including one that some witnesses shared with the Committee. They spoke of a man successful in business but who, owing to certain factors, became a bankrupt. As a result his marriage failed, and he was at a very low ebb — unemployed, no home situation, no money, almost desperate. But for the fact that ACE took him on board when no one else wanted him, that man would have been lost. He was given the chance of retraining, and today he is successful. In fact, he manages the training of up to 250 people. That is a success story. What value does one put on that man's life and the lives

of those he is helping? I have no doubt that a person who has come through such a situation can convey to others something that the rest of us could not. To have lived an experience is much better than to read or hear about it.

Then there is the case of a young man called Norman, who had a long period of unemployment. He tried desperately for jobs, but never had an opportunity to acquire a core skill. ACE took him on at nearly 40 years of age, and he was trained in what might seem a very menial job — grass-cutting. But as a result of learning about grass-cutting he now has a very successful little business. He repairs and sells grass-cutting equipment and cuts grass. Such opportunities would not come along without ACE. The programme has proved itself over the years.

I come now to what I will call a hidden agenda, and we will be asking next week whether there is one. We have a successful ACE scheme, which is open to change. That point came across very strongly in our deliberations yesterday. But it seems that the Government do not want to change a successful organization. Fair enough: if the Government feel that there are new skills and new things we should be doing, we are open to their suggestions. But they will not reveal their hand. By holding this report back, they are keeping ACE people and workers in the dark.

Recently, the Government had discussions about various schemes throughout Europe — schemes that they could implement. It is interesting that in none of the discussions and in none of the papers that were produced was ACE even mentioned. It was not held up as an example, despite the fact that it is the most successful project of its type in the whole of Europe. If that does not smack of a hidden agenda, I do not know what would.

When you are looking for a manager you ask the candidates how they would manage change. It is a stock question, and the stock answer is “I would take people on board.” ACE has not been taken on board by the Government; indeed, it has been side-lined and often rebuked. We were given examples yesterday. And now these cuts are proposed. I enjoyed our discussions yesterday — and I use the word “enjoyed” in the right sense. They were very revealing. I look forward to further exchanges next week, after which we may be able to come back to the Forum with some answers.

I urge all Members to support this very worthwhile motion. There are people out there who really need our help.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue. We have here a problem of considerable urgency. I suppose that I wear two hats — that of a Forum Member, and that of the training director of Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency Ltd. I am therefore well aware of the major contribution of Action for Community Employment (ACE), not only to the local community but also to the voluntary sector.

10.30 am

At one stage ACE employed about 10,000 people, but the figure was gradually reduced. The scheme has made a major contribution in various sectors. One sees the success of recent efforts by the Industrial Development Board (IDB) to secure inward investment.

But it is highly unlikely that the new jobs created through inward investment will go to the long-term unemployed.

In October 1996, 43,521 people in Northern Ireland — more than 53% of the unemployed — were classified as being in long-term unemployment. That goes to show the extent of the problem. ACE provides the second chance that so many people need. And those determined to try to bring some dignity into their lives deserve a second chance. There is nothing so bad as having to go down to the local unemployment bureau and sign for whatever benefit is available. An ACE job is a real job that provides a real wage, and employment gives people the dignity that they deserve.

The programme provides structured training. Mr Nesbitt referred to the core staff. They play a vital role in the development and structuring of training in the various schemes. The £3 million that has been spent on management training through the Open University will, to all intents and purposes, go down the drain if the Government's proposals are carried out. It is regrettable — despicable, in fact — that the long-term unemployed should be used as scapegoats when it comes to paying for the damage caused by the troubles of last summer. The Government must urgently review this decision because the people most affected are the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland. It is proposed that £11 million be deducted from the budget. That will mean a 28% cut in the ACE programme. The extent of job losses will vary from area to area.

One thing that concerns me greatly about the Government's policy on targeting of social need is that calculations are based on deprivation. This has created major difficulties for many areas. Some areas — for example, Castlereagh, Carrickfergus and Banbridge — are rated as having zero deprivation. Policy in respect not just of ACE but of everything — European grants or whatever — is based on deprivation. Areas such as those I have mentioned will lose out, despite pockets of unemployment as high as 50% or 60%. People there will suffer because of a misguided calculation, and ACE will lose out.

I am concerned by the antics of what I call career civil servants. A person comes into a post and, to get the Minister to agree to changes, introduces these schemes. It particularly angers me that the magnificent work of Cecil Graham, now retired from the Department of Economic Development, is being demolished by new career civil servants. I believe strongly that this is one of the best arguments for a devolved Government in Northern Ireland, to whom such people would be accountable. At present they are accountable to nobody. We shall be meeting them next week, but I have serious reservations about their likely response.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Does the Member accept that the formation of the Training and Employment Agency, as one of the first-steps agencies, has been a disaster for all training in Northern Ireland? Since this function was taken out of the hands of the Department of Economic Development all training schemes, including Action for Community Employment (ACE) and Youth Training Programme, and the new Jobskills programme have suffered drastically.

Mr Neeson: I agree entirely. The pilot scheme for the community work programme, according to all the information that I have been given, does not appear to be all that successful. It is benefit-based and is obviously aimed at the unemployed married male.

The thrust of many Government schemes in Northern Ireland — throughout the United Kingdom, in fact — is not to provide training or employment but to enable people to gain qualifications. In all the new schemes that are coming forward, qualifications — national vocational qualifications and so forth — are much more important than training.

Reference has been made to the review that was carried out by the Training and Employment Agency. The Government's failure to release the report is a deliberate attempt to bury the contribution made by ACE over the years.

ACE benefits all age groups. For example, 29.9% of people between 18 and 24 are on schemes. The figures for those aged 25 to 39, 40 to 54 and 55 or over are 40.32%, 23.6% and 6.3% respectively. The Government's proposals are already creating uncertainty in many schemes, and many of the smaller ones could well be buried. ACE provides value for money. For example, in 1995-96 the 7,000 places in targeting social needs districts cost £34 million, whereas 600 IDB jobs in those districts cost £55.3 million.

The motion refers to the Jobskills programme. I share the great concern about the curtailment of schemes, bearing in mind that for many young people this is the first opportunity to enter the world of employment. The programme has created many anomalies. Take, for example, the fishing industry, which provides seasonal employment. In recent times I have been approached by many people from Queen's University and the University of Ulster because they cannot sign on for benefit during the holidays as they are not applying for the jobseeker's allowance.

It is incumbent upon Members to support the motion. Through the Economy Committee we will certainly make every effort to secure existing jobs.

Mr McCartney: I support the motion, which is timely. The debate so far illustrates very clearly the function and purpose of this Forum, which has been decried and sneered at in some quarters of the media. When the cuts in the Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes were first mentioned, the matter was debated in the House of Commons. A singular feature of that debate was that representatives from every Northern Ireland party, right across the political spectrum, were opposed to the cuts and gave unqualified backing for the continuance of financial support for the schemes.

But, of course, since Northern Ireland is essentially disenfranchised and governed like a nineteenth-century colony, what its people's representatives want is very often brushed aside for the benefit of what Mr Neeson has described as "new career civil servants", as well as some very old and dog-eared ones. Northern Ireland has been described as a bureaucrats' paradise. That is exactly what it is. Recently, in relation to the education and library boards, we had a demonstration of what can be done when politicians from all parties unite and present a common front on socio-economic matters that affect all the people. But, of course, we use so much of our time arguing about which state the people should serve that we forget about those we should all be serving. This is one issue which should bring all the parties together. It is therefore unfortunate that the SDLP is missing from the debate. Its Members could have made a very valuable contribution with regard to proposals in support of which they would have no problem whatever in joining with the rest of us.

Yesterday, at Northern Ireland Question Time in the House of Commons, I put to Mr Ancram the following question:

"Does the Minister think that the quite ferocious cuts in funds for the ACE schemes, which are directed specifically at the long-term unemployed, are likely to assist that group of people in Northern Ireland? Does he not think that the matter ought to be reviewed and that those very valuable schemes should be supported instead of weakened?"

The Minister's reply:

"I hear what the hon and learned Gentleman has to say. He knows that this year there has been a particularly difficult public expenditure round, in which priorities have had to be examined carefully, not least because of the need to find £120 million to meet the increased costs that have arisen as a result of renewed violence and terrorism. In that context, a number of serious questions had to be asked about the allocation of resources. In the light of the falling unemployment figures and the changed situation since the introduction of ACE, it was reckoned that those cuts had to be made, although it was a difficult choice."

That answer includes two very questionable principles. First of all, it is the function and duty of the Government to ensure that the rule of law is enforced and that the lives, property and physical safety and well-being of citizens are protected. That is the fundamental requirement, yet here we have a Minister saying "We are going to have to punish and fine you." All the people of Northern Ireland who were never involved in any of the matters allegedly giving rise to this expenditure would be admonished. The schools have to suffer drastic cut-backs, and the long-term unemployed involved in the ACE schemes have to be punished. The whole principle is quite wrong.

10.45 am

The second statement, of course, refers to the falling unemployment figures. This is of very little assistance to the people who need support from these schemes because they are the long-term unemployed. Some 53% of the unemployed in Northern Ireland fall into that category. These are the people who need assistance. They are the people to whom these schemes were specifically directed. They are the sort of people who, if they do not have retraining and the introduction to full-time employment that the ACE schemes provide, have little or no hope of getting employment in the new jobs that the Industrial Development Board (IDB) is supposed to be providing. Mr Neeson, again, has helpfully pointed out some figures for comparison. They relate to the money devoted to the IDB, whose central objective, of course, is not just the provision of jobs but the making of profit. People who want to make a profit do not employ unskilled, untrained labour with a long history of unemployment. The people for whom the IDB will be finding jobs are not the sort that these schemes are specifically designed to protect.

Let me move on to the manner in which these cuts are to be effected. This too displays an absence of real thought or consideration on the part of the career civil servants who are making the changes. What they have done is simply cut all the ACE schemes. But the ACE schemes are not all the same. In the case of the ACE scheme with which I am particularly concerned — a community scheme in Donaghadee — some 68% of people find permanent employment within three months of leaving or, indeed, while still there. The

average for the province is some 42%, which means that a number of schemes are finding virtually no one permanent employment. Therefore there is a question as to efficiency. Some schemes are very small. So, what will happen is that really efficient schemes, like the one in Donaghadee with an average of 68%, will have their staff cut from four to two and, instead of having 98 places, will have 47. A scheme in another area, with an average of members through to employment of, say, 10% or 20%, will also be cut in half. You are cutting the efficient by 50%, but you are also cutting the inefficient by 50%. There is absolutely no qualitative test of the effectiveness or efficiency of any particular scheme.

One thing, although it is usually unsaid, that has enabled some of the faceless mandarins who are dictating these cuts to make them is held to be the unattractive public image of some of the ACE schemes. It is right, it has to be said, that some ACE schemes have not been administered with the propriety that one would like. Some have been the subject of very questionable practices on the parts both of those going through them and of those said to be managing them. The "one or two" — and I stress one or two — rotten apples in the barrel are being used to blacken a scheme which in its general purpose and administration has been extraordinarily effective. As Mr McAlister has said, although it has been effective, although it has addressed a real area of need in society which was ignored, it has not been the subject of any trumpeting in the circumstances he has described.

What we need to do — and here I return to my earlier point — is get together. The Members of Parliament from all the parties, including those which are not represented here today, must get together on this matter which affects the entire community. We must say to our political and bureaucratic masters that none of the people in Northern Ireland want these cuts and that all of the parties are opposed to them. These schemes address a specific and special need in Northern Ireland, which has a hard core of long-term unemployed people who deserve better. It is our united duty to make sure that Baroness Denton and the Government realize that what they are doing is opposed by the entire Northern Ireland community — Protestant, Catholic, Unionist, Nationalist.

I fully support this motion. We should make sure that our views are conveyed, in the strongest possible terms, to those who are alleged to be our political betters.

The Chairman: Before calling you, Mr Casey, may I say to his Colleague, Mr Curran, how delighted we are to see him back in the Chamber.

Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Casey: I support the motion. I can speak from personal experience as someone who helped to pioneer the Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes in 1982, when we had only 400 people employed. I was subsequently employed as a project manager for eight years and was a founder member and chairman of the ACE Federation.

It is absolutely ridiculous that these cut-backs have been imposed when there are still 43,521 long-term unemployed in our midst. Not only do we have to take into consideration the fact that we are losing posts, there are other implications which could have a very important bearing on the future of ACE. Because of the reduction in overheads that these

redundancies will cause, quite a number of schemes could be forced to close their doors through lack of finance.

Other Members have alluded to the fact that about 250 core jobs are going to be lost. These are semi-permanent jobs — jobs that people will have so long as the ACE scheme is in existence.

Another benefit of ACE is that most of the people who come into it are very low achievers, who have the least chance of getting employment in the community. The ACE programme is an ideal vehicle for instilling confidence into those people and giving them a sense of worth. It encourages people to apply for jobs — something that, previously, they probably would not have had the confidence to do.

Also, I have seen people coming in at 24 years of age with honours degrees and who have never had a job in their lives. Nobody wanted to know them because they had no work experience. We take people like that into ACE for a year. After training, quite a number of them get fairly high jobs in the Civil Service, the Housing Executive and health and social services. They would not be able to achieve that but for the benefit of their year in the ACE scheme. There are people who decry ACE, saying "It is low pay. It is only a temporary job." But they fail to see the impact that it has had on the long-term unemployed and the great benefits that it has brought to them.

Another aspect which sometimes is not taken into account is the wide range of services that are being provided by ACE throughout the community. The most vulnerable people were targeted by those running the programmes. We are talking about people with disabilities, the elderly, people who need child-care facilities, home visitation or meals-on-wheels, diners clubs — all the things which are of particular benefit to the most vulnerable people. With all the cut-backs in social-services provision, the community is going to suffer doubly. At least, with the cut-backs in health and social services, the ACE scheme was standing in the breach. If there is no ACE it will be a sad day for the most vulnerable.

I have to agree with the Alliance Party's analysis of the Training and Employment Agency. The scheme was started by the Department of Economic Development. As well as ACE we had the community workshops. Then the Youth Training Programme (YTP) was introduced and, after that, Jobskills. We have had so many that it is very difficult to keep track of them. Then the community programme was introduced. This was like ACE, but was benefit-plus rather than a wage. In my opinion, all these things have been abject failures — not because of the people in them, but because of the way they are organized and run.

In the days of YTP, which was for 16- and 17-year-olds, there was an occupancy rate of about 30% in the case of 17-year-olds, whereas ACE had a rate of between 92% and 98%. If a scheme can attract that number of people it must be successful. The community workshops were scrapped, and YTP and JTP were brought in to replace them. They were such a success that they were phased out within a year and amalgamated under the Jobskills programme. Now the Jobskills programme is going to suffer a 40% cut-back as well. There has to be something wrong with the thinking in the Training and Employment Agency. It is gone off at a tangent into other areas without taking the plight of the long-term unemployed

into consideration. Questions have to be asked. There are boffins up there, and I do not know where they get their ideas or what research they are doing. They seem to change horses in mid-stream. We get changes every year or every couple of years.

I agree with Mr McCartney that we should all — the different political parties, our representatives at Westminster, everybody in the community — put pressure on the Government to get the Training and Employment Agency to change its decision to cut this programme, which is essential so long as we have the long-term unemployed. Jobs are supposedly being created by the Industrial Development Board. It is supposed to be channeling money into the creation of real jobs. The long-term unemployed are certainly not benefiting. I doubt very much that the community is benefiting.

I heartily endorse the motion, and I congratulate Mr McMichael on his presentation.

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, you will, I am sure, be as brief as possible. A great number of points were made in your absence and, if I may suggest it, you might try to avoid repetition.

Mr Hugh Smyth: You are putting me under pressure before I even rise, Mr Chairman. Everyone else gets away with it, but I don't. However, to help you out, as usual and being the type of person I am, I will be brief.

I have no hesitation in supporting this motion. I hope that at some time we will be in a position where we do not need Action for Community Employment (ACE), because, in the end, it is only a substitute for jobs. But that time is light years away. I am delighted that Mr McCartney wants to work in conjunction with our other MPs, from whatever party, to put pressure on the Government. Two or three weeks ago, when we debated the cuts in general, that is exactly what I called for — it is in the Record of Debates. I am delighted that someone listened to me and intends to do something about it. I believe that such pressure can work.

The Leaders of our four parties — in particular, of our main parties: Dr Paisley, Mr Trimble and Mr Hume — have proved beyond a shadow of doubt what can be achieved by working together. That was proven only last week when, through their efforts, we had a change of heart in respect of the education and library boards. We should take great heart from that. If the same pressure is applied we can change the mind of the Government about ACE, and I believe that that is essential.

11.00 am

Some Members have mentioned the 40,000 long-term unemployed. Let us look at the big picture. Approximately 100,000 people are unemployed in Northern Ireland — and they are just the ones they tell us about; the figure does not include all the hidden unemployed. If the truth were known and all those people who are really capable of working were put on the register, you would be talking about a figure nearer 200,000.

That makes it important to ensure that we take every opportunity to support jobs, including this motion on ACE. I am delighted that we have so many fans of ACE now. Not

long ago people were actually criticizing the programme. Their attitude to certain jobs was that they were only old ACE jobs, as if they did not matter.

One thing disappoints me about these cuts. I, along with people like Jackie Hewitt and others from the Farset project — and I know that Mr Rodgers would have supported me because we both come from a training programme — decided to go to the Government and ask them to change the criteria for ACE. Most people will be aware that at the moment you can be employed in ACE for only 12 months. We were grateful for this — and so were the people employed — but thought that, to give both parties a better opportunity (in particular, the people brought in for training), two years would be more realistic.

I ask members of political parties, when they meet with the Government, to seek a change in the ACE criteria, while putting on pressure about the cuts. When a person joins the ACE programme — Mr Rodgers and anyone else here who is involved will be aware of this — it takes him two or three months to find out what it is all about and another two months to get accustomed to the job. Therefore almost half the time is gone before he can make a proper contribution, and then the winding-down programme begins. Not only should the 2,000 places be retained, but the number should be increased, and the length of service should be extended from one year to two years.

I could be speaking for any area — and any Member could probably get up and say the same — when I say that this will have a major impact on the area that I represent, which has pockets of deprivation. I do not claim this; I know it, and there are many people here who can make the same claim. I happen to represent an area in some parts of which as many as 80% of people are unemployed. The average is probably 60%. Some 65% of the people live on an income of £100 or less, so those ACE positions are vital — vital to the people who are in them of course, but also to the economy of the areas where they live.

Let me indicate just how important they are. If you are unemployed and receiving £35 or £40 a week in benefit and then get an ACE job that pays £100 a week, there is a big difference. We all recognize that these jobs are not as well-paid as they should be, but ACE gives the young people, and some not so young, their self-respect back, and that is something which money from the Government cannot buy.

Someone has already mentioned that the vast majority have not yet got used to a little bit of wealth. Nevertheless, being able to give themselves a slightly higher standard of living than before encourages them. Many of these people go on to find permanent employment. When we discussed here some weeks ago the introduction of the jobseeker's allowance Members claimed, and rightly so, that there are people who do not want to work. That is true to a certain extent, but when you get into an ACE position you get used to the money and it encourages you to keep working.

I have said to the Secretary of State that this comes at the worst possible time. We in the Forum are all agreed that the troubles we go through and poverty cannot be separated — there is a direct link. Of the people who are caught up in the troubles — and you have only to listen to the news or read the papers — 95% come from typical working-class areas, be they Protestant or Roman Catholic. They are the no-hopers of society. It is the Government's duty to try to ensure that people do not return to violence, to give them at least the

opportunity to get a higher standard of living by way of a decent job, a decent house and a decent environment, which will make the people themselves much more decent.

We were told that if there were cease-fires we would see large amounts of money being poured into the economy — the peace dividend from the Government. I do not know about anyone else, but I did not see much sign of the peace dividend in Belfast. It is all very well for the Government to say that we have returned to violence and that funds have to go elsewhere, but even during the cease-fire period of about two years they failed to put that money into society.

It is an indictment on them that when things turned sour they hit the section of the community that could least afford to be hit — the unemployed and the sick. And, as the Labour spokesman stated, apart from the ACE jobs themselves let us not forget what the workers put back into society.

In my area there are many old-age pensioners who would not have the comforts that they do have but for the service provided by ACE. They can have their gardening done for practically nothing; painting and decorating is also done for them. They have practically got a home-help service through the ACE programme. All those things are to be wiped out. And for what? Can we really put a price on such services? Shame on the Government that they are doing this.

I want to endorse everything that has been said today and to congratulate Mr McMichael for bringing this important motion to the Forum. I endorse what Mr McCartney said about the strength of our MPs. We do not use that strength often enough, and I appeal to the Leaders to change that. I remember another time when this was proven. I believe that the Belfast shipyard would not be here today had it not have been for the efforts of our political leaders. I know that Mr Maginnis and the leaders at the time, including Dr Paisley and Mr Peter Robinson, were involved. They got together, and they got results. Together, so far as I am concerned, they saved the shipyard.

The Chairman: We are moving away from ACE now.

Mr Hugh Smyth: No, I am not.

We saved the boards.

The Chairman: Your time is up. I have been as lenient as I can.

Mr Hugh Smyth: We need these places restored. Mr McCartney has already said that he is prepared to join with the remainder of our MPs —

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, your time is up. Thank you very much.

Mr Hugh Smyth: — to ensure that, be it Major or Blair (it does not matter who it is) these cuts are scrapped and we are allowed to retain the 2,000 places.

Mr Foster: I am pleased that this issue is before the Forum. It emphasizes the value of this body to the community, and I concur wholeheartedly with Mr McCartney in his criticism of the SDLP for opting out of dialogue — a well-hackneyed word of theirs.

11.15 am

I support the motion because the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme is being ground away as the Government propose yet further reduction in funding. I feel duty-bound to make an input into this very important debate because of the tremendously negative effects ACE reduction are having throughout the province. I refer particularly to my area — Fermanagh and South Tyrone — where a most effective system is being disrupted and the community is being grossly affected. There is a particularly excellent community resource in the Enniskillen area which has lent itself to most commendable community service. I imagine that the same applies throughout Northern Ireland. As regards that community service, I am told that this year's budget reduction comes hot on the heels of a 25% reduction, implemented last March. This will mean that from 84 ACE posts in March 1996, the scheme will reduce to 46 ACE posts by April 1997. In the county as a whole there will be a reduction of about 60 ACE posts which means that over 110 jobs will have been lost within the past year. The closure of an operation employing this many in the county will have a serious knock-on effect for the local economy, even though I believe that this reduction will be achieved by a freeze in recruitment rather than by redundancy.

I am fully aware of the swingeing cut of 32.4% that we in Fermanagh have already had in the central grant resource, and we have a severe revaluation issue to contend with as well. The real tragedy lies in the loss of the key expertise, that is those core staff, probably around six of them, who will be made redundant over the next few months. These individuals successfully delivered the structured training which has made the ACE programme such a success in building the self-esteem of workers, placing leavers in employment — about 52%, I understand — and achieving nationally recognized vocational training awards. Investment in core training is over £3,000 for each worker and this will be lost to the programme along with the skills and contacts which have contributed so much to the economic regeneration of the county.

The social consequences of this proposal will inevitably reduce the services offered to those in need. The effect will be felt more keenly in the light of continuing cuts in the health and social-care budgets. Many of the ACE-funded organizations in the county have played a vital part, alongside statutory services, in encouraging the elderly and other clients in need to cope with very many personal crises. The short-sightedness of this proposal is brazenly offensive to those representatives of ACE sponsors who have been awaiting a review and evaluation of the ACE programme by the Training and Employment Agency.

The principle of consultation and participation has again been callously ignored by diktats handed down from on high. The effectiveness of the ACE programme in providing work and training and in improving the prospects of the long-term unemployed cannot be denied. It is also important that the ACE programme is not seen as being no longer required. The Government's own statistics for the long-term unemployed show an expected increase over the next five years. The problem is not disappearing even though overall unemployment levels are falling slightly; nor should anyone believe that ACE can be substituted by the

community work programme. They cater for different markets. The community work programme appeals only to those in receipt of benefit for whom the ACE wage would be totally unattractive, and community work programmes hold no advantages for women. In view of the £500 million given to the Industrial Development Board, we believe that the withdrawal of £2 million from ACE is not only unfair but also bad value for money in terms of the cost of jobs lost.

Furthermore, the reason for these cuts has been attributed to the failure of the cease-fire and the peace negotiations. It is sad that the Government should cut finance for vital community services to punish the vast majority of decent, responsible citizens. When riots took place in Toxteth, Liverpool, more money was poured into the area. Why are decent citizens here being punished? Whatever the reason for the failure of some to abide by the law, surely all clear-thinking and informed observers must agree that the ACE programme has done much to improve community relations and foster development initiatives in the voluntary sector. In fact, its success in this area must be one of the factors underpinning the peace and reconciliation initiatives made by the European Parliament. Indeed, it may be that the influence of that body on economic policy might lie closer to the real reasons for Treasury concerns about departmental budgets. No doubt, some senior civil servants have seen the opportunity to use "peace money" to offset reduced budgets. But where is the additionality that the peace money should be providing?

I conclude by saying that the Government cannot destroy such a valuable service to communities. It is effective. It is proving its value to so many needs. It has a vital input. It allows for a most valuable contribution to society. It is essential that it should be restored to its former effectiveness forthwith.

The Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the motion. We trust that the Government will take note of the swell of opinion in support of ACE remaining in the community and then restore it to its optimum.

Ms Sagar: I too support the motion.

Ace for Community Employment (ACE) positions have been crucial in counteracting social exclusion and marginalization by enabling community and voluntary groups to operate and offer the broad range of valuable services which have already been mentioned.

ACE posts also service an important stepping-stone into future employment or training while the level of pay, and the hours, are often far from ideal for workers. The training opportunities provided by ACE can give workers a head start when they come to look for further opportunities. Such bridges are especially important for workers from traditionally disadvantaged groups such as women.

When we looked at the employment figures provided by a women's centre in one of Northern Ireland's unemployment blackspots we found these points well supported. This women's centre has employed 52 people since 1983, 44 of them ACE workers. As with many other organizations providing crucial services to the community, there were times when the only paid staff at the centre were ACE workers. Of those women employed, 12 went on

to further education, 18 found paid employment, two became self-employed, three started their own businesses, and two became volunteers.

Cuts to the ACE scheme only exacerbate the impact that other cuts in public spending will have on communities. These include cuts to the Jobskills programme, urban regeneration, youth services, libraries and education. Such cuts also raise serious questions about the Government's stated commitment to the additionality of the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The impact of cuts on the ACE and other social programmes will mean that community groups will have to look to peace-package funds to maintain their core services. This will prevent such groups from engaging in new and innovative projects. In some cases, it could mean that organizations will not survive at all. Where does additionality come into that?

The Government must prove their commitment to additionality by demonstrating that European funds are leading to additional work being done on the streets of Northern Ireland to the tune of £240 million. Additionality can only be proven at the Treasury level.

If community groups are looking to peace-package moneys to replace opportunities lost owing to cuts in ACE and other special schemes, what will happen when the peace funds come to an end? Whom are the Government going to look at then?

As an ex-ACE worker, I should like to say how important ACE is — and I know this has already been stressed. I was a community-care worker and that gave me confidence. It also made me think about my own community, about the importance of looking after it and working for its people. It is very important that everybody is aware of the self-confidence this provides and how important it is to let people know their own self-worth. Unfortunately, training schemes cannot always provide that, but ACE can because 80% of the time is work-based. It is very important to give people their pride and self-respect.

We thoroughly support this motion and are glad to hear that everybody is in agreement. The Forum is the only platform we have at the moment, and we should use it to let the Government know that we do not want this to happen. We also agree with Mr Hugh Smyth's recommendation that the ACE period should be increased to two years. It is very unfortunate that people, having obtained a job, having built up trust in their community, have to leave after one year.

The Chairman: I am most grateful to the DUP for reducing the number of Members to be called. That example might be considered by those on my right.

Mr Dodds: As has already been made clear, the Democratic Unionist Party fully supports this motion. We welcome the opportunity to bring this matter to the Floor of the Forum and, as Mr Hugh Smyth has already said, this is an issue on which the party Leaders should get together and continue the work that they have done in other areas. They should bring to the highest level of Government the concern — evidenced today in the Forum — that exists right across the community about the effects that the cut-backs in the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme will have.

It has been pointed out, and rightly so, that this is more than just an employment programme; it is a programme which aids the entire community. The reverberations of these cuts will be felt not just by the people who could have gone into the programme, but also by other members of the community. In many cases it will be the most vulnerable sections of the community — the elderly, the disabled, the young — who are affected by the withdrawal of what are vital services. Often, these services have filled the gap left by failure on the part of the statutory agencies and the Government themselves. Therefore this is a vital issue which must be addressed by the Government as a matter of the utmost urgency.

Unfortunately, this example of the Government targeting cuts at the most vulnerable people in the community is nothing new, and we have to put it in the context of what is going on, in terms of Government expenditure priorities, right across the board. Look at what is happening in the education system. Look at the run-down in library services, in youth services, in student grants. Look at what happened yesterday and at the scandalous decision to withdraw school-crossing-patrol services. Look at the cut-backs in teachers. The suggestions and proposals that are coming forward are deplorable.

The Government are looking for a 3% cut in hospital expenditure year by year, and they have admitted that this cannot be met simply by efficiency savings. It will also result in a decrease in services. Furthermore, there is to be no new building of public-sector housing. Indeed, we see cut-backs right across the vital areas of social provision, education, health, housing and jobs. We see services being diminished. We see people being thrown onto the scrap-heap after many years of valuable service. We see the most vulnerable people — children, the sick and disabled, young people, the unemployed — forgotten about, put to one side by the Government, who seem to have no comprehension whatsoever of the effect of these cut-backs.

That is why it is vitally important that the Forum exists as a means by which the elected representatives of Northern Ireland can make their voices heard. I too regret the absence of the SDLP Members. Their contribution in areas like this would be very valuable and would increase pressure on the Government. Their failure to be in the Forum and to play their part is doing a great disservice to their constituents, to those who elected them. It is vital that the Government be faced with the consequences of these atrocious cuts in all these areas, of which this latest cut in the ACE scheme is just one example.

Attention has also been drawn, and rightly so, to the consequences for the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. I share the concern of others about that. I believe that there is an attempt by the Government to ensure that in areas where they are cutting back, people are being encouraged, or forced, to apply to district partnerships or to other intermediary funding bodies to make up the shortfall in expenditure that would otherwise have taken place. The three Northern Ireland Members of the European Parliament were instrumental in securing this money — £240 million — over the next three years, with the possibility of another two years' funding, but that is not what they and, indeed, the European Commission envisaged when this money was promised and when the programme was set up. It was not intended to take the place of current Government expenditure or simply to make up the shortfall for other cut-backs.

But, as we have seen — we see it with the lottery funding, and we see it in this area — the Government seize every opportunity to reduce their commitment, to reduce their expenditure. We have seen it in local government as well. In terms of community services, the Government are quite happy if a local authority comes along and takes up the burden, and then, of course, they slowly withdraw and put the pressure on to the ratepayers. They are doing the same with the European Union Special Support Programme, and I hope that very soon the MEPs from Northern Ireland will jointly make that point very clearly to the Government and to the European Commission to prevent the Government from going down that line.

11.30 am

I am very happy indeed to support this motion. I look forward to the day when we, as elected Forum representatives, will not only have the opportunity to voice our concerns and to lobby Ministers, but be able to take the decisions and set the expenditure priorities that we feel are necessary for the people who send us there.

Ms Bell: In the Forum we have debated and discussed our concerns — weaknesses in the health service, social and economic issues, Jobskills, jobseeker's allowance, and so on. And yesterday, like Mr Eric Smyth in Belfast, the South Eastern Education and Library Board, of which I am a member, discussed our concerns about the stringent cuts that are being made in the boards and in education generally.

We are discussing today another topic of concern. I want to put on record my personal disgust at this latest initiative by the Government, who, in order to save money — and that is basically what it is all about — have put forward this initiative, obviously without any regard for the severe repercussions on those most disadvantaged in the community. It is yet another confirmation that the Government are actively promoting the old adage "Survival of the fittest". The Northern Ireland Federation of Action for Community Employment Schemes has acknowledged that this scheme is in need of review and has consistently asked for the release of the review document by the Training and Employment Agency, but so far, as one of my Colleagues has said, it is surprisingly reluctant to issue it.

ACE schemes have always actively sought to improve the quality of life of those who, for one reason or another, have never really known full or long-term employment. ACE's implementation impacted on all aspects of community life in a most constructive and sustaining way. In Bangor, for instance, there are at least 10 schemes, not to mention the rest of North Down, that will be affected directly if these cuts go through. These are small but significant schemes, like lunch clubs for the elderly, home visiting for the elderly, after-school clubs, playgroups, training schemes et cetera. It could also be said that the ACE scheme showed clearly the advantages of partnership in the community for the first time. Connections were made between the voluntary community groups and agencies, which have definitely helped the economic and social life of this province and directly helped those who needed it most.

It has helped those who, through no fault of their own, have not been able to obtain or hold down a job that would in turn give them that feeling of self-worth which has already been talked about and a feeling that they were contributing, in any small way, to society and

to their own community. Things like time-keeping, getting up at the same time in the morning and training in interactive skills have always formed part of every ACE project, and long-term unemployed men and women were only given that chance through the ACE schemes.

I endorse whole-heartedly the comments of my Colleague, Mr Neeson and, indeed, the comments of my other Forum colleagues and whole-heartedly support the motion.

Mr Benson: I am grateful for the opportunity to support this motion. The Government pride themselves in getting value for money. Well, I can think of nothing that gives better value for money than the Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes.

I have a vested interest, but no monetary interest, in ACE in that I was one of six people who in 1988 formed the Newtownards Community Workforce ACE Scheme. Since then we have had about 120 meetings, and not one of the directors has ever charged a penny. Nor did they want a penny, nor would they even have considered taking a penny. Everything is given *gratis*. We have been prepared to put so much into the scheme, to assist the unemployed and the elderly who benefit from it, but the Government have pulled the rug from under us.

We had 93 employees. As Members know, people have to be unemployed for a year or more to be eligible. ACE gives them an opportunity to get work experience. We can also provide some element of training to make them more employable, and, as has been said, since more than 60% get permanent work it is a scheme that really should be supported.

Let us think of the work that ACE employees do. We have quite a number of elderly people and disabled people who could not otherwise get any of the services that ACE provides. We are not in competition with statutory agencies, nor are we in competition with businesses. We are only providing services that would not be provided by any other means. On Wednesdays we have a senior citizens' club, where ladies provide a hot dinner. Many of these elderly folk have no friends, or anybody else, calling to see them. In fact, that may be the only dinner they get in the entire week. I find it very sad that the likes of these people are going to be deprived because of all the cut-backs.

As I have said, we had 93 employees. When the cuts take place in April the number will be reduced to 45, so one of our core workers will have to go. We will therefore have to stop assisting a number of people. We will also have to cut back on decorating for the elderly and on grass-cutting two or three times a year. Although these are minimal services, they are very important to people who will be unable to get them elsewhere. I find that very sad.

I support Mr Neeson's comment that this is dictated by career civil servants. Mr McCartney too touched very well on the question of the lack of democracy in local government in Northern Ireland. They are both quite right. It is time our MPs and party Leaders got together — they have a great opportunity — to fight this decision.

As chairman of an education board, I can say that in addition to the success of last week we had some success over a year ago when the board was going to be abolished. On that occasion we won purely on the strength of political feeling and by getting the Leaders of

all the parties together to fight. I hope that they will get together to fight this decision. One thing that we want to keep is our ACE scheme. I have long felt that the Government should be extending ACE, not cutting it. Everybody on the dole should be on an ACE scheme instead until they get into full employment. If the Government did that we would have fewer of these young hooligans using their energy at two o'clock in the morning to drive cars around and knock people down because they would have to use their energy doing a bit of work.

Mrs Parkes: The Secretary of State announced on December 10 last year that the security and compensation budget would be increased by £120 million over the next three years. While I welcome the increase in security resources, the funding for this should not be taken out of already hard-pressed budgets; additional resources should be provided for this. The funding for this will come out of the Northern Ireland bloc vote and that will hit a variety of essential services such as training, housing, libraries, health and the Action for Community Employment schemes.

The ACE budget was already cut last year and the news that it is to be further reduced by some £11 million is deplorable — this will have a devastating effect on the ACE programme. The ACE scheme is by no means perfect. However, it does make a major contribution to the welfare of many in Northern Ireland. These schemes provide a valuable opportunity for those people, both young and old, who live in disadvantaged areas of the province to develop skills and gain work experience. It also offers opportunities to women, in particular, who are returning to the work-place and gives them confidence to do so. These cut-backs will reduce the number of opportunities for the long-term unemployed to gain the benefit of work experience which is needed to improve their job prospects.

Community and voluntary groups provide a lifeline to the most vulnerable in society. The elderly, disabled people and young people will find, and, indeed, have already experienced, a reduction in the services that they can provide. The cut-backs are disastrous and will have a detrimental effect on small communities in deprived areas. They will cause misery and hardship.

I fully support the motion and call on the Government to reconsider their plans as a matter of urgency.

Mr Weir: I have great pleasure in supporting this motion. I have been informed by a lot of people from the generation above me that the employment situation of 30 or 40 years ago was very different from that of today. In those days it was not uncommon for someone to finish work on a Friday and start a new job on the Monday. Also, if you were lucky enough to get into university in those days, you would really be assured of a good job. I am too young to remember whether that was true or not — I see doubts being expressed from the opposite Benches, but I am not quite as old as I look at times. Whether that was true 30 years ago, or whether that is just a rose-tinted picture, it is certainly not the case now.

The generation that I have grown up with has known nothing but high levels of unemployment. Friends and colleagues of mine, people I went to school with, have spent years unemployed before they have been able to get a job. Indeed, some people I know have not yet got a full-time job despite leaving school more than 10 years ago. That is the

desperate situation we are in. As was mentioned earlier by Mr Hugh Casey, there are problems even with graduate employment.

One contrast that I have noticed since I went to university about 10 years ago was that in those days the only people who went on to do post-graduate courses were the few, exceptional people, who were looking to pursue a very academic career or those people who went in for the vocational side of things: lawyers or accountants, for instance, did post-graduate courses. Nowadays it is very much the exception for somebody to try to leave university after he has got a primary degree; there is a need for graduates to go on and take a second, post-graduate qualification. This is not because they have a particular level of interest in that area, but simply because jobs are not out there. And we have noticed that, as has been mentioned by Mr Casey, there are already quite a number of graduates going on to Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes.

Given the fact that we have had an employment crisis in this kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland, for the last 20 years, ACE, since 1982, has played the useful role of providing a bridge between unemployment and employment. It has helped the voluntary sector, and it has played a vital role in our communities. I think that any reduction in the ACE scheme tears at the vital fabric of many of those communities. Mention has been made already of the ACE scheme in Donaghadee which has a very good employment record, and, as was mentioned by Ms Bell, there are a number of schemes in Bangor and Holywood.

I believe that ACE in essence plays two vital roles. First of all, it provides a bridge from unemployment to employment. In Northern Ireland we have a particular problem with the long-term unemployed. For example, the statistics for those who are unemployed for more than one year show that the Northern Ireland rate is 50% higher than in Great Britain. If you take the figures for three years' unemployed, the rate is double the Great Britain average, and if you take the figures for people who are unemployed for five years, that rate is three times the British average. Reference is made to regenerating the economy through investment, but we have to realize that there is no point in providing new jobs if trained people are not available to fill them. The long-term unemployed without skills are not going to be an attractive prospect to employers. We have got to bolster the ACE scheme.

11.45 am

Then there is the vital point mentioned first by Mr McAlister — the human factor. We can quote employment statistics as much as we like, but perhaps the most vital role that ACE plays is in providing human dignity. Men who when they left school thought they would have a job for the rest of their lives and would be able to support their family — and there are women in the same position — have suddenly found themselves on the scrap-heap of unemployment. ACE and schemes like it provide people with the opportunity to regain experience of work and a little bit of dignity. For some of the young it is the first taste of work. I believe that this is a vital role.

The proposed 28% reduction in ACE provision this year has been blamed on the worsening security situation. Anybody who has studied ACE over the last couple of years knows this to be a lie, as last year there was a cut of 25%, which it was suggested was the result of an improving security situation and the creation of more jobs. Whether through

penny-pinching or because of internal politics in the Department of Economic Development, ACE is clearly being pared to the bone. It is destructive to play politics with people's jobs in this way. It is an attack on the most vulnerable members of society. I urge the Government to think again and to give ACE their full support. I note that people in England are looking to create some scheme of this sort. We should take a lead from that attitude.

I call upon the Government to withdraw these cuts and to restore ACE to the levels of about two years ago. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I too support the motion.

Action for Community Employment (ACE) is one of the most important Government schemes — if not the most important — to provide jobs for many of the long-term unemployed. That is the issue. The purpose of ACE is to provide training and work experience, and it does an excellent job. People do all kinds of work — painting, decorating, gardening and even minor house repairs. As Mr Benson mentioned, the Ards area has had some very important environmental schemes — tidying forgotten areas, clearing rubbish, replanting shrubs, trees and flowers. Footpaths are being laid in scenic areas, and parkland and areas that lay derelict and were off limits to everybody are being opened up.

In Newtownards we had a draught-proofing scheme, which has come to an end. It was one of those innovative ACE projects being carried out round the whole area and was supported tremendously well. Much good work was done for those for whom warmth is especially important. There was a charge, but it was minimal and not prohibitive to anybody. Another facet of ACE work is that it involves care of the elderly and the disabled. Many senior citizens look forward to an ACE worker's visit. For many he will be the only visitor of the day. The level of care for the elderly and disabled is, without doubt, fantastic. The participants are trained to a very high standard, as many acknowledge.

Senior citizens' clubs also benefit from the ACE scheme. These organizations enable many elderly people to enjoy a bit of good company. Some may have only one or two outings in the week, and the clubs may be their only point of contact. What better way to contribute to society than by helping the elderly and those that are less well-off?

ACE workers are also involved with pre-school play groups. What a marvellous education for those involved. Caring for the young teaches the virtues of patience and good temperament, as every parent will know. Home visits for the elderly amount to some 200 per week — another example of hard and important work. Under the ACE scheme in Newtownards the community work-force has carried out some 2,050 painting and decorating jobs in the last few years. It has provided 640 people with jobs, and currently employs 70, including three core workers.

The success of the scheme can be measured by the number of participants who find employment. That is the main point we want to get across. Some 46% of participants have found jobs at the end of their ACE time — surely an indication of the good work being done in the Ards area. The scheme provides training and employment for 12 months, followed by work outside. As a result of that experience many people have obtained full-time employment. The proposed reduction of 28.4% in funding for the Ards area will account for

20 or 21 jobs. It is obvious to everyone that the loser will be the local community. There will be plenty more people on the dole, with no training and no chance of employment.

Furthermore, by reducing the work-force you reduce services to the local community. The domino effect comes into play. Take away workers, and the elderly, the disabled, the very young and single parents — the less well-off — suffer. The vital work done by ACE will be undone by the penny-pinching of this mean, out-of-touch Government. The programme could fold completely. We have already seen examples in our area: there is no ACE scheme in Ballywalter, Greyabbey or Carrowdore. Why? Because of cut-backs. In the Ards Peninsula people are already feeling the pinch.

Let us look at the costs involved. The amount per post is minimal — in our case, some £93 per week. This is money well spent. It provides employment and training cheaply and gives hope to the unemployed. We have a duty to ensure that the ACE scheme provides much-needed special help. The cuts will be deep and will hurt the community immeasurably — indeed, they could be fatal.

The Government need to reconsider their cut-backs in the province, but especially in Ards. There will be a shortfall of some £102,000 this year. The pluses of the scheme must be taken into account. Having outlined some of its sterling work, I am confident that other Members will agree that it is a tremendous bargain. The Government could still redress the balance. After all, everyone looks for a bargain. What better bargain could there be than the ACE scheme?

Mr McFarland: The proposed cuts are a serious problem for Northern Ireland. We in North Down have a number of successful schemes. Members have heard about some of them. Living in Donaghadee, I am particularly concerned about the threat to the community work-force there. I am grateful for Mr McCartney's comments in this regard. I do not think that the Government have thought the matter through or fully considered the critical effect on training for the long-term unemployed, who, as we have heard, include graduates and a great many women returning to work, having raised their families. That is a particular concern in North Down, where a substantial proportion of people on the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme are women trying to get back into work.

People who have been unemployed for many years have an opportunity to develop a work routine. Some may not have bothered for many years to get fully dressed in the morning, having nowhere in particular to go. This sort of routine and lack of exposure to the modern work-place, with computers and modern ways of doing things that they may not have come across before, cannot prepare them for proper employment.

With regard to the social implications, we are facing reduced community support for the elderly. Services that are very important to old people may well go. Cuts can also affect the physical environment. We are all familiar with the "In Bloom" campaigns — for example, Donaghadee in bloom: wonderful flowers everywhere. These get great support from ACE — growing the flowers, putting them into baskets and watering them at two o'clock in the morning.

Mr Shannon: And a substantial amount of money from Ards Borough Council.

Mr McFarland: Yes. I am just saying that the ACE workers go out of time to do this because they are interested.

I am aware of a young man with a troubled past who, through involvement in horticulture, had his entire view of life changed. He is now progressing down the gardening route — very encouraging.

I am concerned particularly about the methodology. We have heard it proposed — and it is a valid proposal — that the smaller schemes should be allowed to go to the wall, leaving the successful ones to carry on with whatever money is left. That is a dangerous premise. Most schemes in rural areas are small. We heard from the Northern Ireland Federation of ACE Schemes about the people who set up the small scheme in Glenarm. It does not get a great many people into employment, for the simple reason that jobs are not available. None the less, it is valuable to that community.

It would be dangerous to go down this road without full investigation. We should not take the simple view that anything which is small and unsuccessful should be chopped and that we should leave the big schemes in place.

I call on the Government to rescind their decision, to which there is cross-party opposition. We should have a campaign such as was launched for the education boards.

I support the motion.

Mr Jim Rodgers: The dreaded news arrived in the post this morning for those involved in the Action for Community Employment (ACE) and Jobskills programmes. The organizers' worst fears were confirmed.

Career civil servants have been mentioned. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s there were civil servants genuinely concerned about people who could not get jobs and about areas with high levels of unemployment, social deprivation and terrorist activity. They head-hunted people to set up schemes, and many of them are still there, getting not one penny for serving on management committees and risking the possibility of the organizations' being declared bankrupt or insolvent.

Virtually all of these are charitable organizations, but I repeat what I told Ian Walters, the chief executive of the Training and Employment Agency, a year ago: that the agency plans to get rid of ACE by the year 1999. I stand by that. It wants ACE out of the road. In some people's eyes it has been running too long. As one who is involved in training, I know what great work the ACE providers — whether small organization or large — have done. But the aim is to get rid of them: "We do not need them."

My organization also runs the new community work programme. What have we found there? Recruitment has been capped. If someone leaves, he cannot be replaced. And the news this morning is that 16- and 17-year-olds leaving school on 30 June this year will not be able to join a training organization until the first Monday in September. This is the only part of the United Kingdom in which young people must stay at school until the end of

June. In England, Scotland and Wales there are two leaving dates. We were told by Brian Mawhinney, former Education Minister and now Chairman of the Conservative Party, that this was a pilot scheme. That was three years ago, but nothing has happened on the mainland.

I know what is going to happen in July and August: an increasing number of people will have their cars broken into or stolen or their houses burgled. Many young people will be roaming the streets and getting into petty crime because they have nothing else to do.

What are we in the Forum to do to prevent the massive cuts in training provision? I think we should invite the Minister responsible, Baroness Denton, and Ian Walters, the chief executive of the Training and Employment Agency, to address the Forum at the earliest possible moment. This is an all-party issue, and we have been told continually by the present Government that if there is an issue on which the politicians of the province are united they will look at it sympathetically. Mention has already been made this morning of the education and library boards.

12.00

I urge Mr McMichael, the proposer of the motion, whom I would like to thank on behalf of the Ulster Unionists for agreeing to add in the Jobskills programme, to agree in his winding-up speech that we need to bring along the Baroness and the chief executive of the Training and Employment Agency. Part of the problem with the agencies is that the Minister refers us to their chief executives, but they do not want to be involved and we are suffering as a result. There are people here today from ACE schemes who know that those schemes are not going to be in existence in a few months' time. They are worried sick. The same applies to those who are operating in the Jobskills programme.

We are told that the level of unemployment is decreasing. The figures given to me yesterday show that 71,940 people are out of work — 9.3% of the work-force. I do not believe them. Mr Hugh Smyth has talked about figures of nearly 200,000. The Government have doctored the figures many times, but my estimate would be about 130,000. A few months ago someone in the Social Security Agency told me that over the last 15 years there have been 19 changes in the way the figures are compiled. I do not see much evidence of all the jobs that we heard about prior to the visit of President Clinton in December 1995. Where are they all?

Let us have equality of treatment in the way that training schemes are being looked at — something that we do not have at present. For example, Dundonald Training Centre is being closed to save £500,000. The Boucher Road training centre in South Belfast closed only a few months ago. Where has the money been going? To Springvale Training Centre in West Belfast, where there was a rocket attack on a security forces patrol the other evening — a place that Gerry Adams and company are for ever using for press conferences and economic development seminars. So let the Training and Employment Agency come clean. Let them be fair and stop taking money out of ACE or Jobskills to put it into the Republican part of West Belfast. I hate to have to say this, as I am not sectarian in any shape or form, but we are not having equality of treatment. And the quicker we get it the better.

I repeat: let us have the Minister here. Dr Hayes was willing to come last week. Let us see the Minister. We have every right. We are democratically elected representatives. We care for the people who are going to suffer. The most deprived members of society are going to find themselves out of a job. Remember what the wages in ACE are. They average £90 per week, and there are deductions, which include national insurance contributions and PAYE.

So we have to fight against this to the bitter end. I know that we can discuss it in the Economy Committee. I welcome the decision by Mr Nesbitt and others to meet with senior officials next week, but, as has been said week in and week out, we need to be able to bring people here to examine them carefully, not just in Committees but in the Forum Chamber itself. I sincerely hope that Members agree with me on this matter.

Mr McMichael: First of all, I wish to thank Members for their support.

As a Forum, let us recognize the fact that the Northern Ireland Federation of ACE Schemes (NIFAS) held a demonstration outside this building today to heighten public awareness of this issue. They should be congratulated for continuing to use their initiative and their resisting of the Government's plans. It is quite clear that there is a need for political leaders and community leaders to be proactive; they must work hand in hand to address the lack of commitment by the Government to deal with the needs of Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to long-term unemployment, and they must resist the Government's efforts to eradicate ACE schemes.

As Mr Rodgers has already said, the letter notifying the implementation of the Government's cuts went to the ACE projects this morning. I have a copy of it before me. Let me refer to a couple of paragraphs. At one point Baroness Denton says to the organizers of ACE schemes

"I would ask you to take particular care in reducing services to the elderly, the young, under-fives, the disabled and the ill, and to give the maximum available time for possible alternatives to be considered and put into place."

The audacity of Baroness Denton in making those remarks. Where do the Government stand on taking care? Where is the care in the Government's systematic dismantling of the health service, which has provoked the ACE scheme workers to take action unilaterally in order to fill the holes being dug by the Government when they take away facilities from the most vulnerable in society? The Government are now saying that the people who run the ACE schemes should take care and make sure that people do not suffer any more than they have to. Maybe Ministers should be considering what they are prepared to do to deal with needy people and to address their needs.

Baroness Denton says

"I have asked the Training and Employment Agency to do whatever is possible to minimize the effect on needy people in disadvantaged communities."

I would have thought that the answer to that was very simple: maintain the ACE schemes and allow them to continue with their good work.

The most worrying and sinister aspect of the communication from Baroness Denton appears in hand-written form at the end of the letter. It says

"I regret that the Northern Ireland Federation of ACE Schemes have withdrawn co-operation, making it impossible to work with them."

The Baroness has outlined, unwittingly, the next step in the Government's strategy: to blacken the name of those who are campaigning for the continuance of ACE schemes. The Government are seeking to divide and conquer those who are opposed to the cuts in the ACE schemes. They are seeking to take away the credibility of the umbrella group which is co-ordinating that campaign for them and trying to target the individual community schemes in order to implement their proposals.

Is NIFAS wrong in refusing to co-operate, in refusing to assist in its own hanging? I think not. Why should these groups carry out the will of the Government by dismantling the ACE schemes and taking away the facilities within their own community? The Government are trying to shift the blame from themselves on to the heads of those who are campaigning just to keep their jobs and to keep facilities within their community. The blame must be seen to lie with the Government. It is they who are taking away those jobs in the first place.

To respond to Mr Rodgers's suggestion: I would be quite happy if Baroness Denton were prepared to come to the Forum, but I think we all know that she would not do so. Ministers consistently refuse to come to the Forum and answer questions. This is because they have not got a leg to stand on when it comes to putting forward reasonable, articulate answers to the questions that the people of Northern Ireland wish to ask about their policy.

I imagine that details of today's proceedings will be sent to Baroness Denton and to the Secretary of State as a matter of course. If Mr Davis can pay attention, surely he will appreciate this one as he is always raising issues about a Labour Government. As the Labour Party is likely to form the next Government, and it is very difficult to see an outgoing Secretary of State, or an outgoing Minister of Economic Development, taking steps to reverse the cuts in the ACE schemes, it is important that we communicate with Marjorie Mowlam, the Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and ask Labour to put their money where their mouth is. They should tell us now what their policy is going to be on ACE and whether they are going to maintain the necessary level of support for it.

The Chairman: Before we take a decision on this, do Members believe it a good idea for me to send a letter to the Baroness making this point and indicating that we would very much like to hear from her?

Mr Hugh Smyth: Mr Chairman, would you also be prepared to write to Mo Mowlam on Mr McMichael's last point?

The Chairman: I will content myself with one letter for the moment. We might have a little bit of a diversion.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I will pay for the other stamp.

The Chairman: Let us see how we fare with the motion first.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum endorses community opposition to enforced reductions in the ACE scheme and to the curtailment of the Jobskills programme through unrealistic limits to their financial support; calls on the Government to reverse their policy in recognition of the strength of feeling on this matter; and recognizes the invaluable contribution these schemes have made to improving employment prospects and community development, particularly in deprived areas.

The meeting was suspended at 12.15 pm and resumed at 1.31 pm.

PARADES AND MARCHES: INDEPENDENT REVIEW

Mr Curran: I beg to move the following motion:

That the North Committee Report be noted.

May I begin by expressing my personal thanks to you, Mr Chairman, for the great kindness that you showed in contacting my wife and family during my recent illness. I would also like to thank all of the Members who contacted them and the officials of this House for all the kindness that has been displayed towards me. It bears out the point that Northern Ireland is a remarkable place when we can show such kindness, as all the Members of this House have, to people who may not be of the same political persuasion.

I have had the opportunity in the last couple of months to reflect on the deteriorating security situation in Northern Ireland, and one of the conclusions that I have come to is that we are in the midst of a no-phony war. I was totally horrified at the murderous, callous attempt on the life of Mr Dodds. I could not believe that anyone would sink to the depths of attempting to attack a person and his wife who were looking after their young son in hospital. In the last couple of weeks we have had two very serious incidents in my own Down district. But for the grace of God half a dozen people could have been killed. On one occasion the car belonging to three young soldiers at a disco was callously blown up in a car park frequented by a very large number of young people. This is the sort of thing which happening at the moment.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute once again to the leadership of the PUP and the UDP for their tremendous work in encouraging the Combined Loyalist Military Command to maintain its cease-fire. I exhort them to continue to do so.

This is the first motion proposed by Labour in this Forum. It gives us an opportunity to lead the public discussion on the North Review, and it is right that we should do so rather than allow the debate to be dominated and guided by those who sought to be definitive even before the report's official publication. We regret very much the leaking of the report's contents. Such leaks are an affront to Members and are a very undesirable way of conducting

matters on issues which are of extreme sensitivity in Northern Ireland. I trust that the Secretary of State will look into this as a matter of principle and urgency.

We as a Forum have an opportunity to redress the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. Our job is to promote dialogue and from that we can develop understanding, leading to respect and trust — something that is so desperately needed in Northern Ireland at this time. Those who denigrate the existence of the Forum underestimate its importance. The prolonged absence of such a central body to oversee our affairs has done very great harm to the fabric of society in Northern Ireland. It is for this reason that I regret very much that some Members have decided to boycott this Assembly. It is ironic that they should do so when we have an elected Forum which many would claim is more cross-community in its representation than any previously elected Assembly in Northern Ireland.

When we put down this motion the North Review had not been published, and so we simply called for it to be noted. By use of the word “noted” we did not mean “disregard it”. We did not mean “a specious, quick glance at the thing”. We wanted to initiate the debate that this extremely important document requires.

The North Review was set up by the Secretary of State, who announced the review of parades and marches in the House of Commons on 25 July last year. Drumcree and related events had sent a shudder throughout the community. Last July the province could very easily have lurched into complete communal confrontation. The costs since have been very high indeed: death, injury, continuing polarization between the two main communities, damage to the relationships between the police and the community, soaring public expenditure, reallocation of expenditure — we had the debate this morning when we began to see the effects of what it has cost us — loss of jobs, tourism, and substantial inward investment put on hold.

The terms of reference for the independent review team were quite clear and unequivocal: to receive information and evidence from a wide variety of parties on the handling of public processions, open-air meetings and associated public order issues; the examination of the present legal decision-making arrangements for public processions and open-air meetings; the examination of the powers and responsibilities of the Secretary of State and the police in relation to public processions and open-air meetings; the examination of the need for structures that will put into place a process which determines whether or not parades or open-air meetings will take place; and, finally, to make recommendations by the end of January 1997.

I recognize the Herculean task faced by Dr North and his colleagues, Dr John Dunlop and Fr Oliver Crilly. I salute their courage and thank them for their services to the people of Northern Ireland. They laboured under great difficulties. The review team covered over 300 written submissions, had 93 meetings with more than 270 individuals, made direct observation of parades and video evidence and also did extensive research. They have produced a detailed and informative report even though it was often clear that they were on a hiding to nothing. Indeed, the Secretary of State has indicated in the terms of reference that his own office is open for review by Dr North and his colleagues. This is a gesture of openness and honesty which should set an example to all those wishing to find a solution to Northern Ireland's difficult, if not intractable, problems.

I wish to focus on the North Review's recommendations. Unless we agree on a strategy to take us out of the current political morass, we may be looking at another marching season highlighted by Drumcree Mark III, one that may be even more catastrophic than Drumcree Mark II. We are in danger of intensifying the political division which exists in both the main communities, and only positive action will bring us back from the brink. This can only be done when there is a clear sense of unified purpose and when all the people, and I stress the words "all the people", play their part with the help of the Government.

We received this report yesterday. It has been impossible in the time available to us to analyse it in the depth it requires. I will concentrate only on the most salient points which my party believes are critical to the way ahead. But I stress that this report requires detailed study and consideration in order to do justice to its 43 recommendations.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the Gentleman not find it amazing that no mention whatsoever is made of the IRA in this report and that if it were read by people 100 years from today they would wonder why we were having such a report? Everybody else is mentioned. The reason that this report came about was that Mr Adams promised it to us. He said that it would be a long hot summer with many marching feet. Is it not amazing that if these gentlemen did desire to do a good job that they did not deal with the root cause and the threat that brought about the situation that developed during the summer?

Mr Curran: I thank the Member.

There is no doubt that North identifies the right to peaceful assembly, the freedom of movement and the right to attend one's place of worship as central to the values in any civilized society. North indeed flags up the dimensions of moral responsibilities incumbent on those persons engaging in public activities that may be contentious and indicates that criminal acts or offensive behaviour should not be encouraged. When we reflect on Drumcree, Harryville, and so on, how do we all measure up to these standards? It is a question we should all be asking ourselves.

The main focus of the report is on the creation of an independent body which would act as an objective mechanism for groups directly affected by parades to articulate their concerns. It is indeed important at an early stage in any problem to identify clearly the needs of each group that will be affected by or involved in a parade before a strategy for reconciliation can be determined. The report considers that solutions are best found at local level if possible. This search for a solution to the difficult issue of parades draws on the background of reformed legal provisions which North indicates are essential to peaceful reconciliation. However, it should be noted that the Government must implement, when and where possible, the necessary legislation to facilitate progress in this area.

The new parades commission, as recommended by North, would have the remit to develop an educational dimension to facilitate its aims. It would also promote mediation and encourage local accommodation on controversial marches. Another important function of the new body would be monitoring which would create a fair playing field for parade participants and residents alike and would help to limit claims made against different groups. The parades commission would also have the function of setting up a mediation groups register.

The commission could activate a case by referral from the police, the public or of its own volition.

1.45 pm

A very significant area of responsibility for the parades commission would be the power to decide on the routing of marches. This has been the responsibility of the police, and we all recall Hugh Annesley, the former Chief Constable, who was on record last year as saying that the RUC was in a no-win situation. This would free the RUC from the claims of bias that were being made by both the main communities in Northern Ireland. This would require, as North recommends, the amendment of Article 4.1 of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 to allow for consideration of the impact of marches on local communities.

It is also significant that Dr North has recommended that if a parades commission ruling is defied, the police should have the power to intervene on public order grounds. Following on from this point it is then recommended that those persons responsible for ignoring a parades commission decision by using weight of numbers, or creating a threat of disorder, would be guilty of an offence.

My reactions to the recommendations have been varied. I am sure that shades of opinion will be expressed in the Forum about the review and different analyses will emerge. But I pose this question: how do we move on from here? The role of the police has been more clearly defined in relation to the handling of parades. It now has clearer responsibilities with added authority, and this will give us a less recriminatory atmosphere during the next marching season.

But will the Government pass the necessary legislation for the recommendations to progress fully so that they are in place before events of the summer heat up? The intervention of a general election may frustrate this process, and we should all be aware that Parliament will be dissolved within the next eight weeks if we are going to have an election on May 1st. A dangerous vacuum will be created and unless we all work to stabilize the situation we could enter into an uncontrollable spiral of violence once again.

Delay and indecision has already cost lives and injuries. It has also cost £30 million from the public coffers, led to a fractionating of the economy and massive inward investment has been put on hold. We are only too well aware from last year of the implications. The Secretary of State has indicated that he is allowing two months for consideration of the recommendations, but he is initiating immediately the setting-up of the parades commission. Northern Ireland needs a period of urgent reflection and an opportunity to share in communal discussion.

Labour welcomes the North Report, but we must be realistic. Time is not on our side, nor do we have the communal strength to endure another summer of discontent. We have received a number of warnings from the business community about the impact of the troubles on the economy. We can still recall sharply the poignant message given by the Secretary of State when he announced massive expenditure cuts last year because of Drumcree. Education, housing, health and the environment have suffered, and jobs will be lost. We have

seen what has happened in education having debated the impact of the cuts to the Action for Community Employment schemes on those least well-off. There is a right for each community to express its own identity and culture, but it is not an absolute right cast in tablets of stone.

Such an absolute view existed in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and we have all witnessed the horror that emerged when that state became ungovernable. We must learn from this experience and remember that with every civil and religious liberty comes responsibility. Sometimes we should not even exercise such liberty, in the interest of the welfare of one's fellow men or women.

It is also important to acknowledge the role that the churches have played in working together for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. I am sure that this will be further reflected when the churches and their groups become even more involved in the work of reconciliation.

Labour has said it before, and we will say it again: we would welcome the introduction of a bill of rights in Northern Ireland that would guarantee rights to every member of society in a fair and just manner. This may be an area of discussion for another day but it must come sooner rather than later for the weary people of Northern Ireland.

I again pay tribute to Dr North and his colleagues for their work and punctuality. They have provided a report which examines some of the most deep-rooted problems that continue to hang over us. It offers a way of dealing with this difficult issue of parades and open-air meetings. We must learn to work beyond the rhetoric of public debate, with its built-in historical recriminations, as proposed in the Mitchell Report. The Labour movement in Northern Ireland will do what it can to assist the process of dialogue, peace and reconciliation, the lack of which is manifestly at the heart of the problem.

I support the motion.

Mr McBride: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words of the motion and insert

This Forum, recognizing the damage done to the Northern Ireland community and the Northern Ireland economy by the events of last summer, calls for the urgent implementation of the proposals set out in the North Report. This Forum further calls on all elected representatives to commit themselves to acting within the law, to opposing any actions which may lead to confrontation and public disorder, and to using their influence to bring about the peaceful resolution of any disputes arising from marches.

I welcome the opportunity that we have here today to debate this important topic. We may well disagree a lot, but we all ought to be able to agree that it is an important topic. One of the things we must all be clear about is that nobody can take any satisfaction from the events of last summer. We saw the damage to the community. We saw the distress and the violence. We have seen, as the North Report says, £30 million of direct costs owing to those events, £28 million of lost tourism and unknown millions of lost inward investment. We may disagree about those costs and about the causes. We almost certainly disagree about the solution. But we all ought to be able to agree that there was no satisfaction in that for anyone

and no one should want to see any repetition of it. We should be able to agree that doing nothing is not a solution.

Alliance has been pressing for a positive attitude to the issues arising from marches for a number of years and, in particular, over the last couple of years we have raised very clear concerns about them. We recognize the right to march as an important and fundamental human right — we want to protect that. We also recognize that there are other rights as well, and we recognize that there are responsibilities and that what is needed is to find some way of striking a fair balance between opposing views and conflicting rights. We recognize the weakness of the present system and the impossible burden it places on the police, who have to make decisions at short notice and on limited public-order grounds.

We recognize that there needs to be change. The best way forward is to create an independent body which would not only have the capacity to facilitate and encourage local agreements, it would also have the capacity to make a decision when such agreement could not be found. And, of course, one of the incentives to reach an agreement is the knowledge that somebody else may have to make the decision for you if cannot do it yourself.

So we have pressed for the creation of such a body. We pressed the Government after the events at Drumcree in 1995, and we pressed it all the more strongly last autumn after the events of last summer. We warned in 1995 and 1996 that events were going to be repeated, and the Government's response was to set up the North Review. We were a bit concerned that it might be a stalling tactic, but we welcomed their efforts and we have to welcome the product.

Members of the review team have consulted widely — indeed, many people here have spoken to them and know that they dealt with the subject in the most in-depth way. They consulted all sorts of groups and considered a wide range of issues. In fact, they have produced a professionally conducted survey of public attitudes. There is a great deal in it, and I hope that every Member here will read it.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Read the 'Belfast Telegraph' one.

Mr McBride: The 'Belfast Telegraph' survey was of the phone-in type. The Member knows perfectly well that in no shape, manner or form was it based on scientific principles.

The reality is that the North Review conducted a proper, professional, scientific survey, and it is important that Members hear some of the things that are being said. *[Interruption]* Mr Chairman, may I have some order please?

The Chairman: I was just about to call for that. A little bit of reasonable heckling is all right, but general booing is just a waste of time.

Mr McBride: Let me draw the attention of Members to some of the figures produced by the North survey: 88% of the people of Northern Ireland — including 83% of those who described themselves as Protestants — want to see negotiated accommodations in respect of these matters; 86% want to see rules in respect of marches, all sorts of marches; 79% want to

see some mechanism for making binding decisions when such agreement cannot be found; and the biggest majority of support amongst the various options was for an independent body along the lines that we proposed.

Now the North Review team, having consulted and surveyed widely, came up with a comprehensive set of recommendations, the key one being the creation of an independent body which would not only have the power to encourage mediation and local agreement but would also have the power to make a decision when that local agreement could not be achieved. That is very much in line with what we have been advocating for a number of years. It is also very much in line with what other people have increasingly been advocating over the last few months.

I regret very much that the Government have not chosen to act more firmly on the report. Kicking into touch unfortunately seems to be an all-too-typical English solution to a Northern Irish problem. I hear the word "consultation" mentioned. Of course there needs to be some consultation on these proposals, but you do not need too much. The fact is that everybody has already marked out their positions. Everyone knew this was one of the main options and they have commented on it. Everyone is fully aware of the situation and can readily make their positions known. The Government could have allowed two or three weeks for consultation, but, by allowing two months, they have avoided taking a decision within the scope of this Parliament.

The reality of it is very simple for me — I represent South Belfast including the Ormeau Road — because the first contentious march of the season is the Easter Monday Apprentice Boys march, which is coming up at the end of March within this period of consultation. *[Interruption]*

Mr Cedric Wilson: Will Mr McBride give way?

Mr McBride: No, the Member will have his opportunity to speak.

It is regrettable that the Government have not grasped the bull by the horns. Doing nothing is not an option. However, the Government have unfortunately left the situation floating loose with no clear mechanism to help us resolve this summer's situation. I do not believe for one moment that there is an easy solution, or anything resembling that. In advocating such a measure one is not advocating a panacea. The Government need to send a clear signal that they are prepared to endorse the report, to legislate for its key recommendations and to set in process a mechanism that will start us on the road to solving this intractable and interminable problem before we come up to this summer's events.

The burden in this matter does not rest solely with the Government. We all have a part to play in preventing those events happening again. Members here have responsibilities and the capacity to influence events as they develop, and they need to do so. No one wants a repetition of last year's events — least of all at a time when the police are already facing the serious threat of a renewed terrorist campaign. I make a very serious appeal to all Members here to make it perfectly clear that they will have no part in any lawlessness — that they will respect, uphold and at all times act within the law.

2.00 pm

We do not want to see any more scenes where elected politicians place themselves at the head of a mob and harangue the police. You cannot be on the side of the rule of law one day and against it the next. This is a real test for people here.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: What about Gerry Adams?

Mr McBride: We are not talking about Gerry Adams. The Member knows very well our stand on Gerry Adams. Gerry Adams was not at Drumcree. *[Interruption]*

Mr Davis: Will Mr McBride give way?

Mr McBride: No. The Member will have a chance to make his own contribution. The people listening have a right to hear this.

I make a serious appeal to all Members to make it clear that they will reject lawlessness and will use their influence to defuse situations, to avoid or bring an end to confrontation. We face another summer of disaster for Northern Ireland, and anyone who takes satisfaction in that is a fool.

Mr Trimble: I am glad of the opportunity to debate this issue today and, I suspect, next week. It is appropriate that the Labour Party has brought it before us in this way. The terms of the motion are appropriate too: at this stage, we are simply taking note. During the discussion we can, of course, express a range of views, but the Alliance amendment with regard to expressing concluded views is premature. We are just beginning the process of examining this very detailed, lengthy and quite weighty report — weighty in terms of the significance of the issues that it deals with and the very radical nature of some of the proposals that it makes.

It contains a whole range of proposals, some of which are positive. I am thinking of the proposal to activate the statutory provision with regard to the registration of bands, the idea of having codes of conduct and so on. These are positive matters, but I will not go into them in detail, preferring to direct myself to the central issue.

The key issue is that a commission, which would have the power to ban parades or impose conditions on them, should be established. At present that power rests with the police and the Government. This proposal would transfer it to a group of five persons, and it would then be practically impossible for the police or the Government to vary the decision. There is a limited appeals provision, expressed as being available to the Chief Constable only in exceptional circumstances. There is no provision, indeed, the report expressly excludes the possibility, for the Secretary of State himself to take an interest in the matter. That is quite unrealistic.

We are talking about decisions on matters which affect public order — decisions which could be tremendously important from the point of view of the stability of the community. People are quite right to emphasize the gravity of the situation and the dangers for everyone from the tensions that have built up in certain areas and in certain sections of the

community. We are quite right to emphasize how important the situation is and how grave the dangers are.

But those who emphasize the gravity of the situation have to bear in mind how foolish it is to suggest that decisions about such matters should be put in the hands of a non-elected quango consisting of persons with no practical experience of and nothing to do with the situation. That is the crucial issue. We have experts, insofar as it is possible to have experts. It is not as if I agree entirely with the decisions that experts make, because they sometimes get it wrong. Indeed, some of the decisions taken by the experts on these issues over the last couple of years were wrong. But we have to recognize that there is a body of expertise in the security forces. To suggest that a crucial decision be taken out of their hands and given to a group of people with no expertise whatsoever is very foolish.

It is for that reason that I am glad the Secretary of State yesterday took the line that he did. He has come in for criticism, but it is not thought through. Indeed, it indicates a rather shallow approach to the issues and reflects badly on the critics. It is very easy to say that the Secretary of State has climbed on the fence by asking for further consultation, but these are serious, weighty issues that need to be thought about carefully.

Like other Members, I have heard rumours in recent weeks that officials in the usual places of the Northern Ireland Office were busy drawing up plans for Orders in Council to be rammed through, at a moment's notice, to implement every jot and tittle of North immediately after publication. And Mr McBride's comments indicate that he would have lined up behind those idiots.

Mr Jim Rodgers: What about the Maryfield secretariat?

Mr Trimble: Indeed.

I am glad that saner counsels have prevailed, and I think that what we are seeing is the beginning of a process whereby people in government who realize the gravity of the situation, unlike the officials in certain parts of the Northern Ireland Office and the Maryfield secretariat, are changing the Government's position. The Secretary of State may have climbed onto the fence yesterday, but I am glad to say that I expect to see him get down on the other side after appropriate consultation and further consideration.

I am, however, much concerned about the very foolish attitude being adopted by the spokesman for the Labour Party in Great Britain — not our little Labour Party here, but the Labour Party across the water. I am very concerned about her approach. It is something that needs to be thought through carefully. Ultimately, as I have indicated, these decisions have to rest with the police and the Government. I mention those two together because the decisions are not purely policing ones. It is all very well to say that we will leave the routine matters to the police, that we will give the RUC operational freedom — and, of course, they do have discretion with regard to operational matters — but there are also policy issues and issues of public security that come into play, and the Government are necessarily involved in those circumstances.

The other aspect of the proposed parades commission is its functions with regard to mediation, conciliation, and so on. The Secretary of State is proceeding with those immediately. I should have thought that the spokesman for the Alliance Party would welcome this decision. If we were to follow the approach that Alliance and the Liberal Democratic Party would like, nothing would happen before the summer. Let us think this through. They are going to proceed by proper legislation. It is generally agreed that you have to proceed by proper legislation because of the complexity of these issues. But it would simply not be possible to draft legislation and see it through all its stages in the Commons and the Lords in the time available. So it could not be on the statute-book before the general election.

Whenever the election takes place — whether March, April or May — and if the Labour Party comes to power, it will have to legislate. But it will not have sufficient time to get an Act on to the statute book before the summer. There was never any possibility of the report's being implemented if things were to be done properly. What the Secretary of State has done, however, is take the conciliation functions to implement them on a non-statutory basis. That is possible because of their limited nature. It may be that a more structured conciliation and mediation approach would help. A lot of unstructured mediation is going on. There are many self-appointed mediators with a range of skills, abilities and successes. A more structured approach might be better, and we have no objection to consideration of forms of mediation.

Coming to the specifics of the matter that is of particular concern to me, I think that anybody who looks at the situation will see that the Portadown Orangemen have made many compromises. They have made many arrangements and many agreements. Anybody who looks objectively at what they have done in recent years will have to concede that the Portadown Orangemen have been eminently reasonable. The problem is the complete unreasonableness of certain elements, who are interested not in any form of agreement but only in imposing their own view.

Here, I come to the point that Dr Paisley made by way of an intervention, for which I thank him because he was repeating something that I said yesterday in the House of Commons — namely, that this report ignores the role that Sinn Féin/IRA has played in fermenting disorder. Why is it that parades that for decades or centuries caused no problem have become a problem within the last two years? What has changed in two years? People say that there have been demographic changes, but in some areas those occurred 20 years ago.

Why have these issues been a problem only in the last two years? The answer is that Sinn Féin/IRA decided to use them to ferment serious public disorder, and it is going to continue to do so. Let us face that. No amount of legislation and no amount of conciliation will change the fact that there are certain groups of evil men who are disposed to create trouble. When one sees the situation in those terms it is quite clear what the response ought to be. I hope that we will see the authorities adopting a clearer and better approach. That is the kernel of the problem.

A colleague of mine pointed out to me the other day that every time there has been trouble over parades — whether in the last couple of years or decades ago on the Longstone Road or going right back to Dolly's Brae — there has been Republican terrorism in one form

or another. That is the crucial factor which causes the problem. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that if you take that factor out, Ulster folk can find a wee bit of give and take and acknowledge practices and customs. People can live cheek by jowl, but a bit of give and take is needed. And it is there in normal circumstances. Abnormal are the actions of Sinn Féin/IRA, which make a difficult situation intractable — for the moment, but not, I think, for all time.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It always amazes me how people put such emphasis on opinion polls when it suits them. There is only one poll that will get the Alliance Party anywhere, and that is the poll at the ballot-box. So far, it has got them nowhere — to such an extent that their Leader ran away to a House from which he could never again stand for membership of the British House of Commons. That shows the faith he had in ever being elected.

The opinion poll in the 'Belfast Telegraph' was arranged to support the North Review. They thought they would get their answer, but what a slap in the face they got. Yesterday, in the House, no one referred to the poll. If it had come out the other way every Member would have been blethering on about it. But there is another opinion poll coming. Roll on the day when the people will deal with the McBrides of this world — deal with those who cannot get elected to the Parliament of this United Kingdom.

There is something else that needs to be said. We have had a pious washing of hands by Labour and Alliance representatives saying that this is a terrible, frightening situation and that those who brought it about must be blamed. Let us put the blame where it belongs — with the politicians who advocated the Public Order Order, which was a brain-child of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and was supported by the Alliance Party and the Labour Party. I see that they are glad. Mr Neeson is nodding his head. He will have time to nod his head in East Antrim. What did the Public Order Order do? It struck a blow at the basic principle that the people in Northern Ireland should have the same rights as the people of the rest of the United Kingdom. That is what Mr Neeson is happy about. He does not want us to have the same civil rights as the people of Great Britain.

2.15 pm

I do not have time to read all the alterations that were made to civil rights in Northern Ireland by that legislation and to compare our rights with those of people in the rest of the United Kingdom, but cross 20 miles of water and you are able to do things which over here are outlawed by this civil-rights legislation, so-called, sponsored by the Dublin Government. The spokesman said "We now have things set in order." I remind this House that all the then Unionist Members of Parliament, with the exception of the right hon Member for Strangford, the hon Member for Lagan Valley and the hon Member for Down South — Mr Enoch Powell at that time — all went to gaol because we believed that we had to make a token protest by violating this legislation. It was because of that protest that implementation of the Public Order Order was delayed.

There is one thing in that Order that has run through this whole controversy, and it is the vital thing — the right to have traditional parades. That is where the great problem is. Under the other legislation the right to have traditional parades was upheld. It is no use people standing up in the Forum and telling us they believe in the right of people to parade

and then, when it comes to a particular issue, saying they do not believe in it. The right to have traditional parades must be put back on the Statute Book. The way forward is for everybody to know that a traditional parade — one that has an established right — whether Hibernian or Orange, Roman Catholic or Protestant, must be permitted to take place.

The action of the Protestant community is to be commended. Today where there are still traditional parades by Hibernians and others, Protestants do not block the roads or demand that they be stopped. In fact, representatives have said that as they are traditional they ought not to be stopped. But here we have the Alliance Party and the Labour Party passing judgement on Drumcree. What was Drumcree about? It was about the right of people to return from church via the main thoroughfare. I am sick, sore and tired of the media in England telling us that they wanted to walk through the Garvaghy housing estate. They wanted to do nothing of the kind.

I was in politics at the time the Tunnel was barred to the Orangemen, and a solemn undertaking was given that the Garvaghy Road would always be open to them to go to Drumcree and come back. That undertaking was violated, but the right is one that Orangemen and others are going to see is defended. I make no apology for saying so, for it is a right that cannot be taken away. The Orangemen are entitled to walk to and from their church.

What happened two years ago? A lawful procession was not allowed. Although it had been cleared by the police, the Orangemen were not allowed to return. Why? Because IRA men had infiltrated the Garvaghy Road residents and threatened them into blocking the road. And because of the IRA-inspired blockage the police chickened out and said "You cannot go along that road." The police should have cleared the road immediately so that the Orangemen could walk down it in freedom. They did just that a few days afterwards, but it was a pity that the police did not do the right thing.

We had a Chief Constable — thank God he is no longer amongst us — who was not even prepared to tell us where the Orange march would end. The march to Drumcree never had an ending in law. He allowed the men to go to church but decided that they would not get back. When the law-breakers get their way the people who stand up in this House and talk about defending the law should be first on their feet to condemn them. But that does not happen.

And what about Dunloy? Why can the Orangemen, who for over 100 years have walked to the Presbyterian meeting-house, not now take a four and a half minute walk to their church? Because the IRA of Loughgiel came in and broke the agreement made between the Orangemen and the residents. It was such a victory because the residents of Dunloy withdrew their notice of protest and said "We withdraw in those circumstances. We will let you walk to your place of worship." But the IRA men from Loughgiel saw that, and we had the road blocked again.

The RUC must be impartial. Where there is law-breaking it must be dealt with. But that has not happened. Many people have been brought to court as a result of the Garvaghy Road incident. It was not the Drumcree incident, but the Garvaghy Road incident, and that is what it should be called. Those people were made amenable. But what about the ones who

blocked the road with hurley sticks in Dunloy to keep people from going to church? I do not see the Alliance Party on its hind legs — or any of the rest. Alliance Members are not up shouting about that. That is a matter for another day. No doubt, Lord Alderdice told Paddy Mayhew what to say. The Secretary of State got up in the House of Commons yesterday and said that this must be implemented immediately. This cannot be implemented immediately.

Next week, when we come back to the subject, my party will move a reasoned amendment. I do not accept that the North Report is impartial. I believe that it is absolutely partial because, having heard him speak, I know the mind of the Very Reverend Mr Dunlop, and I know the mind of the Roman Catholic priest, Crilly. As for Dr North, he was never at a parade, yet he is supposed to be the expert. That is the sort of expertise the Alliance Party wants us to agree with. Well, he had better go farther north, because there is no use for him here.

Ms McWilliams: We welcome the contribution by the independent review and would like to convey our gratitude to Dr North, Dr Dunlop and Fr Crilly for the work they have done on such a very difficult issue. There are many difficult issues in Northern Ireland, but this is one that we will have to face up to if we are to move away from continual conflict. This report represents the start — the start — of a process.

It is not possible at this stage to give a fully considered reaction to the North group's findings. Indeed, many of us received the report just this week. It is a very weighty document and represents a great deal of time and effort on the part of many organizations and individuals. It also represents considerable financial commitment by the Government. We are especially pleased to note the participation of marching organizations and residents' groups and commend this very positive step that they have taken. It was good that the marching groups made submissions. We therefore urge that the North Report be treated with the respect that it deserves. We also urge that it be not sidelined by this —

Mr Donaldson: Will the Lady give way.

Ms McWilliams: I cannot. I have an urgent hospital appointment straight after this.

We urge that the report is not sidelined by the current or any future Administration.

First and foremost, we welcome a new perspective on this very difficult subject. Some people might say that the views of an outsider are uninformed and irrelevant. Indeed, Dr Paisley took this view. The Women's Coalition takes the opposite view. The perceptions of those of us on the inside can only be enriched by the contributions of people not so directly involved, and we in Northern Ireland should now realize that.

We in the Women's Coalition will always support new contributions to any debate. It is only by valuing the perceptions and views of others that we can gain a better understanding of our own problems. Why is it that women are often the first to see the benefit of listening to the perspective of others?

Mr Chairman, may I have some order, please.

The Chairman: Quiet, please.

Ms McWilliams: The number and range of submissions received by the independent review is very impressive indeed. This is a unique examination of a very sensitive subject, and when the Women's Coalition met with the group — we made formal written and oral submissions — we found its members well prepared, very interested and, unlike some of the people in this Chamber, open-minded. They were ready to listen, but equally ready to pose searching questions. We are confident of the value of their contribution.

The people most directly involved must take time to consider this report fully. We demand that political and community leaders rise to their responsibility, heavy though it is, with regard to parades. We must not have a repeat of the events of last summer. We must move to a situation where the views, identities and rights of all are respected equally.

We must also have leaders who will lead the people of Northern Ireland out of this situation, and not full-square into it. The events of last summer were horrific. We urge people to remember just how bad it was for everyone so that we may contemplate the coming summer with a degree of realism. We experienced major civil disturbances, as Dr North notes in his introduction, which were close to anarchy — the virtual overthrow of the rule of law. Northern Ireland has not recovered from the events of last year, and already we are in the grip of escalating tension this year.

We note in paragraph 1.37 that some of the most positive and creative presentations to the review team came from women, the key point being that the way forward is to build relationships and understanding. This we have learned from personal experience. Learning assertiveness need not imply aggressive conflict. We in the Coalition began to address this issue last June. We worked through a process which involved an input from the Orange Order. The Order came and addressed our meeting, and residents' groups did likewise, as did intermediary bodies.

2.30 pm

Within the Coalition we had women who argued strongly for the rights of the Orangemen and Orangewomen, and we also had those who argued strongly for the rights of residents. We found ourselves with a choice, and I know that in your parties you do not have to do this, but we do it. So I think that it might be useful to learn that in the process of facilitating those discussions — whether or not you agree with them — it is important to listen to them. We found ourselves with the choice of rejecting one or other of these positions or, alternatively, of trying to accommodate them. Our submission to the North Review represents the outcome of that process. It is certainly not a fudge, but it outlines a proper plan of work addressing the breadth and, indeed, as we know, the complexity of this issue. We note the rigorous method employed by Dr North and his team. We feel that both the qualitative and the quantitative elements of the report complement each other, and provide us with a well-rounded view.

We wish to highlight some of the most salient statistics. Principally, we note that 88% said that they agreed with a negotiated accommodation and that this should be sought

where there is a dispute between marchers and residents. We note that 79% supported a binding decision being taken by someone else, if accommodation is not reached. Unfortunately, I do not have time to go into the pros and cons of the various methodologies when one engages in opinion surveys and sample surveys. In fact, in another life, in the university, I teach methodological tools on how to get opinions. Some day, perhaps, we shall have a discussion about North's Report and his survey sample as well as the one in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. As we know, numerous calls from the same household were made in the case of the 'Belfast Telegraph' poll, but it is still important nevertheless, and if you wish, we can take that on board.

The most widespread, and the most favoured option for those who can take binding decisions, was an independent commission. Thus, the recommendation in the North Report follows the view articulated by ordinary people in that sample. Paragraph 16.3 of the survey tells us that 94% of Catholics and 92% of Protestants agree — and this is a very important point — that civil disobedience is not acceptable.

There are three things from the report that we should like to impress on the Forum: there are differing perspectives on this; we have changing demographics in this country; and there is a focus on seeking local accommodation.

Regarding differing perspectives, the stated intent of marchers can differ from the received impact. Humorously, Dr North illustrates this with the example of milking cows, and I refer to paragraph 5.23 and 5.30 of the report if you want to see what he means. He suggests that the impact of milking cows may be different on the cows than on the person doing the milking. We also note his emphasis on the impact that parades may have not just on the local community but on the wider society.

A Member: You should join the Agriculture Committee.

A Member: She would not have the experience.

Ms McWilliams: I do, as a farmer's daughter.

On changing demographics, we feel that it is important to recognize, as the independent review has done, that parades incorporate both historical and contemporary experiences. We urge people to take on board the significance of demographic changes. As the survey illustrated, over 75% stated that parade organizers could take account of changes that might have occurred in the religious mix of an area. These figures also state that twice as many Protestants support taking demographic changes into account than do not.

I assume, Mr Paisley, that you know quite a bit about cows yourself since you actually referred to their religious make-up recently.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Would the Member give way?

Ms McWilliams: No. As I said earlier — *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: If you are going to address anybody, it should be me. I learned that lesson — which we should all heed — from the young persons' seminar. They were very strict about that, as I shall be in future.

Ms McWilliams: Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: What is it? Where does it appear in the Rules?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Is it right for the poor animals in the fields — the cows — to be abused in this way?

The Chairman: I am sorry. Who is being abused and by whom?

Ms McWilliams: Indeed. Dr Paisley, I have to respond by saying that Members of the Forum have actually been known to apply that term to the Women's Coalition from time to time.

A Member: Shame.

Ms McWilliams: Thirdly, there is a focus on seeking local accommodation. Eighty-four per cent — *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: Let Ms McWilliams continue.

Ms McWilliams: — said that unruly hangers-on on both sides had contributed to public disorder. There was virtual unanimity between Protestants and Catholics on this issue. Outside pressures can work to prevent local accommodation, but, prioritizing it in the first instance, no single parade need become a regional issue. We appeal to the Forum and to the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party in particular, because the Ulster Unionist Party is the leading Unionist Party in Northern Ireland and it has formal links with the Orange Order. We also want the major leaders of the Nationalist community, who are not in the Forum, to heed our words.

At the Forum meeting on 8 July last year, Mr Donaldson spoke of the Ulster Unionist Party doing all in its power to ensure that violence is avoided. This year, we should like to see a closer relationship between word and deed among leaders.

A Member: Are there many more pages?

Ms McWilliams: This is the last.

Talk and negotiate; seek local accommodation; control inflammatory speeches and — this could apply sometimes inside the Forum — represent the totality of your constituency and not just one side of it; provide proper public leadership; encourage and lead compromise; and engage in dialogue.

We are facing a future that is about managing diversity. If the exercise of one identity clashes with the rights of another, then the only possibility for a long-term solution in this country is through negotiation. We can wake up to that tonight, tomorrow, next year, in 10 years' time or beyond the year 2000, but we are going to have to learn to negotiate with each other. It is only through the accommodation of differences that a stable solution can emerge. It is clear that people want and need stability. After the events of last summer, that is the least that we can offer them.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I intend to be very brief.

A Member: Mr Chairman, I am surprised that Mr Smyth is here. It is the afternoon. Maybe his watch has stopped.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Mr Chairman, we could do without that Member. Maybe he would like us to do what the SDLP and all the smaller parties did — go out and leave it to the two main parties. He is lucky that he has a party with quite a lot of Members, and I congratulate them for being able to elect so many. It is quite easy to see when I am not here. Equally, I could point a finger at quite a few Members who do not seem to be here in the mornings, but I am not prepared to do that. I have constituents to look after, and my constituents will always come before the Forum, with all due respect. Having said that, we can do without remarks like that. They are most unhelpful.

I support the Labour Party's motion. I do not see how anyone could do otherwise with a report that only came out yesterday. Of course, it is right and proper that we thank Dr North and his team for their hard work. It does not mean that we have to accept it. We recognize the hard work.

Mr McBride — and I am sorry that he is not here, because I, unlike others, do not like attacking people when they are not in the Chamber — mentioned that he deplored the leaks that seemed to have been taking place over the North Report. Well, I wonder if any of those leaks spurted out from his direction — he seems to be in the wonderful position, having only just received this document, of being able to come here a number of hours later and ask us to endorse it. That is an utter impossibility.

We know that there were loose connections with all the wrongs and the situation at Drumcree, but Mr McBride seemed to be indicating that all the jobs and all the tourism that have been lost was to be blamed on Drumcree. I feel that that is wrong.

Mr Jim Rodgers: That is why Linfield is doing badly.

Mr Hugh Smyth: That is right. I was going to say that Linfield was put out of the Irish Cup. Sure, blame it on Drumcree.

The Chairman: We ought to stick with North and leave Linfield out of it.

Mr Hugh Smyth: A fellow called North scored the winner, but that is beside the point.

It is very wrong. When I spoke here last week I said that for certain issues it was wrong to blame the paramilitaries or to say that if the paramilitaries were not there a problem would not exist. It is equally wrong in this situation for anyone to blame all of the wrongs on Drumcree. We are being asked to pay for it — something which I will return to in a moment. Is that right? I should have thought that people like Mr McBride would have been standing here condemning the Government for saying to us “Yes, someone has to pay for Drumcree. That is why you have 2,000 places fewer on your Action for Community Employment scheme. That is why we have all sorts of cuts.” Mr McBride, what about the violence during the last 25 years — before Drumcree? I do not remember us being asked to take such severe cuts to pay for that violence.

Mr McBride: Mr Chairman, may I reply to that?

The Chairman: No. Let him continue if you do not mind.

Mr Hugh Smyth: It seems to me that the Government were prepared to find the extra funds to finance the violence of the Provisional IRA, but when there is street violence attributed to the Loyalist section of the community, they use that as an excuse to punish everyone, particularly the innocent. That is very wrong. This has already been mentioned on many occasions by Mrs Robinson, but one of the bombs that exploded either in Manchester or London cost more, financially, than 27 years of violence in Northern Ireland. Did the people of Manchester or London have to suffer any cuts? I say that they did not, and rightly so.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: They were subsidized.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Dr Paisley is right. They were subsidized. Yet there are as many Irish people, in fact, I would say that there are more Irish people, living in London and Manchester than there are in Ireland. A lot of those people would be involved. I did not see the Government saying “Because of the possibility that that atrocity may well have been carried out, and, indeed, evidently was carried out, by sympathizers from the Irish community in Manchester, we are going to punish everybody in Manchester and make you pay.” That is wrong. That, again, is typical of the Government in that they treat us not as second-class citizens but as third-class citizens.

In case anyone thinks for one moment that I intend just to dump this report, Dr Paisley has made it absolutely clear that we will revisit this subject, possibly next week, when everyone has had an opportunity to read it — and I welcome that. But I should also like to say, because I think that it needs to be said, that we had better be very careful. Hugh Annesley was mentioned earlier. He stood up and said that the police were in a no-win situation and, basically, that he wanted someone else to take the decisions for him. Wouldn't it be lovely if we all had that luxury?

There are many times — and I know that I speak for many of my fellow councillors in Belfast and, I dare say, in a lot of the other 26 local authorities — when it would be lovely if we could just herd all the unpleasant decisions down to some wee group to make those decisions for us. Let us take all the popular decisions. Yes, we are opening a beautiful, expensive Waterfront Hall. Lovely. Let us take the credit and the bouquets. But when it

comes to closing a community centre or a leisure centre, decisions which are not too popular, then we get some wee group to make the recommendation to us, and we follow it through. That is wrong. It is a double standard. Where will all this end? If we allow someone to take parades decisions for the RUC what will come next?

2.45 pm

Another practice that is very unpopular among the Nationalist community in particular is the searching of houses. Will we, having set up a commission for parades, have to establish one to decide for the police which houses may be searched? That may seem ridiculous, but if we had been told three or four years ago that somebody else would be making these decisions we would have said "That is ridiculous." Nothing can be ruled out.

Let no one think that we are dismissing the North Report lightly. Let no one think that we do not appreciate the hard work that went into this very important document. I hope that we will return to it next week.

Mr Ken Maginnis: It is appropriate that I should take up where Mr Hugh Smyth ended — with the Government's abdication of their responsibility. When the North Commission was set up the Government washed their hands of responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland. It would be quite acceptable to us all, I suppose, if they had said "We require an investigation. We require an analysis. We wish to engage the services of people with expertise in parades and in events such as happened in 1996." It should have been a question of getting expert opinion on the basis of which the Government and those of us who are, in one way or another, given the responsibility of representing the people of Northern Ireland could arrive at an informed decision. Instead, the Government said "We will set up a commission and give it total autonomy", and they suggested to the naïve that this would be a panacea.

If one looks at the background to the situation of 1996 one will see that the North Commission's report defines it in terms of the Orange Order on one hand and the Nationalist community on the other. That in itself is inaccurate. It argues the whole case from the wrong premise. The Orange Order is an element in the Unionist community, and I think that most, if not all, of that community would in some way identify with the problems that the Order encountered. To suggest that it was the Nationalist tradition who were the opposition is to ignore the fact that in the case of the 0.03% of parades last year where trouble occurred it was orchestrated by convicted IRA felons — the Brendan McKennas and the Gerard Rices. These people are not identified, what they stand for is not identified, and our responsibility, as democrats, to stand against what they represent is not, apparently, taken into account.

Beyond that, I find in the report very little that is totally new to me. I am grateful that there are lots of statistics and much information, with most of which we agree — not least with the assertion that 80% of the people of Northern Ireland believe that marching and protesting are community rights. If there is variation between the traditions with regard to the right to march, it is minimal. The greater number in both traditions subscribe to the view expressed in both cases — a view which, in fact, is in line with international protocol as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and with the practice in most countries of the Western

world (not least, the United States). I despise organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the modern neo-Nazis — the Nationalist Front — but everywhere else in the Western world they are allowed to march, provided that the police are able to ensure that the marches will not be a catalyst for those in the areas concerned intent on provoking violence on the periphery.

Let Forum Members, whatever their views, compare an orderly church parade involving ordinary people with demonstrations to promote extreme political causes, such as are held throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, throughout Europe and throughout the United States. It is against that background that we have to make at least some judgements.

I regret that I do not have longer to speak on the technicalities of the report's contents. I can, however, look at what is suggested with regard to the role of the Chief Constable. I do not want to talk about that role as it was performed by the previous Chief Constable, Hugh Annesley. It is no secret that I regarded him as the most objectionable police chief in the United Kingdom. I have little time for someone who is paid £70,000 or £80,000 per annum but has to be away from his place of work 123 days in a year. I have little regard for a person who was so detached from his men that there was a collective huge sigh of relief when his tenure came to an end.

The one weakness that I see in the North Commission's report is that some of its judgements are based on his words. Here was a Chief Constable saying "We are tired of being pig in the middle." I do not want to make our police service, for which I have the highest regard, pig in the middle, but neither do I know a single sensible operational policeman who does not recognize that the reason for having a police service in the first place is to have something standing between the law-abiding community and the lawless, between the terrorist and the vulnerable majority. It is the Chief Constable who, when there is confrontation, places his men to the best of his ability to maintain the peace. And there should be peace for everyone to walk the Queen's highway.

Like many other people, I remember the civil rights movement of 37 or 38 years ago. On some occasions I was the victim of criticism from people in my own tradition because I believed in equality of civil rights. Many envisaged the threat that would arise from that — the possibility of exploitation by IRA terrorists. But that was no excuse, I felt, for denying the proletariat, of whatever tradition, their civil rights. Many Unionists felt as I did. One of the rights supported by us, and demanded by Nationalists, was the right of access to the public highway. Why, 28 years later, should an element in the Nationalist or Republican community decide to stand that on its head?

Let me come back briefly to the role of the Chief Constable. The Chief Constable has the responsibility to which I have referred, as I think we all agree. What does he have to do now? He must listen to the opinion of a group of people. God knows how we will get five people who are seen by society as a whole as being impartial. They will make a judgement, and if the Chief Constable believes that he cannot fulfil the terms and conditions laid down he can challenge them at Secretary of State level. The Secretary of State may well say "I am sorry, but I do not want to fly in the face of the commission, so I am going to uphold its decision." The Chief Constable will then make his assessment on the ground, and he may have to act contrary to the wishes of the commission and the Secretary of State.

What are we expecting of the Chief Constable? We are saying that, as well as adjudicating between two traditions, he has to be prepared to fly in the face of the opinion of the commission and the Government. Does that simplify his position? Does it make his task any easier? I think not. It is nonsense, of propaganda value to the worst elements in society.

I want to finish by making two points, the first of which is that no longer will the Chief Constable have to make his decisions on the basis of what he believes is the easiest way forward. He will have to do so within a finite budget imposed on the RUC at grass-roots level.

The other point is that there are elements in this report that may be taken up and run with. In the House of Commons yesterday evening I suggested that we could simplify the process by getting on not just with the registration of bands but also with the registration of traditional parades. We all know what they are. We could work up a code of conduct and let the Chief Constable get on with the job for which he has the training and the responsibility. If we were to do that, we could forget all this peripheral nonsense about commissions. The Secretary of State, Members will be glad to hear, has said "That solution is one that can be perfectly properly suggested in the consultation period." Well, I hope that he means proper consultation. I hope that the same attention will be given to the views of people who, like ourselves, were elected to represent this society.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Much has been said about the problems that result from parades. In fact, I see in Chapter 4, which is a summary of the events of 1996, that the Commission's terms of reference required it to

"have regard to the particular experience of 1996."

In Northern Ireland problems have often arisen during or after parades, but in not too many cases are the consequences seen 25 years later. However, we in Londonderry suffered this week the consequences of a parade — an illegal, riotous assembly — that took place 25 years ago. Hundreds of people were intimidated from their places of work. Even today hundreds of workers had to down tools to seek refuge and safety in a particular factory because Sinn Féin organizers with black ribbons and badges were trying to manipulate the work-force — and all to do with a parade that took place 25 years ago. That, I know, is a separate issue, but it goes to show what can happen when people are prepared to politically manipulate the organizers of an assembly and all those who take part in it.

The North Commission failed completely to address why parades are held and why they are opposed. I would have liked to deal with this matter at greater length. Let us hope that others will be able to speak in depth next week. However, even from my brief perusal of the report it is quite clear that there is no demarcation line whatsoever. In the case of Loyalist parades that are opposed — whether Garvaghy Road, the Ormeau Road, Londonderry, Bellaghy or Dunloy — there is no attempt to indicate that hard-line Republican activists are at the helm. The three main groups — Portadown, the Ormeau Road and Londonderry — have as their main spokespersons individuals who served time for terrorism-related offences. At least one of them owns up to being a member of IRA/Sinn Féin. That was not referred to or taken into account.

Contrast those parades with parades organized by the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and other Nationalist bodies. There is no high-profile protest by Protestants against the right of Nationalists to march annually in Kilkeel — a predominately Protestant town. Then there is the village of Desertmartin, where, last year, there was no attempt to stop the annual demonstration of the AOH. In Londonderry, when the AOH marched very close to the Protestant Fountain estate in 1995 no attempt was made to stop it. Why is it that Protestants can tolerate Nationalist and Republican parades but Nationalists cannot tolerate our ethos? Did the North people investigate that? Have they mentioned it or given it any recognition? They have not mentioned it at all, yet their terms of reference obliged them to take particular account of the experience of 1996.

With regard to the experience of 1996, of course, one word looms over everything. The word which describes what is said to be responsible for everything in Northern Ireland since July 1996 or July 1995 starts with “Drum” and ends with “cree”. It is quite clear that the North Commission looked at this and decided to draw certain conclusions. It was prepared to draw the conclusion that as Nationalists are opposed to the traditional demonstrations of the Loyal Orders, there must be some mechanism to curtail or re-route these or to stop them completely. Account does not seem to have been taken of the fact that until 1994 there was no such structured opposition to any of these demonstrations.

3.00 pm

There are a number of minute points that did not need a North Review to bring to the fore. I support the recommendation in the report that there should be no alcohol on sale either during or before many of the main parades. That is the case and ought to have been the case many years ago. It did not take a North Review to bring us to this point. I also support the recommendation in the report that there should be no requirement to post bonds or to have insurance cover. Again, that is something that is logical and ought to go without saying.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Of course, one of the reasons they recommend that there should be no posting of bonds was that they knew that Republicans would not pay for bonds. I do not think there would be any reluctance on the part of Protestants to own up to their responsibilities.

Mr Gregory Campbell: That is very true.

I would like to issue a note of caution on a recommendation towards the end of the report under the heading ‘Detailed arrangements for behaviour in the vicinity of sensitive locations’ Under the subheading ‘War memorials or cemeteries’ we are told that only hymn tunes ought to be played. At most war memorials on Remembrance Day that is what happens. But I hope by implication they are not saying — they had better not be — that the National Anthem cannot, or ought not to, be played at a war memorial.

The Chairman: That is an interesting point. It is a hymn, I am sure.

Mr Close: The Forum was elected to promote dialogue and understanding throughout the community. This afternoon we have a really glorious opportunity of demonstrating just how we can promote dialogue and, more importantly, how we are going to

achieve understanding throughout the community. We are charged with trying to demonstrate that dialogue is the way forward. But dialogue is not just about talking, dialogue involves also the ability to listen, and I want to demonstrate to some Members that I have been listening to the debate. I would like to pick up on a couple of points that have been made.

Mr Trimble, at the beginning of his speech, referred to our amendment as being, "premature". I want to ask Mr Trimble, or ask the Ulster Unionist Party, whether it is premature for anyone in January 1997 to recognize the damage that has been done to the Northern Ireland community and its economy by the events of last summer? My party and I certainly do not think so. Is it premature for elected representatives to commit themselves to acting within the law — is that premature? My party and I certainly do not think so. And is it premature to ask people to try to bring about a peaceful resolution to any dispute that might arise from marches? My party certainly does not think so, and I hope and trust that the Ulster Unionist Party, equally, does not believe it is premature to seek those worthy ideals. Mr Trimble also said that the decisions should lie with the police. Well, so be it. Let the decisions lie with the police, provided that we get an undertaking from those who organize parades — for example, the Orange Order — that they will accept the ruling of the police and respect the rule of law. If that were to be the case, then so be it, but the fact of the matter is that that is not the case.

Let me turn for a moment to Dr Paisley. Dr Paisley is in "quare, ole form" this evening, and that was demonstrated by the disproportionate amount of his valuable time that he spent attacking my party. The significance of that must be the import my Colleague's speech had on Dr Paisley, and for that we are prepared to accept the credit totally because we have been told, time and time again, that time is very valuable. But it concerns me a little bit that Dr Paisley is also impinging upon the profession of my party Leader, because what did he tell us? He told us that he too knows the mind of Dr Dunlop. He knows the mind of Father Crilly, and what he had to say about Dr North I will let go.

The North Report has re-emphasized the need for mediation and dialogue as the best way forward and for us all to demonstrate that dialogue is absolutely necessary if we are going to find ways out of difficult situations. And we in the Alliance Party endorse that view. Dialogue and compromise are essential for resolving difficult problems. But we have got to be realistic. We have got to recognize that when mediation and dialogue fail there has to be some person or some body that will have the authority to take decisions.

It should be obvious to everyone here, as it is obvious to everyone throughout Northern Ireland who witnessed the anarchy that was vomited upon the decent people of Northern Ireland last year around Drumcree, that, for example, the Orange Order would not accept the decision of the police and were prepared to go to extreme measures to overthrow that particular decision. I deplore that action. I deplore all those who seek to overthrow the rule of law and the operations and decisions of the police. I deplore those who, through their actions, mimic the operations of the IRA over the past 25 years. They have to be ashamed of themselves.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member not agree that it was the threat of illegal action from the residents and from outsiders brought into the Garvaghy Road which led to the development of the situation that he is referring to?

Mr Close: It was the refusal of some people to accept the Chief Constable's decision.

Several Members: No.

Mr Close: I hear everyone saying "No." If Members want to turn a blind eye to reality, then so be it. But who was threatening the forces of law and order with slurry tankers filled with petrol? Let us face reality. Let us not turn a blind eye to that which we do not want to accept, and let us stop looking for silly excuses and passing the buck. It is incumbent upon all of us to accept our responsibilities. Those responsibilities, as elected representatives of the people, behove us to deplore violence from wherever it comes and not attempt to mimic it, as a lot of people do.

Mr McKee: Spoken like a true Nationalist.

Mr Close: I would like to think that I was speaking as a true democrat, a true upholder of law and order, and as one who does not flinch from accepting responsibilities and does not look for excuses if Colleagues, in whatever Order or political party, look for an excuse to confront the police. That finger can never be pointed at me or my party, and of that I am proud.

I deplore all those who blatantly brought this land and the people of Northern Ireland to the abyss of anarchy, and who, by illegal actions, cost us all dearly, in both financial terms and social terms. I share the views of the review team under Dr North that the establishment of a parades commission offers a better, a more independent means of taking difficult decisions. And one must remember that these difficult decisions have only got to be taken in a handful of cases. Let us not forget that we are only talking about a handful of cases. This independent body should have no political baggage or axe to grind, but should have the interests of the wider community in Northern Ireland at heart.

3.15 pm

Mr Ken Maginnis: Does Mr Close agree that any appointed commission would have a nominee from the Maryfield Secretariat and the Irish Government? If that is the case, how can he argue that such a commission should have no political baggage? Is his proposal realistic?

Mr Close: As I understand it the panel would be appointed by the Secretary of State. I am saying that this panel should be seen to be independent. That is of prime importance so that people will have respect and see that it has no political baggage. That is what I want to see. That is what I am calling for. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has endorsed the idea of a parades commission and that he is prepared to establish such a commission without delay.

I am disappointed, shocked and horrified that he is prepared to play Russian roulette by putting this out for further consultation, a further delaying mechanism. If he wants consultation, let him bring forward the legislation on to the floor of the House and let democracy take its course. Let him put it there now rather than delaying and waiting until he can get out of office, because it is important that the Secretary of State realizes that time is not on the side of the people of Northern Ireland. We do not want a Drumcree 3 *à la* Drumcree 2. We need action now to prevent that from happening. We do not need political cowardice being demonstrated by the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State must stop gambling with our security. He must stop selling himself and his Government short. He should demonstrate that he is prepared to be a man on this issue. Demonstrate, Secretary of State, that you are prepared to take a decision because that decision is right and not because it is politically expedient. We, the people of Northern Ireland, will be living here in July, will you? Do not leave us in a mess. I am pleading with the Secretary of State to act now. I want to see the necessary measures being taken now and if he does that I have no doubt whatsoever that he will have the support of all the decent people in Northern Ireland. He will also have the support of all the political parties in Westminster who genuinely want to see peace and progress in our land.

This Forum can do a tremendous exercise today if it demonstrates to the people out there that we too are genuine in our search for peace and reconciliation, and we can do that by supporting the amendment.

Mr McCartney: When we talk about the world of reality, as seen through the eyes of the Alliance Party, we talk as if the appointment of this commission, independent or otherwise, will be the answer to the marchers' prayer. It will not only make a decision, but the process of sanction that will strike terror into the hearts of a 100,000 people whose decision it frustrates. The real issue is that whether or not we have this commission, the facts on the ground will be the same, and the decisions necessary to be taken to avoid any breach of the peace will still have to be taken.

Leaving aside the media coverage of the events at Garvaghy Road from 7th to 11th July 1996, the extensive local coverage has actually obscured rather than clarified what is crucially important in my view: an understanding of the issues raised by Drumcree. This is basically due to the superficial — one might even say shallow — political analysis of those charged with authority over the media and the dispensation of ideas to the public at large. The media analysis of the issues at Drumcree have been nothing short of pathetic.

Let us look at those fundamental issues. First of all, the banning of the Orange parade from the Garvaghy Road on 7 July by the Chief Constable was a response to what the RUC must have perceived to be a threat of violence from the organized residents of that road, because there was patently and clearly no such threat to be attributed to the traditional Orange parade from the parish church at Drumcree. Has anyone ever seriously suggested that there was a threat of violence from that particular Orange parade?

Secondly, the banning of the parade was in fact a misuse of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. The use of the Order to ban the parade meant that a planned, lawful activity, the Orange parade, was banned as the direct result of the threat of unlawful

action by the organized residents of the Garvaghy Road. In other words, under the 1987 Order any lawful parade may be immediately turned into an unlawful parade by the threat of third parties to use unlawful means to prevent that lawful parade from proceeding.

Thirdly, the objection to the Orange parade, insofar as it was ever, in any coherent way, articulated, reduces to nothing more sophisticated than the intolerant attitude that there is something inherently offensive to Nationalist sensibility at the very sight of an Orange parade. Now this issue has long since been determined in almost every western democracy; the right of assembly and to parade, provided the parade itself is not such as to be unlawful in its inherent presentation. But in a free society this type of intolerant attitude cannot be permitted to curtail or deny to citizens their fundamental rights of association or of expression. In fact, such attitudes should be positively discouraged.

Objection to the parade was also based on the assertion that the route passed through a Nationalist area. That is simply not the case. The Garvaghy Road is a main thoroughfare with the gables of the residents' houses facing the road, placing upon the residents the need to get up early out of their beds and walk 150 yards in order to have their Nationalist sensibilities insulted.

Fourthly, not only did the banning of the Orange parade constitute an unjust and therefore unacceptable use of public-order powers, but the stance of the Government is in effect to permit the development in Northern Ireland of the practice of negotiated territorial access. This is fundamentally unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, it would lead to the virtual captivation of Northern Ireland and therefore extend the ethnic cleansing which has been carried out by the IRA in border areas. Second, it would operate in such a way as to facilitate a growing Sinn Féin/IRA hold over areas of Northern Ireland and thus consolidate the support base of Nationalist/Republican terrorism. Finally, it would involve the distasteful situation of law-abiding citizens having to negotiate the exercise of fundamental rights with convicted terrorists, or representatives of terrorist organizations.

On this point, if I might depart briefly from the subject, what we have seen in this opposition to lawful parades has really been the opening of a second IRA front. After the declaration of its cease-fire on 31 August 1994 — which was complete only in relation to military activities in the use of bombs and guns — it was necessary to open up a second front and that second front was designed specifically to bring the two communities into confrontation.

There is an obvious strategic objective behind the relatively recent Nationalist objection to Orange parades, and that is to engineer a situation of massive conflict between the Unionists and the security forces. The Nationalist calculation is that such a confrontation would create the conditions in which the mainland electorate would back a decisive move on the part of the United Kingdom Government to end what Hume and Adams call the Unionist veto. The Unionist veto is, according to these gentlemen, central to the mess we are now in. The basis of agreement between Hume and Adams is that the gun will be taken out of Irish politics only when the United Kingdom Government are prepared to go over the heads of Unionists to concede the unificationist objectives of Irish Nationalists.

Let me say a word about the real responsibility for Drumcree and for much of the dreadful diminution in community relations in Northern Ireland. It is the responsibility of two sovereign Governments who have engaged in an alleged peace process — the object of which is all too plain. It is a process which unrealistically heightens, to a great level, Nationalist expectations. It is a process which, by the very declaration that the United Kingdom Government had no selfish strategic economic interest in an integral part of their own kingdom, inflamed pro-Union anxiety — some would even say caused paranoia — about their future constitutional position within the United Kingdom. It was a powder-keg, a magazine of explosive, political constituents, that was drawn up and brought together by the two Governments.

Drumcree is not a condition, it is a symptom of a deeper malaise. It is a disease created by two Governments with a flawed, failed and faulty political purpose, simply waiting for a match to send the whole thing up in the air. And where did it end? It ended — or perhaps some would say it began — at Drumcree, because ultimately the position that was faced at Drumcree was that the British Government, the British Army and the RUC had only one option: if the march was not to be allowed to proceed, live rounds would be used on Orangemen. That, of course, unfortunately — it may even be subconsciously — was the route that many so-called respectable Nationalists were prepared for the Government to take. They offered no other means of enforcing the block on the parade other than the use of live rounds.

What would the result of that have been? It would not have been the dreadful rioting, bad though it was in Londonderry, or the equally disgraceful behaviour of alleged Loyalists in East Belfast. It would have been a train of death and destruction throughout the whole community. Dead Orangemen would have meant civil war. It is this that I ask the Forum and the Government to consider.

What do we mean when we hear about breaches of the rule of law? Observance of the rule of law means that the laws themselves are based upon the application of democratic principles. When the will of a majority is flouted or ignored, when a Government sets about frustrating and circumventing constitutional and democratic rights, it is small wonder that people will want to protest. I verily believe that by 11 July 1996 there would have been upwards of 100,000 people at Drumcree.

Were these people all miscreants? Were they *agents provocateurs*? Were they criminals? No. Ninety-nine per cent of them, perhaps, were ordinary artisans, farmers, shopkeepers — people with no criminal record, people who paid their rates, people who were respectable and reliable.

I have to seek the Forum's permission to continue, as I am about to overrun my time.

3.30 pm

The Chairman: A very short time, please. There are many Members yet to speak.

Mr McCartney: It is for the Forum to decide whether to hear me out.

The Chairman: How much time are you talking about? It is for me to say.

Mr McCartney: Possibly four or five minutes.

The Chairman: Two minutes would be fair to everybody.

Mr Junkin: The Member may have two minutes of my time.

Mr Calvert: And five minutes of mine.

The Chairman: I can say exactly who is going to lose.

Mr Paisley, you are to speak next. Are you willing to give up two minutes of your time?

Additional time given to a Member must be found elsewhere.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: If Mr McCartney wishes to finish, fair enough, but please do not take my time. I do not think that that is what he is asking.

The Chairman: We are going to finish at 4 o'clock.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: We have another 30 minutes.

Mr McCartney: Having been stopped in the middle of my peroration, I will now resume.

Laws are being imposed for which there is clearly no democratic mandate (as the term "democratic mandate" is understood in most democracies). When 250,000 people protested peacefully against the Anglo-Irish Agreement they were ignored. That was one of the largest political protests seen in western Europe since the end of the Second World War.

Mr Neeson: Is Parliament not supreme?

Mr McCartney: I hear mutterings. Parliament may be supreme, but it is capable of making bad laws. There were bad laws when John Hampden protested against ship money and when John Wilkes protested against general warrants. When more recently, people objected to the poll tax — not their constitutional future but a form of tax — what did we find? Because they were real citizens with a vote the Government acknowledged that their protest was valid, and the law was changed. That is the way democracy works.

A Member: Alliance does not like that.

A Member: Might is not right.

Mr McCartney: Might is not right, but consider what is happening in places like Belgrade. Would these lily-white liberals of the Alliance Party protest about people going onto the streets in Belgrade because the Government, passing the rule of law, was flouting the

basic principles of democracy? It is exactly the same thing. The principles of democracy are immutable. They are not flexible, malleable, as the Alliance Party would like them to be. I challenge the Government to look again at the basis upon which the laws that they scream are being flouted are being imposed.

The law is there to reflect the wishes of decent, hard-working, honourable people who believe that they have a right of free association. This is one of the guaranteed rights, the entrenched rights, under the Constitution of the United States. Of course, the United Kingdom has no written constitution, so we in Northern Ireland are at the mercy of a collection of faceless bureaucrats who advise upon laws. I am not prepared to have decisions taken by what is really a sophisticated quango. This body, under the fancy name "commission", is a nominated quango that will take decisions. The Government will be covering their expansive ass by placing the responsibility on someone else. That is what this is all about.

We must look very carefully at this report. One half is mediation, which I endorse — we should mediate — but the other half is adjudication. Well, I have never known any public body charged with mediation that can also get itself involved in adjudication. The two functions should be kept absolutely separate, otherwise the mediating body could say to one of the parties "If you do not accept what we suggest, we will be forced to adjudicate against you." That is simply nonsense.

This body needs to look very carefully at the whole process because it is inherently and fundamentally undemocratic. It is upon the principles of democracy that any future laws intended to circumscribe the rights accorded to people in a free democracy should be examined.

I am grateful to you, Mr Chairman, and to the Forum for your indulgence.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: It is sobering to follow such a candid speech. Mr McCartney hit the nail on the head with regards to the importance of this issue.

The Labour Party's motion says that we should note Dr North's report. I would have preferred words suggesting that we reject it. Having studied it and considered its implications, we reject it. Thus we shall not support the motion.

As for the sentimental gush of the Alliance Party, the amendment is not worth referring to. Consider the sort of indulgence that Alliance Members suggest in respect of our liberties.

With regard to the political atmosphere, we are constantly told that we must have a shared understanding of the past. Indeed, the report uses that terminology. It goes on about the need for a new beginning and the current political climate. We are told that we must draw a veil over the past and move forward. Of course, Nationalists never draw a veil over the past. As we have seen this week, Bloody Sunday is not forgotten. Nationalists want to go back to their past when it suits them, but the Unionists must reject their past and forget it.

The North Report is about wiping something out. It is the thin edge of a wedge. It is about one thing and one thing only — bashing Protestants in Ulster. That is the basis of this document. It is about bashing our civil liberties and our rights as a community. It is entitled 'Independent Review of Parades and Marches'. Why was there never an independent review of illegal counter-protests in Northern Ireland, of which there have been plenty? There was never an inquiry into the need to combat terrorism in Northern Ireland, but energy is expended on a review of parades and marches that are perfectly legitimate and reasonable and within the law.

Last night I took some time to read this document. Some things in it amazed me. Paragraph 12.97 says that the proposed independent commission shall take such steps as it thinks appropriate to obtain the views of all interested parties. It goes on to say that it may do so in secret, that it may have confidential hearings. What does that imply? In historical terms, it reminds me of the Inquisition. It is particularly interesting that a definition of the Inquisition says that it sought to render the civil power completely subservient to itself and prescribed the extirpation of heresy as its chief duty. The North Report is about rendering the civil power subservient to a commission that will, in effect, be outside the law. It will create its own laws and decide its own actions, and the civil power, including the police and the courts, will be subservient to it.

With regard to proposals for a code of conduct, the report says that there must be restrictions in respect of certain things, including bands and bannerettes. What restrictions? The carrying of bannerettes is not to be restricted, but the scenes depicted on them are, if they are regarded as threatening or abusive. Could a banner depicting the Siege of Derry and carrying the slogan "No Surrender" be perceived by a malicious community as offensive and abusive? If so, it will go. That is the intention of this report, which is about tramping our rights into the ground.

We must reject these proposals because they are anti-civil-libertarian. Paragraph 12.3 refers to two rights that it says are equal — the rights of people on parade and the rights of local residents, which can be inferred from various provisions in the European Convention and from general law. Notice the word "inferred". It is quite clear that no European convention or international standard gives express rights to residents to allow them to prevent parades or require that their consent be sought. That is why North uses the word "inferred".

We would do well to look for a moment at some of the case-law concerning the right to parade. Under British law it is very clear that a lawful parade must have guaranteed right of passage. I am thinking in particular of the test case *Beattie v Gillbanks*. Here is the judgement:

"The disturbance of the peace was not the natural consequence of the acts of those on parade but was caused by other people antagonistic to them."

That gets us to the root case of all this. The disturbances that occurred in the summer months of 1995 and 1996 were the fault not of those on parade but of those who broke the law, those who decided to block parades to which they were antagonistic. In international law, as in the European Convention on Human Rights, we come across this standard again and again. In

1991 a case concerning the right to parade was taken to the European Court. I quote from the judgement:

"The right to peaceful assembly is secured to everyone who has the intention of organizing a peaceful demonstration. The possibility of violent counter-demonstrations or the possibility of extremists with violent intentions — not members of the organizing association — joining that demonstration cannot, as such, take away the right to parade."

No one doubts that the intention of the Orange Order and of those on parade is lawful and legitimate and, indeed, peaceful. We all know that, on the other hand, the intention of those who protest is to remove people's rights. But even international case-law makes it perfectly clear that a deliberate and antagonistic blockage cannot remove a person's right to parade.

In the United States of America, case-law is identical. In fact, it is more emphatic than that in Europe or anywhere else. Under the First Amendment the Supreme Court says that the Government have no power to restrict the expression of an identity or a message or ideas. Those things are protected under international law and by international standards. It is very interesting that the North Report should propose for Northern Ireland something that would not be accepted anywhere else in the world. It would not be accepted in any part of the European Community or in the United States of America, but it is to be rammed down our throats because of our Protestant identity. We have to reject it on that basis.

Extremists in the Republican community have set themselves the task of deliberately demonstrating against the right of people to march in places like Dunloy, Portadown and Londonderry. The protests are designed not to keep but to destroy the peace.

3.45 pm

I think a message — a very fundamental and clear message — has to go out from the Forum. As a community, we have to warn the Government — and we have to say this solemnly — that there are not enough soldiers, there are not enough police officers, there are not enough courts, there are not enough gaols and there are not enough judges to enforce laws not supported by the majority of people in Northern Ireland. This document will not be enforced over our heads, because the majority of people will reject it.

Our civil liberty, our right to march, our right to express our identity is deliberately being taken from us. Slowly but surely these rights are being removed, and we have got to realize the great ramifications of implementing the proposals outlined in that document. Who knows what the real intentions of those people who took part in the North investigation really are?

The Police Authority made a submission to the North Review team. I am not particularly interested in the details of the actual Police Authority report, but I am interested in the minority report that was put forward by Mr Reg Empey, Mr Kerrigan of my own party, Mr S J McCammick and Mr T J Wilson. They argued expressly against the idea of a commission to examine parades, and they put forward three fundamental reasons about why such a commission will simply fail to work, and those reasons are worth repeating and putting on the record.

Firstly, they said it would be impossible to establish a tribunal which would be representative and accountable and would command the full support of all sections of the community. We know that to be the case already. They will never get a chairman for such a commission who is acceptable. Indeed, the three people on the North Review team could not even agree on the sort of person who should be in the chair. They discuss in certain paragraphs the type of person they would like, but they never come down and say who that person should be. So even these people could not agree about who would be acceptable. We have to realize that there will be no committee acceptable to people in Northern Ireland.

The second reason given by the Police Authority's minority report was that an increasing number of parades would be objected to and the tribunal would ultimately be swamped with dubious objections and malicious applications against parades. I think that is absolutely clear. We have already seen how malicious those in the Nationalist community have been to Protestants. They do not even want them to express who and what they are. They fail to understand Protestants and they fail to wish to live side by side with their neighbours, acknowledging that we have a different identity.

Finally, the minority report says that a tribunal would not necessarily solve the problems. That is absolutely right. Such a tribunal will not solve the problems. It will magnify the problems. On that basis my party rejects this North Report and will be putting forward its own amendment next week.

The Chairman: Mr Junkin, you will be last today. You have ten minutes, and it is ten minutes to four.

Mr Junkin: I have already given away two minutes.

The Chairman: I heard you, but I did not want to do that.

Mr McCartney: I will stay on and listen to the Member.

Mr Junkin: "Mr McCartney" are the first words of my speech anyway.

Earlier today Mr McCartney mentioned the SDLP's boycott of the Northern Ireland Forum. I am asking what actual sign Members see, or anyone else here sees, of moral fibre in the SDLP, in particular in Mrs Brid Rodgers who tried to stir up the media last July from the Garvaghy Road. We have all seen her staged appeal to the world on the television *ad infinitum*, but where is this woman today? Her contribution — whether we would have agreed with it or not is another thing — at least might have been interesting. What price Mrs Rodgers's sincerity?

The North Report is one of a long line of measures from the Government, which to my mind are specifically aimed at Northern Ireland Unionists in order to combat simple, perceived imbalances of social behaviour. It is a product of people employed via the malign influence of the pan-Nationalist alliance, which consists of the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Provisional IRA and the Government of the Republic. These people are very adept at getting Government representatives to jig to their tune and even to lie face down, dead drunk in the

gutter. They are very adept at wringing their pious hands and pleading for terrorists to be given time to reform. They are very good at propagating the theme that the terrorist guerrillas and their Sinn Féin mouthpieces are basically reasonably people simply tinkering towards a fairer system of government administration in Northern Ireland.

And so, after a series of well-orchestrated physical objections to traditional processions in Belfast, Portadown, Londonderry, Bellaghy and elsewhere, the Government capitulated through security surrenders by the Chief Constable, and we now have the North Report. It will take a week to read and digest it thoroughly. I am afraid I did not have time last night because the Agriculture Committee did not finish until after 10 o'clock at the far end of the province, so it was rather late before I was home.

Preliminary reading tells us some things that we already know. We know about the long-standing traditions involved. We know about the numbers taking part. We know that only 0.03% of parades gave trouble last year. We know that there has to be control of lager louts, whether in or out of band uniform. We know that in other countries parades are billed as notable tourism events. If you turn on your satellite receiver any weekend, all over Europe you will see cultural processions, religious parades and agricultural drives taking place, and all of the towns involved are closed off to traffic.

Our tourist chiefs try to hide our traditions. They seem to be embarrassed by the people who employ them. When have you ever seen a brochure for Saint Patrick's Day parades or the 12 July parades or the 15 August or the 12 August parades, available for tourists? In Northern Ireland, we have the most colourful, the most exciting, the largest and, logistically, the best-organized series of pageants possibly in the world. Yet, when 100,000 men and women don their colours on the Twelfth to proceed through another 100,000 spectators, the tourist board assiduously avoids promoting these spectacles. The Dublin tourist chiefs and the New York tourist chiefs are not so *laissez-faire*. They get stuck in, promote their comparable spectacles and make them a commercial success for all.

In Northern Ireland this valuable tourist asset is just another target for those with an interest in destroying this provincial entity. They have attacked nearly every other commercial target in Northern Ireland and killed 3,000 persons in doing so.

Phase one of the success of the attacks on traditional parades is the Government's hiving off of responsibility to yet another committee or quango — one of a long line. Those who understand the psyche of the people targeted by this new arrangement know that it is yet another blow against the limited amount of democracy here. They have had the shambles of the Chief Constable's "No, we won't. Yes, we will. No we won't." policy at Portadown and Bellaghy last year. Now the police seem to want to get out of their ultimate responsibility for policing. Do we now intend to suffer another five, so far faceless, men or women deciding whether or not a normally legitimate procession takes place? The despicable Anglo-Irish Agreement and all the declarations published since have seen the business of this United Kingdom being affected by the input of Dublin Government Ministers. There is no doubt that the sticky fingers of Dublin will try once again to hand-pick the commission members through the Maryfield office and the Anglo-Irish summit.

There is no doubt, again, that this report will give further fuel to those who are already setting out ethnically to cleanse our towns and villages. One end of Main Street in Bellaghy is already cleaned out. It has had an exodus of Protestants since the RUC failed to uphold the law earlier on last year. Two years ago in Bellaghy I asked the RUC to move a small drunken crowd before there was a breach of the peace. I am talking about 20 people. Forty-five minutes later the police still had not moved them, and it broke into a full-scale riot with rubber bullets and people being trampled. The Chief Constable is still very content to let it stay that way in Bellaghy to this very day.

I believe that Northern Ireland cannot continue to be run by quangos. There are more and more quangos whose flavour is dictated by a foreign Government. Sooner or later the weight of these quangos will tip the scales of conflict here so far that there will be rights for no man except the strongest. The Garvaghy Road shambles will then seem like a 13 July picnic.

In conclusion, I am asking that we stop tinkering with Northern Ireland. Even the SDLP does not want to support this document. If it did they would be here today — looking round, I see that even Mrs Rodgers is still out.

I call on the Government to get to grips with security here properly, to protect their citizens properly and to let those who would continue to wreck Northern Ireland once and for all know that they have lost the initiative for good.

The Chairman: We cannot yet vote as there are still 17 Members to speak.

The debate stood adjourned until Friday 7 February 1997.

FORUM BUSINESS

The Chairman: We have one other important issue next week — Standing Committee C's report on cancer care, which has been worked on for five or six months. I propose to take that first. It will certainly take an hour or so, and I hope we will not let the resumed debate make that important work seem of secondary interest.

The Forum adjourned at 3.58 pm.