NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 21 February 1997

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FORUM: STANDING COMMITTEE A (EVIDENCE)

Mr Ken Maginnis: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I understand that a matter of considerable importance is about to be raised in the Forum. As, owing to the time available since the matter arose, not all Members are fully aware of all the circumstances, it would be helpful to many of us to discuss it with our Colleagues and with other political parties. I therefore request a suspension for one hour.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Chairman. I understand that this matter may be brought forward only by leave of the House. Some people think that that means by vote. It is not so. If just one Member says no, leave is not granted. That is parliamentary procedure. We need a ruling right at the beginning. Our Rules say "by leave ... of the Forum."

The Chairman: Interestingly, you have both anticipated what I am going to say.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Great men think alike.

The Chairman: It is a very good start to the day.

I have been asked by the Alliance Party to seek the leave of the Forum to debate a matter concerning Standing Committee A. The terms of the suggested motion are as follows:

"Noting the Forum's duty to promote dialogue in Northern Ireland, and further noting the vital importance of resolving the continuing disputes over marches, the Forum welcomes the request by Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition to address Standing Committee A of the Forum and instructs that Committee to arrange that meeting at the earliest reasonable opportunity and, similarly, to arrange an early meeting with the Northern Ireland Flute Bands Association, as requested by that group."

Since the Business Committee has not had an opportunity to take a view on this matter, I would need unanimous support for addition of the motion to today's business. I propose that, to enable parties to consider the matter, the sitting be suspended for a period.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Are you specifying a time, Mr Chairman?

The Chairman: Mr Maginnis suggested an hour. Is that acceptable?

Several Members: Half an hour.

Mr Ken Maginnis: I am not going to split hairs, but half an hour is a very short period for discussion within and between parties. Someone has just suggested that we make it three quarters of an hour. I am grateful.

Mr Cedric Wilson: As you, Mr Chairman, have said, this matter was discussed yesterday by the Business Committee. You will recall that, while there was no vote, there was consensus that a decision by any Committee, provided that the Rules of Procedure were not being departed from, was valid. The view taken by the Business Committee yesterday was that this matter was one for Committee A. Such comment was made by representatives of all the parties.

The Chairman: We are getting away from the rather simple proposition that there be a suspension to enable this suggested motion to be considered.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I am not going to enter into debate. What I am saying is simply that half an hour would be sufficient. The question has nothing to do with the Garvaghy Road residents; it is whether the Committee had a right to decide a cut-off date. That is a very clear issue, and it should not take long to deliberate upon.

The Chairman: Am I right in thinking that the horse-trading has resulted in agreement on three quarters of an hour?

It was so decided.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The point that the Committee Chairman is making is that the proposal concerning a cut-off date was made by an Alliance Party member.

The meeting was suspended at 10.10 am and resumed at 11.01 am.

The Chairman: I should now like to hear from the parties their views as to whether the Alliance motion should be debated. Having consulted my advisers and studied the Rules, which are now so conveniently in booklet form, I believe that we must stick to the principle of unanimity, which was used on two occasions when the Forum was asked to take business that had not been arranged.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It would help the Forum to come to a decision if the Committee Chairman were to make a statement, as would be done in the House of Commons.

The Chairman: That is precisely what I was going to suggest. We are thinking alike.

Mr Neeson: In that case, Alliance, which tabled the motion, should be allowed to make an immediate response to the Committee Chairman.

Mr Ken Maginnis: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. My party is deeply disturbed at the fact that the first obligation of members of the Committee — their obligation to the Forum — was breached. A member of the Alliance Party — Mr McBride, I am told: I do not want to cloak what I am saying — took it upon himself to go to the 'Irish News' yesterday afternoon and report on the confidential business of the Committee. Thus, the Chairman of the Committee was obliged to go on radio this morning, before Members of the Forum had an opportunity to look at the facts. That is not good enough. It devalues the Forum and causes confusion. In many ways, indeed, it helps to prevent us from coming to the best possible decisions.

Far be it from me to suggest how you, Mr Chairman, should conduct the business, but my party believes that those who contravene the Rules to such an extent and so seriously should be called to account.

The Chairman: Before getting into all these irrelevant — well, perhaps not exactly irrelevant — details, let us consider what Members have just had 58 minutes to think about. Leave aside what has been said outside. Is it the wish of the Forum to accept the motion, in the name of Mr McBride, concerning the Garvaghy Road residents?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We must hear from the Chairman of the Committee. The Alliance Members have got their propaganda out, and we need to hear authoritatively from those whom we appointed. Then the decision can be made. You are right, Sir, in saying that the Alliance Party may not move this motion without leave. And if anyone objects, that is the end of the matter.

This is a propaganda thing. I heard the Roman Catholic priest say that they did not trust this Forum, that they did not believe it to be impartial. That is why they allowed the time to run out. We must defend the Forum's integrity. We are not going to be threatened by IRA men or anyone else.

Mr McCartney: I endorse entirely the view that you, Mr Chairman, have expressed: the only issue before the Forum is whether it should unanimously grant leave for this motion to be moved. It is my impression that there is absolutely no possibility of such leave being given. In one sense that would be the end of the matter. The motion would simply not be heard. As a matter of order, that is the procedure that we should follow. One person is enough to end this whole discourse, but there is very great merit in the suggestion that, in order that not only this House but the public at large might be informed of the true state of affairs, as soon as the motion has been rejected — as I believe it will be, and by rather more than one voice — the Committee Chairman should be afforded an opportunity to state clearly the relevant facts. The lengths to which Standing Committee A has gone to facilitate everyone reasonably wishing to be heard on this issue should be made clear.

Mr Neeson: I agree with Mr McCartney that the public should be informed of what happened. That is why this is important. There is a major procedural dilemma facing Standing Committee A. In order that the full facts may be made known, Mr McBride, who tabled the motion, should be given the right to reply to the Committee Chairman's statement.

Quite a number of important issues that run to the very core of the future of the Forum arise from what took place in Standing Committee A yesterday.

The Chairman: I do not have to put the matter to each party, as it is quite evident that there is not unanimity. During the interval I checked the use of the word "unanimity". It has been used on a number of occasions to define what Rule 8(5) means by "by leave ... of the Forum". That paragraph permits a discussion, at short notice, with leave of the Forum. "Unanimous" is the word that was used on previous occasions. On the basis that we are not required to vote on a matter that is not a motion — the suggestion that this subject be debated today — I think that it is fair to invite the Chairman of Standing Committee A to tell us briefly what the issues are.

Mr McBride: Will those who tabled the motion be allowed to explain why it should be debated?

The Chairman: We are going to hear from the Chairman of the Committee, of which you, Mr McBride, are a member. After that, perhaps I will call you.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I will be brief, as the facts are stark and fairly easy to understand.

The Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue charged Standing Committee A to look at two issues — boycotting and parades. On 12 September we commenced our work on the parades issue, and on 30 September we instructed the Committee Clerk to write to all those who we thought might have a contribution to make. All the major players — the RUC, the community relations people, Mediation Network, all the Loyal Institutions, all the concerned residents' groups, including those from the Bogside, the Garvaghy Road and the lower Ormeau — and everyone else brought to our attention were contacted. Indeed, Mr McBride was largely responsible for giving us the names and addresses of all the residents' groups that he wanted us to contact. We received no response from any of them.

On 16 December the Committee Clerk wrote pointing out that we were disappointed at not having received even an acknowledgement, let alone a submission. At that stage we pointed out that we had a cut-off date of 20 January. There was pressure from this body to deal with the issue at an early stage. (There would be little point in reporting on 12 July.) The Committee moved forward, and because quite a number of people requested an oral hearing we decided to extend the cut-off date from 20 January to a day in February.

On 13 February Sir Oliver Napier — this was not a Unionist guillotine — proposed that the Committee write to the groups and individuals who had promised submissions and inform them that the Committee would finish taking evidence by Thursday 20 February 1997. That was duly done by the Clerk. In response, late submissions were received yesterday — one from the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, one from the Progressive Unionist Party and one (a very terse statement of views and a request to be allowed to give oral evidence) from the Northern Ireland Flute Bands Association, as well the following — not a submission but a letter — from the Garvaghy Road residents:

"Dear Mr Wilson,

The Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition has been asked by your Committee secretary to make a submission on the parades issue. We would like to avail of the opportunity to make an oral and written presentation simultaneously to the above Committee. Only under that condition would we feel confident of making a fair presentation of our views. Members of the Residents' Coalition would be willing to travel to Belfast to do so at a date and time of your convenience."

The Committee had to make a decision — in response not to the Garvaghy Road residents or any of the others who had made submissions but to the proposal of Sir Oliver Napier, agreed by the Committee — that the cut-off date be yesterday or that the period be extended again. We did not take a quick decision, but asked the Clerk about the time-scale. The intention was to bring the report to the Forum by 21 March. Working back from that, we could see that, logistically, we had only one week, following deliberations, to put the report together. Bearing in mind the criticism that our initial report on boycotting had not been received by Members a week in advance, we were very keen to complete our deliberations.

A majority of Committee Members were of the view that it was strange that a body that had had four months to present very well-formulated views — views that had been expressed in submissions to the North Committee and had been put forward on a daily basis — was unable to come up with something. Many other groups sent us copies of their submission to North. That would have been helpful.

Any denial in respect of these residents' groups or other bodies that declined has been self-inflicted. Indeed, we have the same situation in the Forum, where there is no representation of any major Nationalist group. This is not a matter for the Committee to be ashamed of. Those who have boycotted or distanced themselves from this body and its Committees are responsible for the lack of input from the Nationalist community.

I do not intend to go any further. The facts speak for themselves. As Committee Chairman, I am satisfied that we behaved properly. Nobody could say that the steps we took were unreasonable. Three letters and an extended deadline gave these people ample opportunity.

11.15 am

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I should like the Committee Chairman to clarify something. Was it the rule that everyone had to make a written submission first? I was told by the Committee "You will not be heard until we have read your written submission." Is the Committee Chairman telling us that the residents gave an ultimatum that their written and oral submissions must be taken simultaneously?

Mr Cedric Wilson: Let me demonstrate how flexible the Committee has been. I know that you, Mr Chairman, are aware that to secure an input by the major Nationalist party, the SDLP, despite the fact that they are boycotting this body, the Committee was prepared to go outside to meet Mr John Hume. We wrote three letters requesting a meeting. Indeed, we expressed our willingness to meet him on the same occasion as the Apprentice Boys, in his own constituency, in Londonderry, or at a time and place of his choosing. Twice

I asked him personally to make a submission. I then spoke to Brid Rodgers. They declined to make an input.

Mr Donaldson: Let us be absolutely clear about this. As Vice-Chairman of the Committee, I have to say that Mr Wilson has chaired our meetings properly and efficiently. I quote from the minutes of Standing Committee A's meeting of Thursday 13 February:

"Sir Oliver Napier proposed that all groups or individuals with outstanding replies should be contacted, giving an absolute final deadline."

The words used in the minutes are "absolute final deadline", and the agreed date was 20 February. Sir Oliver, as a lawyer, will know that such terms are pretty watertight.

The Chairman: We are getting away from what we want to do.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I will finish briefly.

The Chairman: I propose to listen to you, Mr Wilson, watch you sitting down and then call on Mr McBride as the last Member to speak on this matter, which we must not allow to take up all day.

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: I am sorry if Members do not like it, but that is my ruling.

Please sit down, Mr Wilson. I call Mr McBride.

Mr Hugh Smyth: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. Under what authority do you make such a ruling? Maybe you can show me the relevant Rule. As Mr McCartney has said, this debate has been wiped off the board. We are now discussing a separate matter. We all agreed that the Chairman of the Committee should be invited to speak. How can you justify naming one person to reply? His reply will not relate to his own proposal, as that is gone. Which Rule are you invoking, Mr Chairman?

Mr McBride: May I start?

The Chairman: Mr Smyth was kind enough to question my ruling. Rule 3 says

"The Forum shall exercise control of its own business, subject to the Chairperson's ruling which shall be final on all questions of procedure and order".

Mr McBride, please.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I am still making the comments that I was asked to make, and I have not given way to Mr McBride.

I want to state loudly and clearly that the Garvaghy Road residents have not made a submission. We therefore have nothing from them to consider in our study of the evidence.

However, there will be every opportunity for the Committee to come to a balanced conclusion, as the views of the residents' groups, the flute bands and various other organizations were given to the North Committee. We will take account of the views of the Nationalist community. Mr Casey, Ms Sagar and people from the Alliance Party claim that they represent sections of that community. Those people were very forthright in putting their views to the Committee, so let no one suggest that we do not have some balance.

It is regrettable that the major Nationalist party, the SDLP, is not present. It could still rectify the situation by taking its seats in the Forum and in the Committee.

Ms Sagar: I do not sit on the Committee.

Mr Cedric Wilson: The Women's Coalition has a representative on the Committee.

Mr McBride: This is a matter not of procedure but of principle. The principle is whether this body is open to the views of the whole community. It is a matter not of deadlines but of the Forum's duty to promote dialogue and reconciliation. Rule 8(1) says

"The business of the Forum shall be such as to promote dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland."

I take that to mean —

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr McBride: No

I take that Rule to mean that this body has a duty to hear the widest possible range of views. Things have been said about procedure. Dr Paisley asks whether people were required to give written submissions in advance. In fact, groups attended without having given written submissions. There were different standards. Last week it was suggested that a deadline should be set. Sir Oliver Napier did indeed propose a deadline for this week. The point is that that deadline could have been complied with. The Garvaghy Road residents' group contacted the Forum on Tuesday, indicating that they were willing to attend yesterday.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Will Mr McBride give way on that point?

Mr McBride: No. The Member has had his chance.

The residents were willing to come, and a precedent had been set. A group, of whom nobody had heard, contacted the Chairman on Sunday and asked to be allowed to put its case. I have here the agenda for yesterday. On the Chairman's direction, it includes that group. The arrangement was subsequently withdrawn, but the fact is that the Northern Ireland Flute Bands Association, with which I have no quarrel, and which I wish had had an opportunity to speak, could get on the agenda, whereas the Garvaghy Road residents, who offered to come at short notice, not previously knowing that there was a deadline, were not given that chance.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Will Mr McBride please give way?

Mr McBride: No.

We believe that the whole issue of parades is crucial and that we must do everything possible to defuse it. We must have dialogue. There must be discussion. We are delighted that this group had the courage to come forward. Others from the same background refused to do so. The need to hear their evidence was much more important than an arbitrary deadline of no great significance. We could perfectly easily have extended the Committee's business by a week without affecting efficiency. The decision was not to do with procedures or deadlines; it was a political decision arising from people's unwillingness to hear the attitudes of those who do not agree with them.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I refer to Rule 8(1):

"The business of the Forum shall be such as to promote dialogue and understanding".

Is this man promoting dialogue and understanding, or is he promoting himself and the Alliance Party?

The Chairman: I rule that he may continue.

Mr McBride: I am challenging those who are not prepared to hear the views of others. We must listen to others. We will not solve this problem without dialogue. What we have here is not about procedures or about deadlines, which could be adjusted, but about solving problems. The decision taken by Standing Committee A yesterday and, in effect, confirmed by the Forum today has done great damage to the credibility of this body.

The Chairman: We could have this motion debated by the back door. Do Members want that?

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: In that case, are you prepared, for the moment, to leave the matter where it is?

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: Therefore you do want a debate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Committee Chairman has a right to reply to the attack on his credibility, as has every other Member of the Forum. The Alliance Member has indicted people, saying that they do not want to talk. We talked to some of these persons. I myself talked to them, as the Vice-Chairman of the Committee knows. I am prepared to talk to people who are not IRA men, but I will not talk to gunmen. Let it be perfectly clear that the Chairman of this Forum Committee has been indicted by Mr McBride and others.

The Chairman: What we are going to have, as I threatened, is a debate by the back door on the Alliance motion. Do Members want that?

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: I understand very well the desire to express acceptance of the credibility of the Chairman of Standing Committee A, but we have three other motions to deal with today. I think that this matter has been ventilated very fully, thanks to the Committee Chairman and Mr McBride. If there are injured feelings — and undoubtedly there are — perhaps we ought to consider in a reasoned manner what to do about them. Certainly the Business Committee will have its first opportunity to come to some conclusion as to whether, in a situation of this sort, a motion is required and, if so, what its terms should be.

I propose now to call Mr Nesbitt to propose the first motion on the Order Paper. The debate may not take very long. If we were to get that business out of the way, we could come back to the matter that we have been discussing, were that the wish of Members.

Mr Neeson: It would be helpful to have a vote on whether to debate the Alliance Party's motion.

The Chairman: I am sorry, but no. I have gone into that. *[Interruption]* Please let me speak. I went into that matter during the interval. It is clear to me that a recorded vote requires a motion. But we do not have a motion as there was not unanimity with regard to the Alliance Party's proposal. I have to rule that a recorded vote, which is what you are looking for, is not available.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I suggest that we decide either to hear or not to hear this thing out. Let us be finished with it. Under the Rules the Committee Chairman is not going to have an opportunity to reply.

The Chairman: Very well, if that is the wish of the Forum. I thought that I was saving time and was being courteous to everyone by suggesting that it is pretty clear that there is not the necessary unanimity.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Put it to the meeting.

The Chairman: Very well. Those in favour of the motion standing in the name of —

Mr Hugh Smyth: With all the due respect, Mr Chairman —

The Chairman: I am thankful for your respect, but would be even more thankful if you were to sit down.

Mr Hugh Smyth: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: We are at the moment —

Mr Hugh Smyth: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. In any House a point of order will be taken. Before Dr Paisley's remarks, you, like Mr McCartney and myself, confirmed

that the motion had disappeared. It is gone. You allowed the Chairman of the Committee to speak, and, for reasons best known to yourself, you called Mr McBride.

The Chairman: Perhaps you would be kind enough to listen.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Now you are prepared to put to the Forum a motion that no longer exists.

The Chairman: I said that it was clear that there was not unanimity in the Forum and that it would be a waste of time and rather petty to take a vote. If, as Dr Paisley has suggested, we should vote on this, I imagine that a show of hands would be enough.

Several Members: A recorded vote.

11.30 am

The Chairman: All right. May I please have those who wish to take this motion —

Mr Ken Maginnis: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I certainly do not want to delay the proceedings, but I must say that your point about unanimity is important. I take issue with Dr Paisley in that, in my view, this is not a question on which a vote is required. It has been difficult. I would be grateful for a suspension of 15 minutes.

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: I take it from the cries of dissent that there is not unanimity on that proposal.

Mr Ken Maginnis: Then we are bound by the unanimity Rule, and there is no question of a vote.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. You said that there was not unanimity on the request by my Colleague Mr Maginnis. But there is no need for unanimity. Rule 6(5) says

"the Chairperson may at any time suspend a sitting for ... fifteen minutes."

[Interruption]

That is the Rule.

The Chairman: I would like to dispose of the matter with which Mr Smyth and I had some difficulty.

Mr McCartney: If it will cut the Gordian knot, I formally object to this motion. That is all you need, Mr Chairman. There is not unanimity. The matter stands decided.

The Chairman: That is what I have been trying for some time to achieve.

We shall move on. I call Mr Nesbitt to propose his motion.

Mr Cedric Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. Dr Paisley said that I had a right to make a comment regarding the attack on my integrity. I do not wish to do that, but I do want to remove the slur on the Committee staff. They were contacted on Tuesday by the Garvaghy Road residents, but they did not have authority to decide whether those people might come to this body. And to suggest otherwise is ridiculous. The Committee could not hear that request until yesterday.

The Chairman: Thank you very much. That is important. I would hate to have any slur on our excellent staff.

Mr Ken Maginnis: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. You will recall that on a previous point of order I raised the issue of those who infringe the confidentiality of Committees before the Forum has had an opportunity to consider particular issues. I noted that Mr McBride made no attempt to vindicate himself. May I ask you, Sir, to deal with this matter, on which depends the credibility of the Forum.

The Chairman: I am impressed by what you say, but I would like to give the matter some thought and come back to it later. If we start a vituperative dialogue in the media the purpose of the Forum will disappear even further.

Mr Neeson: In your consideration, Mr Chairman, will you take account of the article in this morning's 'News Letter' — a major statement by the Chairman of the Committee?

The Chairman: I certainly will.

NORTHERN IRELAND ECONOMY

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move the following motion:

That the Forum notes the work undertaken to date by Standing Committee E.

I wish, in this brief progress report, to refer to certain points. Our terms of reference were to consider issues relevant to the performance of the Northern Ireland economy. We met early in November and decided in the first instance that we should talk to the key players in the economy. We met officials of the Department of Economic Development as the governing body in this field, as well as representatives of both sides of industry — the Confederation of British Industry and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions — and of two other bodies.

Members will see from the report that we identified various issues to be considered — in particular, long-term unemployment, cross-border co-operation and the European dimension. Those are the key areas, and we took additional evidence in respect of them. We also embarked upon a tendering arrangement for research in one area — the European dimension.

With regard to long-term unemployment — in particular, the Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes — we are currently making progress. The ramifications of ACE have been discussed in the Forum. In this connection, we met two bodies — the Training and Employment Agency and the Northern Ireland Federation of ACE Schemes — and took oral evidence from both. In the context of long-term unemployment we have written to Baroness Denton, the Department of Economic Development and the Training and Employment Agency asking them to support our case that the proposed ACE cuts should not be implemented immediately.

Essential to all this deliberation is a review being conducted by the Training and Employment Agency. This is intended to stimulate debate on the question of long-term unemployment. I understand that part of the reason for delay in this process is that people are updating the relevant statistics. But such is the speed of life today that if everything had to be updated before publication, nothing would ever be published. We understand from our deliberations that the review does not involve any proposition as to how to deal with long-term unemployment. Rather, it is a historical analysis. The view of the Committee is that it is long past time for publication. As Chairman of the Economy Committee, I request that the Forum endorse a call for immediate publication. Until the review is published, full deliberation on this aspect of long-term unemployment will be impossible.

All the groups that we met emphasized that one of the key elements in the economic ills of Northern Ireland is the high proportion of long-term unemployment by comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. This is an issue that we wish to address speedily.

The purpose of the Committee, like that of the Forum, is to encourage dialogue, understanding and consensus — not just among the parties but also between the Forum and business agencies. I hope that that will continue to be its function.

The Chairman: If the review to which you have referred requires any pressure, or if I can help in any way, please let me know.

Mr Nesbitt: Very well.

Mr McAlister: When we discussed an important matter a few moments ago the Press Gallery was full. But this too is an important issue. In fact, as has been said, the second-most important issue concerning Northern Ireland, after political stability, is the economy. Well, where are the press now?

Several Members: Where are the Members?

Mr McAlister: I am coming to that. The Members will not get off. The Chamber has emptied because the press are outside looking for the burning issue. That is where the cameras are. I just wish that the press in this country would pay as much attention to the economy as to the important political issues. Both are important.

The Chairman of the Economy Committee has done a first-class job, and it has been a delight for me to serve as Vice-Chairman. With regard to issues that we thought were

important — and I am not talking about the matter concerning Mr McBride or anything controversial — we have found the press to be not the slightest bit interested. The Press Gallery was full, but suddenly, for a debate on the economy, all the reporters are gone.

Mr McCartney: I fully endorse what has just been said about the attitude of the press. It appears that anything that requires reporters to think, to make a rational and logical analysis, is taboo. They want to report on any form of spat or difference — anything that will portray the Forum as a hotbed of disagreement. The issues on which Members come together — the economy, health, education — and in respect of which Committees work very hard in a constructive and committed way, but which require a little patience, a little reading and a little analysis, appear to be beyond the intellectual capacity of the fourth estate.

The Chairman: The two of you agree, and I do not think that there are many in this Chamber who do not support what you have said.

Mr McAlister: I want to lighten the heavy atmosphere by telling the story of a minister who turned up to preach and found one parishioner and the organist. On being asked what he should do, the organist said "Well, I am here, so I'll play." The minister went down to the parishioner and said "Mrs Jones, the organist is willing to play." She replied "Well, I am willing to sing, so I think you should continue. You know, at home on the farm when I go to the back door to feed the hens, if only one turns up I still feed it." So the minister went up and preached with great liberty for an hour and three quarters. At the end of the service he thanked Mrs Jones, and she said "It is true that when I go to the back door to feed the hens, if only one turns up I feed it. But I don't give it the whole bucket."

11.45 am

The Chairman: That is a very salutary story. I must remember it and use it some time.

Mr McAlister: There is no copyright on it.

At this stage we are making only brief comment on the economy. We hope to give Members the full bucket in due course. I endorse everything that the Committee Chairman said. I repeat that he has done a first-class job, and it has been a delight for me to serve as Vice-Chairman. I initiated the economic debate in the Forum by bringing forward a motion. It may be remembered that in that original debate I said that I felt, through my grass-roots business contacts, that there was an unco-ordinated approach to the economy and that something would have to be done about it.

You often ask yourself "Is my journey really necessary?" I was delighted when the Forum was set up, and even more delighted when I was given the opportunity to serve in it. Standing Committee E has done an excellent job so far. The feeling among the people who have made submissions is that there is an unco-ordinated approach to the economy in Northern Ireland. The opportunity to come here and discuss various aspects of the economy was indeed welcomed. Everyone has been very supportive.

The work being done under important schemes like Action for Community Employment (ACE) deserves our support. This Forum has been the perfect vehicle to voice the problems of ACE. I too call for publication of the review document as soon as possible. Whatever pressure the Forum or you personally, Mr Chairman, can exert will be beneficial to those who are concerned about the situation.

The submissions received so far have been good. We are coming to the stage of wanting to bring them together for presentation to the Forum. This has been a good time to discuss these things. It is very appropriate that we have an Economy Committee. Although I am a member, I wish it every success. I look forward to our being able to give the full bucket.

Mr Neeson: I fully endorse the remarks of the Committee's Chairman and Vice-Chairman, both of whom do an excellent job. I am glad to say that there is unanimity in everything that we do. We work very well as a group.

I support the remarks of Mr McAlister and Mr McCartney about Forum coverage by the press. It is a sad reflection on political life in Northern Ireland that important issues like this are largely ignored by the media.

I am particularly pleased that the Committee has embarked on major research into the impact of the European Union on the economy of Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the peripheral nature of the province. Our research will deal with such issues as transport, cross-border co-operation and the impact of peripherality. There is a distinct possibility that when the Union is enlarged in 1999 Northern Ireland will lose its Objective 1 status. Then, of course, all member countries face the problem of whether to join the European Monetary Union. It is important for politicians in Northern Ireland to address these issues now, before they are upon us. That is why I welcome the fact that the Committee is zooming in on them.

The Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce gave evidence yesterday. Clearly, people in business now realize that there is a direct link between the economy and politics. I welcome the fact that a major effort is being made, not only by politicians but also by people in business, to come together to discuss the issues. There is a direct link between political stability and economic success.

I welcome the fact that the Committee's work is progressing so well. We hope to be able to present our first major report in the not-too-distant future. The work that we have been doing, particularly in relation to Action for Community Employment (ACE), is very worthwhile. Indeed, I suggest that it has prompted the Training and Employment Agency to agree at long last to release its review. The timing is still a matter of some concern. It is important for the Forum to put pressure on the Government to make sure that the review is released.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I believe that, under such able chairmanship, we will forge ahead and bring forward constructive proposals.

Mr McCartney: I would like to join in the congratulations that have been extended to Mr Nesbitt, Mr McAlister and the other members of the Forum's Economy Committee. I want to make a number of brief comments on some of the issues that have been raised.

The Committee Chairman has got it absolutely correct when he states that if groups like the Confederation of British Industry, the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations that make an input into the economic life of Northern Ireland wish to interface with the political life of the province, the proper medium for doing so is this Forum. I know that an attempt to make direct contact with the negotiating members of the parties at the Stormont talks was looked upon by some parties with a degree of antipathy — and correctly so, there being a strong feeling that some of these groups, with their strong Government connections in various guises, could be seen as attempting to put pressure on the negotiations. That was not their function. None the less, as Mr Neeson has pointed out, there is an important function for them — to co-operate with and inform the politicians and help them to make the correct decisions about the future of the Northern Ireland economy, including employment. And the place for that is this Forum.

I would like to take up some of the matters that the Committee Vice-Chairman, Mr McAlister, mentioned. He talked about the need to educate the media, particularly the local newspapers, concerning the fact that there is a very positive side to the deliberations of the Forum. As he said, we had a debate on the economy generally. On that occasion I made a speech about the importance and significance of European Monetary Union, including the significance of the overall huge economic problem for the United Kingdom and our relations with the Republic. In that debate there were several contributions of real worth. Did we hear a single mention of it on radio or television? Did we read a single line about it in the local newspapers? No, because that would have stretched media imagination and perhaps forced them to use long-buried chromosomes, genes and other brain organisms. What they want is headlines: "Ulster Unionists Slam DUP", "Alliance Challenged by UK Unionists". They want something cheap that requires nothing more than a factual statement. To think, to be challenged, to comment — oh no, those are matters for the national dailies.

When I open the 'Belfast Telegraph' I see page after page of advertisements for Nissans, washing machines and various other items. The number of pages devoted to serious political comment that might educate the people of Northern Ireland, that might encourage in them a feeling of community, a feeling that their representatives were working for their benefit in the fields of education, health and employment, including ACE schemes, is zilch. These media are a disgrace as a community service, and it is time the Forum had a debate about their attitude, their responsibility and the fact that they are giving a completely false picture, not just of the parties here but of the amount of work that is done between all of them.

Mr Browne: This does not apply just to the Forum. The same thing is to be found in any council chamber, but especially that of Belfast City Council, which does not have the greatest of names amongst the media. When there are contentious issues on the agenda the media are there, but as soon as we start talking about things on which we are all agreed they disappear.

Mr McCartney: I am grateful for that intervention. Clearly, this media malaise is to be found at every level of public representation.

Mr Alcock: Would it not be a good idea to have the editors of these journalists' papers appearing before a Committee of the Forum, where they could explain their actions?

Mr McCartney: That might valuably be included in a motion about the attitude of the media to this body.

Let me return briefly to the issue of the economy, about which there has been a great deal of agreement across the board. We have Mr Paddy Roche, a professional economist, we have the Chairman of the Committee, a respected academic in the same field, and in the Ulster Unionist Party there is Dr Esmond Birnie. These people are in different parties, yet they co-operate and work for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland generally. They provide the expertise and the industry to challenge some of the propaganda about the benefits — there are some benefits — of co-operating with the Republic. The benefits are to be taken up and expanded. My complaint about all the propaganda concerns the way in which they have been grossly exaggerated by these groups in order to support a general political policy in the framework document. So it is important that we point out to the people, through economic discourse and through the work of these Committees, what is true and is for the benefit of the whole community and what is false Government economic propaganda to support a highly questionable political policy.

Mr Hussey: I want to refer very briefly to several themes arising from the evidence. With regard to one of these, let me remind the Committee that its members are mainly from the east of the province. I am disappointed that this theme has not found its way into what have been identified as key areas. Unemployment is not equally spread across Northern Ireland. I suggest to the Committee that some such matters could become definite sub-themes in key areas.

With the decline of primary and secondary industries, the importance of the service sector is, of course, increasing. I remind the Committee, for example, of the decline in primary-sector and secondary-sector employment in the Londonderry shirt industry and of the increasing importance of services, particularly to the west.

There are other factors — for instance, transport difficulties — but I request that, in particular, the area identified in item 8 of this paper be kept to the fore.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I should like briefly to support the remarks of the Members who have taken part in this short debate. Let me emphasize that I and my party were very concerned about the action of the Government in trying to bypass the Forum and arrange direct meetings through the talks process at Stormont. They hired a room and made arrangements at their convenience to meet the "Lodge of Seven". This is not an Orange Lodge or a Masonic Lodge but a group of the heads of bodies that co-operate in the field of the economy. My party and I have met the group and have made it clear to them that the Forum is the place to which they should be coming to meet the elected representatives of Northern Ireland. I have been given a firm undertaking that they will all be glad to give evidence to any Committee they are invited to.

12.00

I support Prof Alcock's suggestion that we might invite newspaper editors to one of the Forum Committees. Perhaps the most appropriate one would be the new Political Affairs Committee. A frank discussion might indicate why they are not committing themselves to faithful stewardship, to accurate reporting of events. Everything has been blamed on Drumcree.

Even the tourist industry says that it is losing out on local holidays, but a director has told me that that is completely untrue. He said "We hadn't a very good summer last year weatherwise, so people are saying that they intend to go where they will get some sunshine. We stayed at home last year, thinking that we would have some sun, but that didn't happen."

The BBC and UTV put people on to sell their lines. They put words into the mouths of those being interviewed. If someone says "I wouldn't say that" he is not put on. They make up a policy and then get people to interview. People on the street are picked only if they back the policy. A hundred might disagree, but they are not put on. The media have not provided a fair service.

Our workers are second to none. We have not had any problems on the shop-floor. There is harmony between capital and labour, and this has been a plus in getting our economy going. However, the Secretary of State's comment that our economic position was never better is incorrect. There may have been a drop in the unemployment figures, but we still have great economic problems. Mr Nesbitt and his Committee have come up with an excellent plan. If they can carry it out, dotting every "i" and stroking every "t", we will have a contribution second to none from the Forum.

I hope that the Committee will put specific emphasis on the matter of research. The first question that employers thinking about coming to Northern Ireland ask is "What research opportunities are available?" They need retraining facilities to fit people for particular tasks. It is disgraceful that there have been such drastic cuts in Queen's University's research programmes. The Government must give the people of Northern Ireland the training opportunities necessary for inward investment. If a prospective employer finds that we do not have the necessary research facilities he will go elsewhere. That hole must be plugged quickly if we are to retain interest in Northern Ireland as a place for investment.

Mr Speers: I too want to congratulate the Committee on its work.

As a member of the Agriculture Committee I am aware of the importance of research. Indeed, the industry has been a leader in this field for years. Much research and development work is now being privatized, and some of it scrubbed out. There is a very strong feeling that difficulties in the agriculture and related food sectors must be tackled. This is something that the Economy Committee should consider in depth. Our agriculture industry is a world-beater, and we have a duty to ensure that it is sustained.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I want to make a brief contribution. I agree with everything that has been said so far but would like to add a few comments.

In recent years the areas fortunate enough to have advance factories have been able to attract investment, particularly from the United States. Indeed, an announcement was made just yesterday. The Committee should urge the Industrial Development Board (IDB) to ensure that advance factories are provided in disadvantaged areas. I keep hearing about the vast number of jobs coming to West Belfast. The other day someone put the figure at 3,000. Well, I happen to represent West Belfast, but mine seems to be the forgotten area. None of those 3,000 jobs have come to the people I represent. Let me make it clear that I welcome employment to all parts of Northern Ireland, but the authorities must get it right. There is unemployment right across the board. The IDB should be forced to ensure that advance factories are placed in areas like east Belfast, south Belfast and Protestant west Belfast, to give us the same opportunity.

I want to refer to a point that any Member who has been to the United States may well have come across. Southern Ireland, with its carrot of 10% tax on profits, has a massive advantage over Northern Ireland. When I was over there Tony O'Reilly told me that he had wanted very much to build a plant in Northern Ireland but had gone to Dundalk because of tax concessions. I realize that we live by the rules of the United Kingdom, but I believe that a case should be made for special treatment because of Northern Ireland's very high unemployment figures.

Mr McCartney: While, in general terms, I endorse what Mr Smyth is saying, I must point out the danger of suggesting that Northern Ireland is different from the rest of the United Kingdom. The farming community would soon say that they could get bigger grants if all Ireland were treated as a unit. And there would be other groups. Hoteliers and others in the tourist industry would point out that they could get more money if they were in a certain situation. I hope that Mr Smyth agrees that, as a part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland gets benefits way beyond those available in the Republic and that, from time to time, we should share with the rest of the Kingdom the effects of the fact that in certain areas we are perhaps not so well off. The special 10% tax is viewed by economists as a rather dodgy idea, which could backfire very badly.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I take that point fully. So far as I am concerned, Northern Ireland will always remain part of the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, however, we are treated differently. I pray for the day when we will be treated the same way. Members of all 26 local authorities have been crying out about different treatment right across the board. What do they do? They provide playing-fields and bury the dead.

With regard to our being treated differently, I was delighted at the comments of Dr Paisley when I saw him on television as he gave evidence to a parliamentary Committee. We are treated differently when it comes to bombs and bullets. The damage in Manchester and London was unfortunate, but the people there were not asked to pay for it. Contrast that with what happens here. We were asked to take cuts of £135 million to pay for bomb damage. People have gone to the Education Minister, and I am going to meet Baroness Denton about the same thing. As Mr McCartney has said, different treatment could be dangerous, but we must use every means at our disposal to make it easier for industrialists to invest in Northern Ireland. Unemployment here is far higher than the clever figures that the Government throw up might make us believe.

I support the Committee and all its works.

Mr Bolton: Dr Paisley referred to the cuts in grants to Queen's University. I am sure that he will not object to my saying that the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster has suffered similar cuts. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: You will get quite a bit of agreement on that.

Mr Bolton: It is a little-known fact that the university is the largest employer in Coleraine — probably in my constituency of East Londonderry. These cuts will be very detrimental to employment in the area. I hope that Mr Nesbitt and his Committee will investigate why the constituency should be so high in the unemployment league.

Mr Nesbitt: The three key areas are to a certain extent included in the 15, and it is true that unemployment, specifically long-term unemployment, is not evenly spread. We have deliberated about targeting special areas. Certain areas such as North Down, despite the fact that they are not regarded as having special needs, include pockets of very high unemployment. In other words, the disparity is not just an east-west phenomenon.

Mr Bolton made a point about the University of Ulster in response to a remark by Dr Paisley about funds for research at the Queen's University of Belfast. Of course what applies to Queen's applies equally to the University of Ulster. There is one possible distinction, whether fair or unfair: Queen's University is an old-established red-brick university, and the University of Ulster is somewhat younger. As someone who has no bias in the matter, I will make no further comment!

12.15 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Some of us have been personally lobbied by Queen's University, including the Vice-Chancellor, on this issue. I have received no similar representations from the other quarter, which is why, in keeping with my promise, I mentioned only Queen's. But I agree that the University of Ulster should get the same treatment.

A Member: The polytech should be supported too.

Ms McWilliams: It is not a polytechnic.

Mr Nesbitt: The Member is wearing many hats. It is not a polytechnic. We heard an interesting joke earlier today: secondary schools have become high schools, grammar schools have become colleges, further education colleges have become higher education institutions, and higher education institutions have become universities. Those that were universities in the first place are now going back to calling their departments schools. Names keep changing.

The question of the Republic's 10% taxation was raised. It sounds tremendous from the point of view of the Southern economy, but a detailed examination would reveal

something different. The gross-domestic-product argument indicates that the Southern Ireland economy is much better than that of the United Kingdom, but GDP is a measure only of income, not of value or of purchasing power. When those aspects are taken into consideration, Northern Ireland is still 20% to 25% ahead of the rest of the island. Different tax rates in the unitary financial system of the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is a part, would be extremely difficult to justify. We have heard the valid argument that any advantageous treatment should apply to all regions of the United Kingdom requiring it. Other parts of the country are as disadvantaged as Northern Ireland, but parts of northern England, for example, are not so geographically distinct.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I agree with the Member's comments, which are along the same lines as those of Mr McCartney, but the Liverpools, the Birminghams and the Sheffields, where unemployment is running very high — not as high as ours, of course — could also be considered for a 10% tax bracket.

Mr Nesbitt: This is a very pertinent point currently being considered by the European Union. The Union does not want to have member states bidding against each other through various industrial incentives. One of the latest such moves is an attempt to introduce a different tax regime in the Basque region of Spain. But the Union says that in regularizing economic assistance for industry it will have to take account of certain matters. One of these is the 10% tax. The problem is being addressed not just in the United Kingdom but throughout the European Union.

The Chairman: Please remember that we are simply noting the Committee's progress and not debating the economy — something that we shall do when the Committee submits its report. I endorse Members' comments about Mr Nesbitt, Mr McAlister and the other members of the Committee. I am very pleased with the progress they are making in an area that is vital to Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

The Forum notes the work undertaken to date by Standing Committee E.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS (NORTHERN IRELAND)

The Chairman: With 17 March coming up very soon, the motion on St Patrick's Day is timely.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum calls on the authorities to make St Patrick's Day a public holiday in Northern Ireland.

The motion is simple and straightforward and certainly should not take up a lot of time.

St Patrick's Day is celebrated all over the world — and rightly so. Unfortunately, not everyone in Northern Ireland has the opportunity to join in the festivities. This is a cause for concern. For far too long a majority of manufacturing workers and, indeed, others have had to go out to work on St Patrick's Day, while bankers, civil servants and many others have enjoyed a day off — a day on which to celebrate our patron saint. In my 20 years in industry we have had to clock in on St Patrick's Day — we still do — while other members of society have had the day off to celebrate, to go to golf clubs, football matches or even the schools' rugby final at Ravenhill. This has always been considered rather unfair, but I hope that by bringing this motion before the Forum we can get sympathy and, more important, agreement among Members. I hope that eventually the powers that be will take notice and will enable all to enjoy fairness and equality.

St Patrick is known and respected world-wide. He is immediately associated with this part of the world as the person responsible for bringing Christianity to Ireland. He spent his time, I understand, mainly in Armagh, Antrim and Down and is said to be buried at Down Cathedral in Downpatrick.

Last St Patrick's Day many leading Northern Ireland figures, of all persuasions, celebrated at the White House in Washington with President Clinton. For the first time Sir John Kerr, the British Ambassador to the United States, hosted an Embassy dinner for all the visitors. I am reliably informed that Sir John is a Scotsman. We are delighted to have an Irish/Ulster-Scots connection who acknowledges Patrick as our patron saint and 17 March as a day worth celebrating. When St Patrick's Day does become a holiday for all of us in Northern Ireland we can come together to remember the saint as a symbol of Christianity acceptable to all traditions.

Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Secretary of State, must surely have a special affinity with our patron saint. It may be that he was named after him. If so, I am sure he is proud of his connection with such a highly respected Christian personage. Sir Patrick has announced his intention to retire shortly. If he were to agree to the request contained in this motion he could leave Northern Ireland knowing that, on one issue, he was able to unite all the people.

I seek the support of the Forum for the motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words after "the" and add

"Government to make St Patrick's Day, Orangeman's Day and Ulster Day statutory prescribed public holidays in Northern Ireland."

It may seem strange to some people, as it seems strange to me, that Orangeman's Day, whether it falls on the Twelfth or on a date near the Twelfth, is not a prescribed public holiday in Northern Ireland. Every year, Sir Patrick Mayhew, or someone else, has to make a proclamation setting the day aside. From 1926 the proclamation was made by the Governor of Northern Ireland, but now it falls to the Secretary of State. Why should the arrangement not be permanent? I am arguing that these three days should be statutory public holidays.

It is regrettable that St Patrick has been made a sectarian figure by the Roman Catholic Church, which claimed that he was a Roman Catholic. I have here a little document containing some answers given by Prof Barkley, a noted historian of the Irish Presbyterian Church. Here are some of the questions and answers:

"Was the early Irish church subject to Rome?"

"No, the independence of the early Irish church is one of the most indisputable facts in history."

"How did Rome come into Ireland?"

"Rome first gained an entrance into Ireland in the eleventh century, 600 years after Patrick. When the Danes, who had settled in Ireland, became Christian they refused to acknowledge the authority and jurisdiction of Patrick's church and sent their bishops to be consecrated as Roman Catholic bishops."

"How did Rome gain her hold on the whole of Ireland?"

"Rome gained her hold on the whole of Ireland because in 1155 Pope Adrian IV — an Englishman — gave King Henry II of England permission to carry out the conquest of Ireland for the enlarging of the bounds of the Roman Catholic church."

That proves conclusively that the Celtic church was not in union with Rome.

I regret that Patrick has been made a sectarian figure, but I am reminded of a very interesting little book, which I hope all Members of the Forum, including the Member who proposed the Alliance motion, have read — 'Ulster Sails West'. The writer says that, standing in New York on St Patrick's Day, he was amazed to see prominent Unionist and Loyalist leaders hailed on banners as Hibernians. The Hibernians stole Unionists and Loyalists and represented them as people who wanted a united Ireland. God forbid that Ian Paisley's photograph should ever be on a Hibernian banner and that people should be told that I stood for a united Ireland.

Patrick brought the Bible Gospel. In his works — the Confession, the Epistle and the Hymn — one finds set forth the simple Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I happen to believe that we should have a public holiday on St Patrick's Day. We should not allow St Patrick to be sectarianized by anyone. All people who love the simple Gospel of Christ should honour him in this way.

Orangeman's Day is the basis of our constitutional settlement — the Williamite Revolution settlement. We are here now because of what happened on that great day. It is a day on which all who value the constitution of the United Kingdom — not just the constitution of Northern Ireland but the constitution of the United Kingdom — should honour that event. It should be a public holiday.

Then the founding of this state came about by the signing of the Covenant, so that day too is very important. Immediately people will say "You are being sectarian now." Am I? Who signed the Ulster Covenant? The premier Roman Catholic peer of England, the Duke of Norfolk. Well, if it was good enough for the Duke of Norfolk to sign, it is good enough for us to celebrate with a public holiday.

We should proceed with speed to the Minister with this message about all these days. I hope that the Alliance Members will be broad enough in their minds. They have always preached the need for a truly catholic spirit. I am broad enough in my mind to say that St Patrick's Day, Orangeman's Day and the day that lies at the foundation of our province should be public holidays. I do not like the American connotations. I have been invited to the White House, but I will not be going on 17 March to drink green beer. Indeed, I do not drink any sort of beer. It is not my intention to take part in what has become a very strange phenomenon in the United States of America. But I do welcome the fact that Sir John Kerr, who is an Ulster-Scot — he told me he came from those that rustled cattle across the border — said to me "Why should not the British Embassy, as well as everybody else, claim and have a dinner in honour of him?" And I might say that his invitation has been received with great enthusiasm — everybody wants to go to the British Embassy. I am sorry that I cannot accept because, believe it or not, the Free Presbyterian Church came into existence on 17 March, so I have duties at home.

12.30 pm

We should have public holidays on these three very important days, which mark the bringing of Christianity to this island, the laying of the constitutional basis of the United Kingdom and this little province's birth, through the leadership of Lord Carson of immortal memory.

Mr Foster: I rise to support the DUP amendment.

It has been documented very well — and I made the point a couple of weeks ago when I spoke on the North Report — that Orangeman's Day, 12 July, which is so dear to those of us who regard it as very important to remember the defeat of that despotic king at the Battle of the Boyne, was not just an Irish thing but had a European aspect as well. So far as Ulster Day is concerned, the solemn league and covenant too has been well documented, and I support that idea whole-heartedly also.

With regard to St Patrick, no doubt he is very near and dear to the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, if not the whole island. If we believe in the Scriptures, we are part of the Patrick who loved the Scriptures so well, kindling a great light, illuminating the world, shining over the whole earth. We are aware that Patrick was brought in slavery to Ireland from Romanized Britain and sold to a Cruthinic chief called Milchu, who used him to

tend his flocks around Mount Slemish in Antrim. Thus Patrick came not among the Gaels proper but among the Cruthins. It is said that after six years of slavery he escaped but returned about the year 432 to preach the Gospel.

I understand too that among St Patrick's first converts were Bronach, a daughter of Milchu, and her son Mochaoi. Mochaoi was to found the great monastery of Nendrum on Mahee Island in Lough Cuan — Strangford Lough actually. So legends about St Patrick firmly place County Down as the cradle of Christianity in Ireland. History states that Patrick founded it in Armagh around the year 444. The selection of a site so close to Emain Macha would suggest that the Ulster capital was still the most powerful over-kingdom in Ireland at that time.

We are aware that the teachings of St Patrick were those of our Lord and His Apostles and contained nothing contrary to the Scriptures. We know that from his writings which are preserved in Trinity College, Dublin. We are also aware that his father was a deacon, and his grandfather a priest. He strove, he visited the most remote places in Ireland, he baptized converts, he built churches, he ordained clergy and he consecrated bishops. It is so evident, as history relates, that St Patrick was a hallowed person who should get the recognition, respect and reverence that a great man such as he is entitled to. Our churches recognize it. The regiments of our Army recognize it each St Patrick's Day. The wonderful 'St Patrick's Breastplate' is a lovely and very popular hymn. So, I subscribe to the request that St Patrick's Day, along with the other two days referred to — Orangeman's Day and Ulster Day — be made a public holiday.

How does St Patrick's Day relate to the overall scene with regard to patron saints in the British Isles? I understand that the saints of Wales, Scotland and England have but bank holidays in recognition. There is, I am quite sure, no compunction at all in any of us in Northern Ireland about recognizing and acknowledging our patron saint. We are very proud too that the cross of St Patrick is embodied in the Union flag and so emphasizes the affinity of the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh in this family of Britons on these British Isles. We are so proud of that tremendous Union. The flag is the embodiment not of sentiment but of history. St Patrick is very dear to us, 12 July is a day of remembrance and thanksgiving, and Ulster Day, which marks the solemn league and covenant, is also very dear to us. They all mean so much to the people of Northern Ireland.

I support the amendment.

Ms McWilliams: We also agree that 12 July should be a public holiday. Dr Paisley has informed us that the Secretary of State has to declare it a public holiday each year. I suppose we will all have to change our diaries, where, in brackets, it is noted as a public holiday. We want to see it remaining as such and, indeed, would like to see St Patrick's Day noted similarly.

We have three reasons for suggesting this. It would be an admirable way of symbolizing our common ownership of St Patrick. It would help, we feel, to desectarianize and deghettoize the figure-head most closely associated with the country in the minds, as we have heard from Mr McCarthy, of the international community. And given that Slemish was

amongst his most formative experiences, it seems churlish not to recognize his contribution to our way of life by declaring St Patrick's Day a public holiday.

I would like to read something that St Paul said in his letter to Galatians (this is from the Authorized Version):

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

In a similar spirit we in Northern Ireland should be able to say with St Patrick "There is neither Prod nor Taig, neither Unionist nor Nationalist, neither the Shankill nor the Falls: for you all share a common heritage." And what better way of saying that than by declaring St Patrick's Day a public holiday, a day on which we are reminded of what we share and of what, indeed, has the potential to bring us together rather than pull us apart?

Finally, St Patrick's Day should be a public holiday because, as we have heard from Mr McCarthy, it might help a group of citizens to be less dishonest about what they do on that day. As Members know, the schools' rugby final is held at Ravenhill every 17 March, and the schools get a recognized half-day to attend. But the adults who go — and I assume that they are not all self-employed or unemployed — have either to take a sick day or to absent themselves from work. To relieve them of guilt and make them more honest citizens, which no doubt would be good for them and good for all of us — society ought to encourage citizens not to be so duplicitous about what they do on St Patrick's Day — let us rid ourselves of these unnecessary ambiguities and, for the good of everyone, declare St Patrick's Day a public holiday.

We support the Alliance Party motion.

Mr Weir: I rise gladly to support the DUP amendment. The reason for my support is that the three days referred to celebrate events and people that should be special to everyone in Northern Ireland, whether Protestant, Catholic or of no religion.

As has been said, it is a great shame that St Patrick has at times been associated purely with the Nationalist or Catholic community. His ethos is one that every citizen of Northern Ireland should embrace. Ms McWilliams mentioned the Schools' Cup final. One of the abiding memories of my youth is of going to Ravenhill, where, on a number of occasions, I was able to cheer my local school, Bangor Grammar, to victory.

A Member: Just once.

Mr Weir: I think it was quite often. At least I was at my local school. Indeed, I look forward to cheering on Bangor Grammar to another victory this year.

It is a pity that the Unionist community does not embrace St Patrick more, because, as has been said by Dr Paisley, his role really was to bring Christianity to Ireland. I am very glad that the education committee of the Orange Order is soon to publish a book on St Patrick. This will help to dispel many of the myths. Indeed, it has often been said that if St Patrick were in Northern Ireland today the only group that would not welcome him in any

fashion is Sinn Fein/IRA, which would meet him with a taunt of "Brits out". It is good for us as a community to welcome the prospect of a bank holiday and, indeed, a public holiday on St Patrick's Day.

But Orangemen's Day (12 July) and Ulster Day should also be celebrated by all the citizens of Northern Ireland. The Williamite settlement, as anybody who has studied history will understand, has been shown to be the turning-point in British history that secured the constitution. The events of the earlier part of that century, which pushed the United Kingdom towards a democratic constitutional way forward, were really secured by the Glorious Revolution. As Mr Foster has said, those events had a major role in Europe in that they helped to stop the tyrannical expansion of Louis XIV and to give the prospect of democracy and freedom to the people of Europe. That being the case, I believe that the day is one that all of us should be willing to celebrate.

Finally, there is Ulster Day and the securing of the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Irrespective of political viewpoint or religion, it is commonly accepted — indeed, the case has been strongly proven — that the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been of great economic, social and political benefit to all the citizens of this province.

All three are days of which we should find common ownership and which we should celebrate together. I have great pleasure in supporting the DUP amendment.

Mr Casey: I will not detain the Forum very long. If we do succeed in having St Patrick's Day declared a public holiday, it will be a great opportunity for all the people of Northern Ireland to join in celebrating a special day that is not divisive. Maybe we could see the Orange Order and the Hibernians marching as one.

Mr Peter Robinson: Down Garvaghy Road.

Mr Casey: That would be a wonderful sight. We were talking earlier about the tourist trade. Tourists might come from all over the world to see such a special phenomenon. Although I am very reluctant to equate our patron saint with politics or anything else divisive —

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Casey: No. Some Members have just derided the idea of the two Orders marching together, so I am not going to give way.

12.45 pm

I have no problem with the 12 July's being declared a holiday either. It has always been recognized in industry and commerce as a holiday, so to have it formalized would not inflict hardship on anybody. Certainly, if sections of the community feel that it is a special day to them, that is fine. I do not have any objections. In respect of Ulster Day, I did not even know it existed until this morning. We may have a bit of a problem with that because of the two different jurisdictions. I do not know whether we would have the right to declare that

a public holiday. What I am suggesting is that we might consult with the Government of the Republic so that both jurisdictions could declare it a public holiday. That would be another step in the right direction.

I wholeheartedly support the Alliance motion. With regard to the amendment, I do not have any objections to Orangeman's Day, and if we were to consult with the Government of the Republic and have Ulster Day declared a public holiday, I would agree with that as well.

Mr Gibson: I support the DUP amendment. First of all, we should realize that in recognizing St Patrick's Day we acknowledge the wealth of work done by the early Celtic church. Its influence spread not just throughout Ireland but across the northern part of Great Britain and into established universities and outlets for Celtic influence right across northern Europe. In fact, there was a well-established Celtic trail which went all the way down to Switzerland. It has never been recognized — nor was it allowed to be recognized by the Roman Catholic church system — that there was a tremendous Celtic influence as a result of St Patrick and his endeavours in this island, and everyone should recognize that.

When we talk about 12 July and about the battles that established the constitutional settlement in these islands we should recognize that that was a very important point in the birth, or the pushing forward, of democracy. That was the great seed-bed for the Mother of Parliaments. Therefore, in recognition of this, this proposal should be extended to allow for a holiday in the whole of the British Isles. We have offered that constitutional system as a pattern for democracy throughout the world, and much of the world has copied — and indeed has been glad to copy — the system that developed as a result of that contest.

It was a European contest which was fought at Aughrim, Enniskillen and on the walls of the Maiden City, never mind the green, grassy slopes. It was a contest of democracy versus a form of hypocrisy. Naturally, any Ulsterman is proud of this day, and it goes without saying that retaining that democratic spirit which has pervaded the whole of this society means that Ulster should have its own special day.

I support the amendment.

Mr McFarland: For many hundreds of years, up until 1922, St Patrick was the widely accepted patron saint of Ireland — accepted by all sections of the community. I agree with Dr Paisley that attempts have been made since that time to politicize St Patrick.

We do, of course, sit in the Forum under the cross of St Patrick on the Union flag. The Irish regiments, for example — and the Chairman will know this well — hand out the shamrock every St Patrick's Day, and that is a tradition that has gone on for years and years.

If you go to the central lobby of the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster and look up you will see extremely fine gold mosaics of four saints — St Patrick, St David, St George and St Andrew. They stand there with St Patrick representing Ireland as it was before partition. This is a key part of our history, and I agree that both sections of the community should feel that they own St Patrick.

Mr King: Would my Friend not agree that an ideal way of rehabilitating St Patrick would be through the restoration of the Order of St Patrick? There are many Members in the Chamber who, I am sure, would be ideal candidates for membership of that. It is like the Order of the Garter and it applies to Ireland. Perhaps we could have a campaign to get that ancient and venerable Order restored.

Mr McFarland: My Friend has made a useful suggestion. May I also mention briefly 17 March and the Ulster Schools' Cup Final. As someone who has played on a cup-winning Campbell College side, I strongly support — *[Interruption]*

I have a problem because Bangor Grammar School in my adopted constituency is to play Campbell College shortly in the next round. So I have a bit of thinking to do there.

The Twelfth holiday is also part of our history and it is important. I am sure I am not the only one in the Forum who was surprised to learn that it is not an officially-designated public holiday, and Dr Paisley is right: we need to take steps to rectify that — that, of course, could be a campaign for the non-existent media to take up on our behalf! Ulster Day is obviously important to our history as well.

Whilst I commend the Alliance motion, I support the amendment wholeheartedly.

Mr Poots: I welcome this debate and support the amendment that has been moved by my party Leader. The Alliance Party can do nothing but back the amendment as there is only a slight addition to its motion. As we have been magnanimous enough to support them on the St Patrick's Day issue I am sure Alliance Members will support us with regard to Orangeman's Day. As they are all going on holiday at that time of the year anyway, they are bound to want it to be a public holiday.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The House of Lords sits on 12 July.

Mr Poots: Many legends obscure the facts surrounding St Patrick. In Irish folklore, he emerges as a cross between Santa Claus and a leprechaun. In reality, Patrick was one of the most self-sacrificing, determined missionaries that the Christian church ever had. Legend and folklore would have us believe that Patrick was a venerable Roman Catholic saint, that he was responsible for driving snakes out of Ireland and that he was a white-bearded, miracle-working, spell-casting magician. The reality is that the only snake Patrick ever got rid of from Ireland was the original serpent — the devil.

In his writings St Patrick said

"I am greatly a debtor to God who has bestowed His grace so largely upon me that multitudes were born to God through me. The Irish, who had never had the knowledge of God and worshipped only idols and unclean things, have lately become the people of the Lord and are called the sons of God."

St Patrick was a Bible-believing, Gospel-preaching Christian. He believed in the sound Gospel truth that you have to be born again and accept the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour, and that is what he preached. He did not believe in worshipping idols. At that time he taught the Druids the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He believed in

the sound teachings of the Word of God and did not believe in church traditions. He was not sent here by any bishop. He was called by God to come over to Ireland, and he preached the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mr Shannon: Would the Member agree that if St Patrick were to come back today and if he was at one of the St Patrick's Day parades, he would be shocked to the core to find that there were "Free the IRA prisoners" floats taking part in the parades and pro-United Ireland slogans there as well? That is a fact. They have done forgotten about the Christianity viewpoint and brought the Gaelic-Irish, political issue to the fore in the St Patrick's Day parades, and that is what we do not want to see — he is our St Patrick as much as he is theirs.

Mr Poots: I know that Patrick would have rejected violence of all kinds from whatever source and, as a Christian, would have believed in peaceful ways of doing things.

The three days that have been mentioned are all important ones in our history, and if they were managed properly they could bring in a great deal of tourism. We get a lot of bad publicity over 12 July when, in fact, we should be getting thousands of people coming here to see the spectacle that takes place. Other countries have festivals which bring in tourists, yet there are certain people in this country who wish to turn tourists away. They should be coming here to see our great festivals.

I support the DUP amendment.

The Chairman: I suggest that we break now for lunch. I hope that Members will be back at 2 o'clock sharp.

The meeting was suspended at 12.54 pm and resumed at 2.02 pm.

The Chairman: I am grateful to those who have returned promptly. It is important that we should make the best use of our time. I am sorry if this sounds rather military, but it is a habit of a lifetime.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: When I read the Alliance Party's motion I was reminded of the words of William Perkins, with whom Dr Paisley is no doubt familiar. When people were talking about abolishing saints'' days he based his argument on Scripture:

"Go to the ant thou sluggard".

I appeal to the Alliance Party to support the DUP amendment in the interests of parity of esteem and of promoting the dialogue and understanding that are so important to that party and many others. To ask merely that a particular day which is perceived to be the domain of one section of the community be made a public holiday is to promote division. The Alliance Party should therefore reconsider its position. The amendment seeks to facilitate all the people of Northern Ireland in its wide-ranging approach.

Patrick, in his writings, speaks about biblical Christianity. Any person in Northern Ireland who subscribes to biblical Christianity will have no hesitation in accepting such a holiday. Also, those who subscribe to the principle of democracy and constitutional government will be happy to agree to a holiday on 12 July, for it too is not the domain of just one section of the community. With regard to Ulster Day and the founding of the state of Northern Ireland, our proposal should be gladly welcomed by all the people of the province.

I therefore ask the Alliance Party to support the DUP amendment and not to go for anything that is divisive and sectarian.

Mr McCarthy: It is extremely sad that the DUP has once again introduced sectarianism into what —

Several Members: Rubbish.

Mr McCarthy: If Members had listened to the first DUP representative who spoke they would realize that what he said was sectarian from start to finish.

The Alliance Party's motion is straightforward. In my presentation I spoke of Christianity among all people. The DUP amendment is divisive and a distraction from the spirit in which my proposal was put forward. We would have no objection to formalizing 12 July as a statutory public holiday. The Twelfth and 13th have always been holidays in Northern Ireland. The thrust of my motion is to ensure that St Patrick's Day is seen as belonging to all the people of the province. I feel very strongly that this simple proposition should be supported by everyone in the Forum. It is disappointing that half the Members are not here. A proposal supported by a reasonably full House would stand a better chance of a favourable response from the authorities.

The Chairman: I suggest that the decision be taken by show of hands.

Mr Morrow: Surely, Mr Chairman, you cannot do that. Or can you? Surely the three-minute Rule applies.

The Chairman: Yes, if there is to be a recorded vote. Incidentally, it is very good to see a few Unionists here now.

Mr Dodds: I too welcome the Unionists.

With regard to the three-minute interval, surely whether it is to be a recorded vote or a decision by show of hands is immaterial. Regardless of the procedure used, notice should be given in the normal way so that Members within the precincts may be aware that a Question has been put.

The Chairman: You are probably right.

Is a show of hands acceptable?

Members indicated assent.

Question put: That the amendment be made.

The Ayes and Noes having been registered by show of hands, the Chairman declared the Ayes to be in excess of the required majority.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum calls on the Government to make Saint Patrick's Day, Orangeman's Day and Ulster Day statutory prescribed public holidays in Northern Ireland.

NEWCASTLE DISEASE

The Chairman: The next business is the motion on Newcastle disease, which used to be called fowl pest.

Mr Poots: In place of the motion on the Order Paper we now have a composite motion, which, I understand, has the backing of the Ulster Unionist Party. The revised version will be available shortly.

I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum expresses its concern at the outbreak of Newcastle disease in several of Northern Ireland's poultry flocks and urges the Department of Agriculture to continue to take all necessary steps to arrest the spread of the disease and preserve the high health status of the Northern Ireland poultry industry.

The poultry industry has been rocked by the outbreak of Newcastle disease, or fowl pest, which took hold almost three weeks ago. This is the worst health crisis of this nature in the poultry industry since 1973. A small outbreak occurred in 1991, but the strain was not as virulent as the current one — PMV 1 — which is incredibly infectious and can be carried by wild birds that do not actually have the disease themselves but are merely agents. It can also be carried on lorries and can be airborne. The windy weather that we have had has not made it any easier to prevent the disease from spreading. The implications for the poultry industry are potentially disastrous.

At the outset I would like to make it clear that there is no question of this disease being passed to humans. The Chief Veterinary Officer has gone to great lengths to reassure the public that there is no such danger. No scientist has placed any question mark against that statement.

2.15 pm

The poultry industry in Northern Ireland has grown rapidly over the past 20 years. Gone are the days when every farmer's wife kept a few hens picking around the stack-yard,

feeding them on boiled potato skins. Massive new units which can house tens of thousands of birds have been built. The table-egg sector has over 4 million birds laying £45 million worth of eggs at farm-gate prices. The broiler industry has 8.5 million birds with a farm-gate value of £94 million. A further 1.7 million birds are laying hatching eggs for both home and export markets. There can be over one million other birds such as turkeys and geese, depending on the season. A massive amount of value-added business takes place which involves preparing, and even pre-cooking, chickens so all the housewife has to do is pop them into the oven. Over one million chicken feet are exported to China — do not ask me what they do with them. Five thousand people are employed in this multi-million pound industry and it is, therefore, imperative that it gets full backing from the Department of Agriculture.

Newcastle disease can go through a flock at horrendous speed. Hens start hanging their heads; they have respiratory problems; they start scouring and they quickly die. The first outbreak of this disease took place on the shores of Lough Neagh, at Lurgan; it spread rapidly to Dungannon, Larne, Coagh, Ballyronan, Newtownards, Glarryford, Randalstown and Cloughmills. Four different farms have been involved and, regrettably, 450,000 birds have had to be destroyed. To put this into perspective, there are 15 million birds in Northern Ireland at any given time, and that means that 3% of the entire flock has had to be destroyed. They have all been rendered and none has entered the food-chain.

It is believed that the origin of the current outbreak was in England. There is an inoculation programme there but only for parent stock. Six units in England developed the disease prior to the outbreak in Northern Ireland. Steps taken to halt the spread of the disease have included a total closed-farm policy. Visitors are prohibited, all delivery vehicles are scrutinized, and there are restriction zones of 10 kilometres around sites where the disease is present. Free-range birds are being kept closed in and, latterly, a vaccination programme has commenced. The vaccine takes some 48 hours to act, and the veterinary service believes that once all flocks have been vaccinated, the disease should stop spreading.

Whilst the industry has had no real option but to initiate a vaccination programme, it will probably seek to regain disease-free status through good husbandry practice in the future. This will mean discontinuing the vaccination of birds at some stage. The reason for this is that greater restrictions can be applied to the importation of poultry from other parts of Europe — poultry which have other diseases that we are free of. Disease-free status is also a great selling point for those involved in hatching eggs for the European market.

The veterinary service and the industry are to be congratulated for the way they have co-operated in taking evasive action to slow down and, we hope, stop the spread of this disease. All have worked around the clock in a harmonious fashion. Producers who have been victims of this disease should be compensated in full for their loss. The disease is such a lethal killer that between the time a farmer first discovers it and the time he gets the house cleared out, he can have lost literally thousands of birds. Insurance cover only pays out on living birds, but there is a three-month decontamination period before farmers can restock. Many farmers have borrowed large amounts of capital to build poultry units. These people have shown initiative and are at the very heart of our economy. They cannot be left to hang.

Finally, as far as possible, grain should be kept in closed silos. Lorries should be loaded under cover so as to prevent wild birds having an opportunity to spread disease in our poultry flock.

Mr David Campbell: I thank Mr Poots for introducing this motion.

It is, however, with sadness that we have yet another agri-health scare to debate. As Mr Poots said, we should not take newspaper reports that hundreds of thousands of birds are being slaughtered out of context. We have to look at this disease in the context of the 15 million bird population in Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Unionist Party thanks Mr Poots and his party for agreeing the composite motion.

We wish to make the point that the outbreak of Newcastle disease was confined to several flocks. The decisive action taken by the Department of Agriculture has ensured that outbreaks have been confined to nine. While one might anticipate a further outbreak or two, one hopes that, as a result of the vaccination programme that is being introduced, the disease will now be brought rapidly under control and Northern Ireland's status as a Newcastle disease-free area will be restored, and restored quickly.

Mr Poots indicated the importance of the poultry-meat and egg sector to Northern Ireland's agriculture, and Members will recall that our beef industry is worth some £450 million a year. The poultry-meat and egg sector contributes some £310 million per year, so it is an extremely significant portion of our agriculture industry, employing, in primary production and processing, some 5,500 people. So it is right and proper that something is done about this disease which has the potential, if not brought under control, to devastate the industry. That is why the Department has acted decisively and quickly and is bringing it under control.

On a wider scene it is encouraging to look at United Kingdom meat consumption over the past six months. The figures indicate that despite the BSE crisis, and despite the best efforts, if you like, of the vegetarian lobby, meat consumption has continued to rise. Poultry-meat consumption, in particular, has risen far in advance of other meats and now makes up 38% of total meat production. That is significant in itself. My Colleague, Mr Junkin, who is a primary producer — a broiler producer — will comment further. He is the resident expert on poultry on the Agriculture Committee, and I look forward to his comments.

I merely rise to support the motion. I can assure Members that the Agriculture Committee continues to debate this issue. We discussed it at length yesterday. Mr Junkin has a proposal, if he is permitted to make it, on a specific aspect of this disease which we would like the Agriculture Committee to look at in more detail. It concerns whether flocks in Northern Ireland should be vaccinated as of right.

I support the motion.

The Chairman: I shall take the unusual step of calling Mr Junkin next so that we may hear his proposal.

Mr Junkin: Newcastle disease struck poultry flocks in Northern Ireland in 1973 when there were over 30 occurrences before it was controlled by a programme of selective vaccination. At that time, it appeared to be windborne and so the Department of Agriculture vaccinated only those flocks down wind of the early cases. This was successful and vaccination was soon phased out again.

We have had 24 Newcastle disease-free years since — a veritable lifetime. Our Newcastle virus-free status has had full European recognition, which has allowed us to keep dirty vehicles and equipment out on the other side of our ports, and that, in turn, has helped to prevent the ingress of many other European poultry ailments that are stacked up over there.

This has been of incalculable financial benefit to our flock farmers. But this year, as we have heard and read about, a very virulent strain of fowl pest, as you, Mr Chairman, have called it, took hold first at Lurgan and then spread in a rather random way across half of the province. This time it does not appear to be windborne but rather spread by the native wild birds which are non-affected carriers of the virus.

Weather watchers think that it may have been brought to our shores by migratory wild fowl on an easterly wind from last month's outbreaks at Tewkesbury, Hereford and Burgess Hill. In those outbreaks 230,000 birds had to be put down, including turkeys. But it could easily have come from Finland, Sweden or Denmark where they also have had recent infections of fowl pest.

Anyway, we got it and the industry has coped marvellously well given the very virulent nature of this present strain. Staff in the Department of Agriculture have worked ceaselessly in conjunction with the processors, first of all to understand and, secondly, to contain the disease. I have to mention the Ulster Farmers' Union, specifically. That man, Greer McCollum, has an awful lot on his shoulders this year.

There have been about eight outbreaks so far, with another two farms suspect as of yesterday evening. A programme of immediate vaccination for chickens in the surveillance zones is already underway — 12 million doses of vaccine have been purchased — and after two or three days their immune systems will be fully protected or as fully protected as it is possible to be. I have to say that in Holland —a country where there is intensive poultry production — the vaccine has occasionally been known to fail.

The vaccine comes in two forms — live and dead. The live vaccine can be administered, very simply, via a fogging unit straight into a poultry house, and the chickens absorb it through their lung linings and their eye fluids. It has to be repeated after three weeks and, thereafter, every eight weeks on any particular flock. The dead vaccine is administered by a leg injection of grown birds, at around 18 weeks. It provides immunity for life and also transfers immunity, through the egg, to the next generation in the breeding fowl. The next generation — usually broilers — will maintain this immunity for about 30 days only but, as they are to be slaughtered at around 42 days, it will not have a significant effect and there will be no risk of their catching the disease.

I found out last night that there are many small backyard flocks throughout the province — in cities, villages and even on farms — and nobody ever takes the trouble to note this on the census form. There is no public record of these small flocks, but the processing industry is very anxious to find out where they are. I understand that they will administer a vaccine, free of charge, to those flocks in order to safeguard the rest of the Northern Ireland poultry industry. We do not want to leave a residue of fowl pest in somebody's backyard and have it flare up again in six months' time.

There are costs involved in vaccination. Live vaccine will cause a reaction in layers which results in a temporary 2% to 20% reduction in the egg-laying rate and, of course, this happens every three to eight weeks.

The injecting of dead vaccine is usually done by a person with an automatic injector who administers an oil-based product directly into the chicken's leg, which is held firmly by another operator. In Great Britain this is a routine procedure because they vaccinate there as a matter of course. All too frequently, the person holding the chickens — two or three in each hand — finds that his or her own fingers get a shot of vaccine from the needle every now and again. The oil-based injection reacts very viciously with human flesh and it is very common for affected fingers subsequently to have to be amputated. Because of the cost of accident insurance, farmers over there try to do as much of the job as possible. In one well-documented English case, a farmer's wife, who tries to save money for her husband by holding the chickens for him, has only two fingers left. It is as serious as that.

However, as vaccination is voluntary at present, no legislation needs to be enacted. It is organized in a prophylactic manner and could easily be phased out when the risk appears to have subsided. The present application should see this current outbreak receding in another week or so after, unfortunately, another three or four flocks going down.

2.30 pm

But there is a cost implication. The cost of vaccination for a laying hen can be justified financially and over a long laying cycle is, therefore, minimal. But half a penny per broiler — farmers in Northern Ireland have not even been covering their costs for the last four or five years — is too much to ask. The Great Britain farmer is receiving approximately 20 pence more per broiler than the Ulster processors are paying, so the Great Britain man has a lot more room to manoeuvre. The Northern Ireland man just does not have the profit to pay for this.

The vaccination issue, which has already been mentioned by Mr David Campbell, is one that should be explored by the Agriculture Committee because it has serious implications for our disease status in the future, balanced against our image abroad. I propose that Agriculture Committee members debate it at some future date when they redd up some of the pressing urgent business.

The most critical and important issue is that of food safety. That is what is on the lips of the people heading out last night and tonight to buy the groceries for the weekend. Consumers' safety is paramount and the consumer is very confused over BSE in cattle because of the vast amount of media attention. I am somewhat glad to say that there is not an

awful lot of media attention this afternoon, and that may be some help. But there are numerous fowl pest infections world-wide. It cannot affect humans. The only people who could possibly be affected by fowl pest are those currently working in poultry houses where there are outbreaks and those who are involved in slaughter and so on. The worst that can happen to them is that they get temporary flu-like symptoms that go away in a couple of days.

No one has ever been affected by eating infected chicken because the virus is so easily spotted on the farm by the farmer. The chicken catchers will not lift a sick bird, the people removing birds from the crates at the factory will discard a sick bird if they find one and on the killing line, the veterinary inspectors will surely spot anything that is left. What I am saying is that there is a not a shred of evidence to say that fowl pest affects humans via the food-chain. We owe it to the process workers, the farmers and the poultry industry leaders to be positive about the quality of Northern Ireland poultry. It is the envy of our competitors.

I am pleased to support the motion.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Junkin. You were suggesting that there are some actions which could be taken by the Department of Agriculture. Am I right in thinking that?

Mr Junkin: No, by the Agriculture Committee.

The Chairman: You do not want me to write to the Minister for Agriculture or do anything to bring this to attention.

Mr Junkin: Perhaps Members would agree to sending a letter to the Department commending it on the hard work and long hours that its staff have put in and on the success rate in containing this to a small number of flocks — currently only about eight, instead of 36, as on the last occasion.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Junkin. I thought that it would be a good idea to say "Well done". We usually write to Departments to say "Badly done".

Mr Casey: I would like to congratulate Mr Junkin on his presentation.

We all realize that the agriculture industry is the key one in Northern Ireland and provides employment for quite a sizeable work-force. Recently, we have seen this industry brought to its knees by the BSE crisis. The potato sector is in difficulties, as is the pig sector. Now the onset of Newcastle disease among poultry — and this is worst outbreak in over 20 years — is another dagger in the heart of the farming industry.

The outbreak will affect not only the farming industry but also the extensive poultry processing industry which makes a sizeable contribution to our export markets. To date Newcastle disease has struck in Lurgan, Dungannon, Larne, Coagh, Newtownards, Glarryford and Randalstown, and, according to Mr Junkin, there were some more suspected outbreaks last night. Over 0.5 million birds have been affected already. There may be many reasons for the suddenness of the appearance of this disease, which we should leave for the veterinary service to determine. However, we have been assured that Newcastle disease is not a risk to human health. It must not be equated to the recent BSE crisis. This is a malady that affects

poultry, and it is not transmissible to humans. There is no risk to human health from eating poultry or eggs.

In order to control the outbreak the industry is co-operating closely with the Department of Agriculture to take whatever steps necessary to beat the disease. A voluntary vaccination programme which began this Wednesday is now ongoing and will greatly assist in slowing down the further spread of fowl pest. The main processors have encouraged their suppliers to vaccinate. To date, over two million birds have been vaccinated, and this is set to continue if necessary. Further measures that poultry producers employ include strict quality and hygiene procedures such as a disinfecting system for poultry transportation vehicles to and from production areas.

The Ulster Farmers' Union has recently indicated that if the vaccination-free status that Northern Ireland has at present is lifted and is lost permanently, it will be perfectly legal for other member states to export birds and hatched eggs to Northern Ireland. This would have a devastating and lasting effect on our poultry industry. It would introduce other harmful diseases which we are free from at the moment because of the good husbandry of the industry and the work of the Department of Agriculture. Therefore, it is vital that the industry accommodates whatever action is necessary to control the disease on the advice of the Department. The consequences and the loss of jobs, the loss of major sums of capital invested in the poultry business and the gradual displacement of our local poultry industry to distant suppliers is cause for deep concern. We will encourage the Department of Agriculture to take whatever steps are necessary to curb this disease and ensure that public confidence in poultry products is kept at a buoyant level.

We are very glad to support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I rise to support this motion. Contrary to the rumour that seems to be going around the country at the present time, may I state quite categorically that the cause of Newcastle disease is not Drumcree.

The outbreak of Newcastle disease is the latest problem to affect the farming community in the province. We have had the BSE crisis, which has had a major effect upon the farming industry. The potato crisis followed very hot on the heels of that, with prices the lowest they have been for years. Now, to follow that, we have Newcastle disease, which has led to the slaughter of some 500,000 birds out of total of 15 million. And just yesterday we had another outbreak in Cloughmills.

May I touch upon three points that are important. I thank Mr Junkin for his comments. As well as being on the coal-quay, so to speak, his comments are very appropriate to the industry itself. The Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland, as Mr Poots has said, will only pay out money for the birds that are not dead. In other words, if you find so many birds dead and perhaps only 10% are left out of a flock of 15,000 or 20,000, the Department will only pay for the ones that are still living but are probably going to die. We should be asking the Department of Agriculture to make sure that there is full compensation for all birds that die from Newcastle disease. I understand that in this present outbreak one farmer lost 90% of his birds before Newcastle disease was eventually diagnosed so he was only reimbursed for 10% of his flock. That is something that should be looked at.

There should be full compensation for all birds that have died or will die as a result of this disease.

Secondly, vaccination should be fully available from the Department of Agriculture at a reduced fee or, indeed, free to all the producers. Poultry is one of those businesses which can be very much touch-and-go: you can hang or you can do well as a result of, as Mr Junkin said, even one penny or half a penny on a bird. When it is that close to make or break, it is important that the Department make money available for vaccination purposes. It would be more appropriate for the Department to make that money available so that the vaccination can go ahead, as it has done. It should be congratulated for the good work it has done so far — credit where credit is due.

Thirdly, I am bit concerned about some of the statements that have been released, specifically, those relating to my own area of Strangford but possibly other areas as well. Mr Junkin said the disease may have come from England and been brought by carriers — wildfowl and, indeed, wildlife. I think I am right in stating that there has been no evidence to say absolutely that the carriers are the wildfowl. It is important not to speculate on what the causes are but to wait for the facts to become more apparent.

In my own constituency of Strangford, we have the Wetlands and Wildfowl Trust and also the Ark Open Farm just outside Newtownards. At no time did they say that their premises were closed, but I understand that a statement was put out on the radio saying that they were closed. We do not know who put that statement out, but it was grossly unfair to those people who are trying to run the businesses. This particular mid-term break is a very busy time for the Wetlands and Wildfowl Trust when a number of school parties and a lot of individuals go there to enjoy themselves. Even if it be that wildlife are the carriers, even should it be proven so, nobody can control the wildfowl from travelling to and fro, from flying wherever they want to fly. They are independent, they are free, they can come and go as they please.

Mr Poots: Could we not re-route them?

Mr Shannon: I am not sure if that would be possible.

The Ark Open Farm is an example of a place that the media said was closed, but it was not closed. I suggest that we need — and this is my third point — clarity in the statements that are put out, so that everyone knows exactly what is happening, and we are not, in some cases, ruling on hearsay or on something that has been put out at the last moment.

Lastly, the public needs to be reassured about the product it is getting. Mr Junkin, very rightly, reassured the public about the production of chickens right through the system, until they are on the shelf in the supermarket. We want to say quite clearly in the Forum that chicken is quite safe to eat — indeed, a chicken will be just as tasty tonight as the one you had last week or the week before or a month ago was.

A Member: Depending on who cooks it.

Mr Shannon: Well, it depends on who cooks it. My wife cooks it well, and I am sure everybody else's wife or husband cooks it well too — unless you are buying Kentucky Fried Chicken, in which case it is always nice.

It is important to retain confidence in our farming industry and especially in chicken production and marketing. We need effective steps to preserve the industry's status. That is a challenge for the Department of Agriculture and that is the wish of the Forum, the farming community and, more importantly, the consumer.

I support the motion.

Ms Sagar: The Women's Coalition would like to show its concern for the farmers whose businesses are affected by Newcastle disease. Our concern is also about the safety of food and whether there is any threat to public health. We understand that there has never been a food safety risk from Newcastle disease, although we also understand that the disease can cause mild conjunctivitis in poultry workers and in those giving the vaccination. There are, however, no risks, as has already been stated, to public health. There is no risk from consumption of chicken or eggs. All diseased flocks are slaughtered and do not enter the food-chain. We believe it is important that consumers, as well as farmers, are given clear, open information. It is also in this way that the public can be reassured. In September, in the Forum debate on BSE, we called for the setting-up of an independent food safety agency. We reiterate this call.

2.45 pm

We note the recent setting-up of the Food Safety Council in England, but we need to know what relationship this will have with Northern Ireland. Will it monitor and advise on food policies from a safety point of view? Will it monitor farm-feeding practices? Will it monitor and advise on food manufacturing, processing and enforcement? Most of all will it reassure consumers that their interests are being given proper consideration in the overall carrying-out of food policy?

We express our concerns to all those affected. This is yet another blow to the farming industry. But perhaps it also reminds us yet again of the action we need to take to place public health and consumers at the heart of debate so that the food industry suffers the least possible damage when there is a food scare.

We support the motion.

Mr Gibson: I support the composite motion.

We are aware that intensive agriculture has brought forth a number of diseases that were previously unknown. When I was listening to the debate this morning on the report from the Economy Committee, I became aware that every industry needs the back-up of research. At present, and for the last 10 years, the agriculture industry has suffered from a lack of money being put into research. The Loughgall research station, which is famous, has virtually been cut back to non-existence and other parts of research have also been discouraged. We are now beginning to pay the penalty for not having the research that

should parallel any intensive industry. Therefore, I am making a call today that we go to the Minister responsible for the Department of Agriculture and encourage her to give the intensive agriculture industry the necessary parallel research to back it up, just as any other industry has. Without this our agri-food industry will continue to be dedevilled by outbreaks of diseases, and it should be borne in mind that the food industry is one of our biggest industries.

May I congratulate one of the workers in the Omagh veterinary laboratory who, doing his part-time work — not full-time but part-time work — discovered a new and previously unrecognized pig disease. This proves that research must be ongoing.

I agree that there should be a statutory agency for food safety; our economy depends on a disease-free agri-industry. But above all that industry must have immediate, official support for research.

Mr Eric Smyth: I want to support my Colleagues on this issue. I am not an expert on this, and I have not read all the documentation — I just love to eat chicken. I asked my Friend why they called it Newcastle disease and he said "I thought Drumcree would get the blame for it — it gets the blame for everything — and the Orangemen would get the blame for casting the disease on the poor chickens."

Seriously, I am concerned about the health of the community — the people who buy and eat the chickens. I do not have much confidence in the so-called experts who tell us that all is well. We got the same story with the BSE crisis. We were told that it was not dangerous, yet people have died because of it.

Mr Shannon: It has not been proven.

Mr Eric Smyth: That is what I am trying to get at. It has not been proven, but at the same time we have to be careful. Who gives these people the right to say that it is all right and that it will not bring death or disease to humans? The public needs to exercise caution, especially with our children eating school dinners. I am not too happy with that part of it. I must voice my concern about the farmers who lock those little chickens up. I think it is disgraceful to see all those chickens locked up as though they were in prison. I wonder where the diseases come from, since they are locked up. I wonder if there are many diseases among the chickens that are free-range and running about the farm. Farmers need to go back to the old days, to the normal way of raising birds and animals. *[Interruption]*

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: How do you know he is not an expert. He is right.

The Chairman: Is this an intervention?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is about the chickens that are locked up and those that have free-range. I am told that free-range chickens do not take Newcastle disease. I do not know how true that is.

Mr Eric Smyth: That is a point that nobody has spoken about today. I am able to bring something to the debate. Maybe that should be looked at. Maybe we should get back

to the old ways that God wished things to be done. We are all out to make plenty of money, but we are facing a crisis with all these things coming to the fore now. My Colleague mentioned the pigs. They will be the next cause for concern. There will be something wrong with our bacon. I do not know what we are going to eat by the time all these concerns are dealt with.

I certainly want to raise my concerns about those issues and support the farmers in this respect. I hope that the scientists who are investigating these things will get control of them and give us the proper information. I was never happy with the scientists' point of view. We have listened to these people long enough, and they have sometimes been proven wrong.

The Chairman: I am going to call on Mr Poots to sum up. There are three questions on my mind. One is the point made by Mr Junkin about small flocks of chickens, and people who own them should pay attention to what is happening. The second is the point made by Mr Smyth about whether we are absolutely sure about the disease question. The third, which is very much on my mind is that awful suggestion, which again Mr Junkin made, that people who get an injection of the inoculation by accident can be seriously hurt. Perhaps, Mr Poots, in your summing-up you could deal with these three.

Mr Poots: Mr McCarthy wants to speak.

Mr McCarthy: Lest we be accused of being in a huff or something we will certainly support the motion, regardless of where it came from. We do not have to make amendments. If something is right, we will support it. Almost everything that needs to be said has been, but there are a few important items I wish to speak about. The seriousness of the poultry problem and the health of the poultry concerns me, not the problem of human health.

The Government must, and, I am sure, will, take the necessary action to stop future occurrences of Newcastle disease. They must, for example, ensure that the Department's veterinary laboratories are kept open and work throughout the weekend if necessary. Vaccination is needed in controlled zones, but the Department must consider whether it is an appropriate long-term measure. If we vaccinate all the flocks in Northern Ireland we could open the door to imports from other European Union countries and, as a consequence, pose a possible threat to our egg and poultry industry. Large numbers of jobs on farms and in processing and broiler-house manufacturing are under threat. We must protect this vital part of our economy.

We fully support the motion.

The Chairman: Mr Poots, it was really only for my own information that I was interested to know what you thought about those three points. There is no obligation on you to say anything about them.

Mr Poots: I welcome all the support that this motion has received here today. The idea of bringing the motion to the Forum was to highlight the plight of the farmers whose chickens have had Newcastle disease, to let them know that we are thinking about them and to give them our support at this time.

One or two points perhaps need to be clarified. Mr Eric Smyth raised the point about the possible spread of the disease to humans. I just want to reiterate that there is no scientist of any ilk who would try to say that Newcastle disease can be passed to humans by the consumption of either chicken or eggs. There is no question of that. I do not believe that anyone should be trying to do industry any harm in that respect. Consumers must be given sound and proper advice, and that advice is that it is safe to eat chicken and eggs.

A couple of other points were raised in respect of compensation. It should be stressed that compensation is arranged through the insurance that farmers take out. However, insurance companies only cover for the birds that are living. It would be helpful if the Department of Agriculture were to provide cover for the birds that die. We are not asking the Department to cover all birds, just the ones that die.

The Department has said that free-range chickens should be kept closed up at this time. It is its view that free-range chickens can get Newcastle disease. A growth in free-range chicken and free-range eggs units has taken place over the last few years, and the market is driving that. The farmers do not keep chickens in closed houses just for the sake of it; it is an economical way of producing food. If the consumer demands free-range chickens and free-range eggs, that is what he will get. We cannot tell people what to take, we can only do what we are asked to do.

I would like to thank all the parties for supporting this motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum expresses its concern at the outbreak of Newcastle disease in several of Northern Ireland's poultry flocks and urges the Department of Agriculture to continue to take all necessary steps to arrest the spread of the disease and preserve the high health status of the Northern Ireland poultry industry.

EDUCATION: FINANCE

Mr Curran: I should like to make it clear that when Mr Casey and I leave the Chamber it will not be out of any discourtesy to Members but because we have an urgent appointment at 3.30 pm.

3.00 pm

I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum is deeply concerned at the cut-backs in education in Northern Ireland, believing that such financial measures will detract from the quality of educational provision, in that schools will be unable to fulfil their statutory and legal duties of securing the curriculum for those pupils.

This morning I listened with great interest to the debate on the interim report of the Economy Committee. I was initially a member of that Committee but because of illness

I was not able to attend it again until recently. I listened to the little anecdote that Mr McAlister mentioned about the lady feeding the chickens out of a bucket at the back door. When we come, in due course, to debate the economy, let us hope that, unlike in the song, popularized by the late Burl Ives, there will be no "hole in the bucket dear Liza, dear Liza".

I recently spoke to a very dear friend of mine, the principal of a small rural school, and I congratulated him on the absolutely marvellous results that he had in the transfer examination, colloquially still known as the 11-plus. In fact, consistently over the years, this little rural school has been able to achieve really good success rates. Something like 60% of the kids he puts in for this examination achieve As — quite incredible results. This year nine out of the 15 kids he put in for the examination achieved the A grade. I asked him how he was consistently able to produce these results in a small rural school. He said that apart from the school's dedicated teachers, it was a reflection of the much smaller numbers and the teachers' ability to give great care and attention to the children. This is very relevant because this little school will be in line for something that is going to happen to a number of schools in Northern Ireland in the near future as a consequence of what is happening in education — closure. I hope we will all bear this word "closure" in mind.

The question implicit in the motion is this: have we reached the point where the education service in Northern Ireland is in total crisis? To continue the poultry theme that we introduced earlier on, I really do believe that the chickens are coming home to roost. We are seeing the consequences of the cost-cutting activities of the present Conservative Government. Given the levels of investment in education in Northern Ireland — some £1·376 billion on education, arts and libraries — one would think that our children would be getting a fairly decent education. But the Government have now set in train cuts to the education budget which are totally unacceptable in a society like Northern Ireland which needs a trained and intelligent work-force to compete with other work-forces among our competitors elsewhere.

You may remember that in the report that was produced by the Education Committee under the guidance of Mr Gibson we referred to the Department of Education's plan 1996-2000. The Department's report very clearly made the point that in Northern Ireland substantial numbers of young people are leaving school without qualifications, or with fewer qualifications than in the countries of our economic competitors elsewhere. Bearing this in mind, one would have thought that any Government determining expenditure priorities would be concerned about education and whether or not it was receiving adequate resources.

The Department of Education allocates resources to the local education boards and each in turn apportions its funds according to its area strategy. In recent times we have seen nothing less than crisis management by the Department of Education. At least four out of five of our education boards have been seriously affected by these cuts — and I mean seriously. This week we have seen the difficulties that the Belfast board has faced in rejecting the 2% increase in funding offered it. A proposal by this board to axe the street-crossing patrols would have been drastic in the extreme, but this figure of 2% was totally inadequate, even to meet the board's existing needs. It does not cover teachers' salaries or the schools' budgets, and it will result in teacher redundancies in the coming year.

Yesterday, I had the opportunity to discuss with the chief executive of one of the other boards how the situation affected him. He took me through the implications of the small increase in block funding and he told me that, taking into consideration the incremental increases for teachers — incidentally, teachers' salaries account for some 80% to 90% of the budget allocation for schools — there is a need for something like £5 million in cuts and that can only be met by redundancies in the schools. He said that there will be schools that will have as many as 10 teachers made redundant and that the redundancies will especially affect secondary schools. What will the implication of that be at a time when we are looking for improvement in the education service and for a reduction in the pupil/teacher ratios in classes?

The Department of Education is asking the board to make an 8% cut in curriculum activities, advisory and support services, the youth service and headquarters administration. The school budgets for salaries definitely point to redundancies and that ultimately means closures. School closures are going to result from the major cost cuts that are proposed. The reason for this is very simple: with the redundancies that are envisaged schools' boards of governors will not be able to meet their statutory obligation to provide the required curriculum. Undoubtedly there is going to be a rationalization programme, and the question really raises its head: where do we go from here?

Another concern for Labour is the unacceptable cuts proposed in the youth service. We believe that children should be educated in such a way as to be skilled and to be able to respond to the needs of work — there is no such thing as a job for life. Young people must be encouraged to acquire skills and abilities and to be mobile between different types of work and, if necessary, different areas. The youth service is a vital link for young people when they leave school, and it promotes their personal development. Many schemes are run at different levels to encourage our young citizens to be positive and active in society. The youth service provides useful inter- and intra-community activities. It also helps our young people to develop more refined views on the nature of the difficulties in Northern Ireland. But now we have a situation where this link is being undermined by the lack of adequate funding. There may be redundancies within the ranks of youth workers. If this is so, it would be a tragedy. Many of them are dedicated people who understand our youth.

If there is no proper youth service it is likely to lead to an increase in criminal and anti-social behaviour in the younger generation. This will almost certainly feed into the many problems we face in Northern Ireland. Can we really afford to have any more arson attacks on our schools? We are all very aware of what has been going on. Therefore, it seems incredibly short-sighted of the Government to axe the youth service as it provides a critical function in this troubled society.

A teacher in one of my local secondary schools epitomized the effect of the cuts to curriculum activities, when, referring to the proposed cuts in technology, he said "Before long we will be returning to the days where we were banging two stones together. That is about all we are going to be able to offer our kids." Indeed, it seems farcical and smacking of double standards when one considers the new £3·7 million extension to the Department of Education's headquarters in Bangor. One has to ask if that money could not have been better deployed elsewhere in the system. The infrastructure of our education service is being eroded by the constant haemorrhaging of adequate funding.

Gillian Shephard, the Secretary of State for Education, was questioned by David Blunkett, the Labour shadow spokesperson, during a recent education debate in the House of Commons. David Blunkett pointed out that the Government had allocated a 4·4% increase in funding in England and Wales but only a 2% increase in Northern Ireland, and that is significant. Let me tell you about that 2% additional money in Northern Ireland. It includes substantial savings in relation to rates revaluations in schools and does not represent any new money at all. How do Northern Ireland Ministers, and I put this question to the Secretary of State, defend this disparity in allocation of resources *vis-à-vis* Northern Ireland and Great Britain? Labour condemns this difference as Government irresponsibility. We have to consider the impertinence of the Conservative Government on their last legs before a general election. The reality probably is that this Government is finally finding itself in deep financial crisis — and we are well aware of its ability to conceal that.

We must question the rationale of the Government's financial delegation to schools. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order is about creating a device to conceal the really inadequate levels of funding that are being set out by the Government for education in Northern Ireland and passing the buck, as they are well able to do, to boards of governors and principals. This is totally unacceptable. Local management of schools is welcomed by many teachers, but it should not act as a smoke-screen for inadequate Government funding.

It has been very easy for this Government to blame Drumcree and other disturbances for all the ills in our society. But it is the responsibility of the Government — and let everybody in the House understand this — to provide a properly funded education service. That is vital to our future development and for stability and prosperity in Northern Ireland.

The Chairman: Mr Curran, did you say that both you and your Colleague had to be away by 3.30?

Mr Curran: Yes, we have a very urgent appointment.

The Chairman: I do not know how we can get 12 speakers in before then, but I am sure we will do our best.

Mr McFarland: These cuts are the latest in a line which has been going for several years. Last year, for example, the Department of Education, as I understand it, only half-funded the teachers' pay increases. The latest swingeing cuts, however, are of a different order.

Education is an easy target. It is a well-known fact in business that when times get a bit rough, the first thing to get clobbered is training and education. These latest cuts are hitting the young people, as has been mentioned already — in particular, funding for clubs will suffer. At the moment we have enough problems getting our young people into clubs. For those who do come they are valuable places to learn about the problems of drugs and glue-sniffing. When the clubs close, I am afraid we will get further problems in those areas.

To turn to libraries, I understand that there will be about an 80% cut in the purchase of new books over the coming year. That of course mainly hits the elderly who use libraries more than any other group.

The boards are going to have a problem with the cuts to curriculum support, particularly for the small rural schools. Currently the system in use is cluster-group teaching where, because schools cannot afford a dedicated teacher, a group of teachers go round and teach different topics in different schools, and that is very likely to be cut by the boards.

A major problem is building maintenance. Members will be aware that our schools are already falling down. Building maintenance is an easy target. And almost certainly our schools are going to be in even worse condition.

Teachers' salaries account for something like 80% of the education bill, so they are obvious targets in this situation. The boards are to fund about 1% of the 3·5% salary increase this year — the schools will have to find the rest. There are bound to be teacher redundancies. However, it is not that simple. For example, if you lay off two teachers, they will be entitled to a redundancy package. In order to pay that redundancy package, you may have to lay off another teacher. It is a vicious circle. Fewer teachers lead to an increase in class sizes. To see the effect of that one has only to look at Great Britain where there is absolute chaos in the schools — 36 children in a class, and the teacher unable to teach them properly. The pupil/teacher ratio suffers, and this will happen, I suspect, right across our schools. With fewer teachers how will schools' boards of governors fulfil their responsibility to deliver the curriculum? We are heading, I am afraid, for crisis here. Where is this to stop?

I was chatting to someone who is involved in Donaghadee High School in my constituency. It is a thriving school. Two years ago it got a new headmaster. He has built up the school, and it is rapidly increasing in size. Now he is faced with teacher losses. He is also faced, I suspect, with the closure of Scrabo High School in another constituency. This means that pupils from there will be redirected to other schools, so he may well have even more children and fewer teachers, which will result in a reduction in the service to the pupils.

We in Northern Ireland are justifiably proud of our education system. These proposals will seriously affect that valuable asset.

I support the motion.

3.15 pm

Mr Gibson: I support the motion without reservation.

This debate should not be taking place. We in Northern Ireland regard education as our most valuable asset and are proud of the fact that we have a great tradition of education provision. When we see that asset threatened, as it is today, naturally we feel somewhat resentful. It also illustrates the Government's perverse thinking. It appears that the democratic people of Northern Ireland are being punished because they will not yield to terrorism. The Minister has said "You will suffer a £120 million loss because I have had to spend the money on security."

Let us look at the track record of the Governments who have come here since 1973: more money has been spent on repairing the destruction caused by terrorist bombs than it would have cost to build every school in Northern Ireland or to give every citizen a brand-new, 5,000-square-foot house. That is a terrible indictment of the inability of a Government to tackle and defeat terrorism. After 20 years of this they are saying "We will punish you because you will not yield to terrorism." That, in reality, is what Michael Ancram is saying to the people of Northern Ireland. We are in a dilemma with our education service, which should be free and equally available to everyone, now embroiled in the political terrorism of the Provisional IRA aided and abetted, unfortunately, by Michael Ancram, the Minister responsible for political development.

A year ago the Department could not get the statistics right when it claimed that it would effect a £2 million saving by reducing five boards to three. In fact, it would have cost £28 million and £5 million for the ensuing three years. That illustrates how inadequate this Department is when it comes to education administration. I am tempted to say that the Minister's attitude should prompt the Forum to pass a vote of no confidence in the Department of Education and the Minister himself.

It is diabolical that, on the verge of the millennium, we are having a debate about cut-backs in one of the basic resources we most treasure — the right to education and the right to have it freely and equally available.

I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr McCartney: I support the motion without reservation. I found Mr Gibson's observations of particular interest because when expenditure for Northern Ireland was being debated last Wednesday in the Grand Committee at Westminster, this was an issue I raised. I call it the principle of extracting penalties or taking hostages from the entire community of Northern Ireland based on the fact that a terrorist element is breaking the rule of law and causing additional expenditure on the suppression of terrorism. Does that justify the Government's taking measures that will penalize the most defenceless in our society? I am talking about our young folk and their education; our sick and elderly and the amount of money that is available for hospitals; and our long-term unemployed and the money that is allegedly going to be saved by the Draconian cuts in such schemes as Action for Community Employment (ACE).

We have been told that certain terrorist elements in Northern Ireland are responsible for increased costs and that, as a result, the Government will be forced to punish all law-abiding citizens. Northern Ireland's vast majority of law-abiding citizens will be punished through the education of their children, the health and welfare of their sick and aged and the employment prospects of their long-term unemployed. That is what it amounts to. Fiscal cuts are being used as a way of attempting to coerce the population generally into a line of political policy that suits the Government. That is a general observation about —

Mr Bolton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will give way.

Mr Bolton: Does Mr McCartney agree that the main loser will be the controlled sector? As Members know, education has been sectorized by our political masters at Westminster into the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors. The controlled sector, now coming under scrutiny, will be the main loser, especially in small rural areas where the threshold is 60 for a primary school and 300 for a secondary school. Those schools were handed over, in good faith, by our forefathers to a devolved Administration, and they are now having to bear the brunt of each and every cut that comes along.

Mr McCartney: I could not agree more. Indeed, that was one of the specific issues that I had intended to address. Funds are now being voted by the education boards to the boards of governors of controlled schools so that they can measure out the requirements for their own needs. As a result of that schools — primary schools, in particular — are falling into two categories. Some of them are designated as being in areas of special need. I am not suggesting that there are no areas of special need, but, as a result of targeting these special needs schools and providing them with additional funds, they are able to build up a credit balance. They are able to employ staff and do a whole lot of wonderful things, but small primary schools — schools which have 300 to 350 pupils — in areas like North Down are not getting the benefit of any special grants because they are not in an area of special need. They are having to make teachers redundant. They are going to have to double up in their classrooms and the children are going to be heavily penalized in respect of the quality of the education that is available to them.

There is another issue that I imagine will be of specific interest to the Women's Coalition, though of general interest to us all, and that is the availability of money for pre-school facilities. Members of the Women's Coalition raised this on a previous occasion, and I am sure that they will agree that in terms of pre-school facilities that enable mothers to return to a career and generally to continue with their own lives, Northern Ireland is about the worst in Europe — not just in the United Kingdom. Yet I understand that the introduction of the voucher scheme — a scheme that not everybody agrees with and which has its own defects — is to be postponed for a considerable period. So the situation where we have very deficient pre-school facilities for working mothers is to continue.

Those are only two aspects, but there is a further aspect at the other end of the education spectrum and that is in relation to the amount of money that will be made available to the universities. According to the Chancellor of Queen's University, with whom I discussed this issue in company with Dr Paisley, there is absolutely no doubt that the funds available for research at the university have been drastically cut. It has already been pointed out that companies thinking of engaging in new processes in Northern Ireland are enquiring about what research facilities are available, and Queen's has been in the forefront of working in conjunction with industry to provide research facilities for some of the inward investment companies as well as for existing ones and to undertake projects for the development of new products and infinitely better services for a whole range of industrial needs. That is going to be cut back and the attractions of Northern Ireland as a manufacturing base for industry will be vastly reduced.

But there is another aspect in relation to university teaching. Many of our young folk go to the mainland to get their primary university education. One of the factors that has

attracted them to return to Northern Ireland is that they could do post-graduate research work under funded, post-graduate scholarships. Sir Gordon Beveridge was very anxious to point out that this is one way of reversing what some call the "brain drain" and bringing some of these talented people back into Northern Ireland so that their expertise is not lost for ever and the future of the province and the quality of those serving it is maintained. The money available for these post-graduate research scholarships has also been drastically cut back. From the very young in pre-school right across the range to grammar school pupils, to university graduates and to post-graduate researchers — all are being penalized.

I think it was H G Wells who once said "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe". There is no doubt about it: the present cuts and financial arrangements in Northern Ireland mean that the Government are wagering heavily on catastrophe.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr McCartney. Since you referred to Ms McWilliams, perhaps she would like to speak next?

Ms McWilliams: This is an extremely important motion. We have heard about the differences in educationed achievement in Northern Ireland. I suppose we do not know whether to be delighted or to despair about the fact that we have some of the highest educational achievers anywhere in the United Kingdom because of our grammar school system. But, at the other end of the scale, we have the largest number of children leaving school without any qualifications whatsoever, and we have been repeating this fact for many years. Some day we will sit down and look at this dreadful exam called the 11-plus or the Transfer Exam.

As a mother whose child has just gone through that process, I know exactly what it means to wait for the envelope to come through the door. But that is not how children aged 10 — and most of them are only 10 — should be judged in relation to their performance over the next 12 years of their lives. I know that the Select Committee is currently looking at this issue of educational achievement in Northern Ireland. I know that its report has probably not yet been published, but I wonder if serious attention has been given to the fact that the 11-plus is something that creates the anomaly of the situation in this country.

If we are going to change this situation we need investment. When you visit other countries, you judge them by the standards of their educational system and, indeed, their health system. As we have heard, from university level right down to adult and community education, through grammar schools and secondary schools, right down to primary school and pre-school — every level of education has been cut.

I can speak as a university teacher who has watched the changes that have occurred over the last 18 years in relation to my job. When I went in there, we were meant to be proud of the fact that we were both researchers and teachers. Today, more and more administration is falling on the heads of university lecturers and the motto that goes round the building is "You publish or you perish". As lecturers, we constantly say to ourselves "Where is priority given to teaching, which is what we came here to do?" As a researcher, I believe that it should feed into teaching, but money, money, money is what we talk about, day and daily, in our jobs at university.

I also agree that if universities do not concentrate on research-and-development functions we will not have investment because that is the question that investors ask about any country into which they intend to put their money. Of course the second part of that — as we know from the experiences of De Lorean, et al — is that when a country does not invest in research and development in universities, it makes it much, much easier for them to pull out of that country. So when we are seeking investment, we should also look at the research and development that is attached so that Northern Ireland will have long-stay employment in the future. I have seriously to ask about the morale among teachers in our primary and secondary schools, about the state of the schools that we expect teachers to work in and, indeed, about the safety standards of those schools.

In order to prepare for this motion I rang the head of the Castlereagh principals group — my two children attend a primary school in Castlereagh — and he had some very serious things to say about the effect these cuts will have on the primary school sector. He told me that over the last two years they have already had serious cuts and are now facing the current cut on top of that, and this has left most boards in Northern Ireland in debt.

He believes, as many of the principals believe, that the Belfast Education and Library Board played a blinder when it said it was to cut the lollipop men and women back off our streets — where else was it supposed to make the cuts? It played right to the media and what it was then able to do was mount a campaign against the cuts using mothers and fathers right across Belfast. That brought people's attention to the fact that if they are cutting back the job of the person who takes a small child's hand and guides him across busy streets, what are we facing in education? It was a good campaign, and it is good to hear now that the jobs of our lollipop men and women will be safeguarded. But for that we would probably have had to wait until a child was knocked down before the educational administration took that issue seriously. It was a good campaign.

However, I ask myself: how many of the mothers and fathers could have mounted a campaign around the redundancies of teachers? That is why it was useful for them to engage right out on the streets where it mattered. The boards have failed to produce long-term plans for the next three to five years because they do not know what level of public expenditure they will be given. How could any of us in the Forum sit down and talk seriously and strategically as politicians in our political parties about where we would like to be? Everyone needs a strategic plan, everyone needs a vision, and we have taken that vision away from our schools.

Schools in the primary sector received a letter recently saying that they should not employ any substitute teachers if a teacher is off sick. The headmaster has to go into the classroom and teach when a teacher is off ill. If there are two teachers off ill simultaneously, the second class is to be dispersed across all the classes in the primary school. This is what is happening at present in our primary schools. In fact, the classes are getting larger. My own child started out in P1 in a class of 22 and is now in a class of 35, and I have been told that that class number will apply right through to P7.

That same school twice applied for a mobile for another classroom; twice it was permitted, and twice that permission was withdrawn. At the same time, however, the

Department of Education has been given permission to go ahead with its new building in Rathgael. How can this be justified? The administration of education is important and, indeed, the Department may well need a new facility at Rathgael. But how can it have that new facility — a brand new purpose-built facility — at the same time as schools are being told they should not carry out repairs. They are not being given money for painting or stationery. If a printer breaks down, a teacher has to try to fix it.

Mr McCartney: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way because the point she has just raised is of fundamental importance. It was one I raised at the Grand Committee. How can the Department of Education justify spending somewhere between £5 million and £15 million — the figures quoted — for a new bureaucrats' paradise when it is shutting down Dundonald Technical College that costs only £0·5 million, one-tenth of that, a year to run? That is the saving — £0·5 million.

Ms McWilliams: The provision that is being cut is right at the heart of the matter. Indeed, some classes are now disappearing — music, art and drama. So it is not just the buildings or their state or the morale of the teachers that are affected, it is the very classes our children were once taught.

I will end by saying that there is something that should concern us about the concept of promoting dialogue and understanding. As Members may know, in Northern Ireland we have an education programme called Education for Mutual Understanding. It is known as EMU, and often people mix this up with the European Monetary Union. In any case, it was the responsibility of the Department of Education to support the provision of EMU. This programme meant that the kids from one school could go and play soccer with children from another school across the divide. It meant that they could also go on school trips with one another. In Castlereagh my children were able to go on a school trip with children from another school there. We have now been told that that will no longer be the case, and that if they so wish, parents will have to pay for those trips themselves.

How can the Department justify the fact that it does not want children to grow up together and share experiences from an early age? We know in this country that it is too late to try to do this by the time those who are lucky enough make it to university. This has to start at primary school level. However, that function has now been passed to the education and library boards, and they tell us that they do not have the resources. So Education for Mutual Understanding has now gone out the window.

Mr Dodds: I apologize for not being in the Chamber earlier when other people were speaking on this subject, and I apologize in advance if I go over some ground that has been covered already.

This debate is very timely given the publicity that there has been in recent days about the axing of services in the education and library boards which has come about because of the Government's refusal to properly fund education in Northern Ireland. Of particular relevance was the announcement — or the excuse — by the Minister that it is because of the events of last summer and the resumption of IRA violence and so forth that this money is being transferred out of the education budget and out of other Departments' budgets to meet the security requirements.

Nowhere else in the United Kingdom would parents, school children and, indeed, hospital patients as well as people in other vitally important areas be penalized and punished because of the action of armed terrorists. To use those events, and to use the excuse that in order to fight terrorism properly and to provide proper security resources, money needs to be taken from education, health, housing, community services and so forth is entirely unacceptable. It must be the duty of the state, above all else, to provide the necessary resources to defend citizens and to provide proper security but, at the same time, that should not be done by cutting back on vital services in these important areas.

I am sure that some Members have already referred to the fact that Gillian Shephard recently announced that schools in Great Britain are to get a 4·4% increase over the next financial year, while those in the Belfast area are only to get a 2% increase. It has been made clear by the teachers and the school boards of governors that they simply will not be able to meet existing requirements or ensure that even existing standards are maintained. As a result, there will be a large number of teacher redundancies, and that is totally unacceptable.

It is clear that the education and library boards are being asked to implement a programme without the proper resources to do the job. I have already made it clear that as far as my party's position on the Belfast Education and Library Board is concerned — and that is the only board that I can speak about with direct knowledge, as I am a member — we will not be there if our job is simply to cut costs at the behest of Michael Ancram and the Department of Education. We have now, as another member of that board has said, gone beyond the fat — we are down to the bare bones, and people are wanting to suck the marrow out of them. That is the reality of the situation. These are now essential services that are being cut.

It is the same with the hospital service. The Government have admitted that the 3% year-on-year reduction in resources demanded of the boards means that those savings can no longer be made from so-called efficiency savings and cutting back on overheads and administration. They will mean at least a 1·5% reduction in services. So it is clear that essential services are being cut. We recently had the board proposing to do away with the school-crossing patrol service in Belfast, and there was, quite rightly, a great outcry about that. The board was mistaken. Some members thought that this would be good way of highlighting the extent to which these cuts are now affecting education — going down the road of proposing to end that service. I did not agree with that strategy, and I am glad that, on Tuesday, the board overturned that decision.

There are many other areas where savage cuts are being proposed. For instance, the special summer schemes for children with special needs are a vital educational facility for children who have severe learning difficulties in schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, in the Belfast Education and Library Board at Glenveigh and at Fleming Fulton. It is not to do with a lack of supervision or proper staff. It has to do with a lack of finances that those three-week summer schemes will be axed this summer.

This has caused tremendous outrage and concern among the parents of these children, because this was really a lifeline for them during the summer months. It also provided an essential educational facility for the children themselves — that is a cut too far that simply cannot be allowed to proceed.

We also have cuts in the curriculum advisory service which is vital for the training and support of teachers. We have savage cut-backs in Belfast in discretionary awards, and the youth service has been decimated. The library service over the years has been starved of resources and with all these cuts, whether it be teachers, the youth service, the libraries or whatever, it is the disadvantaged areas which are hardest hit. It is those areas which are supposed to be targeted for special attention which are actually suffering the most.

It is essential that a clear, unanimous, united message from the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland goes out from the Forum today to Michael Ancram that he must put in resources to our education service, that we cannot endure any more cuts to the essential services which are so important, and that everybody in this community, whether Nationalist or Unionist, Protestant or Roman Catholic, is agreed on this.

We must ensure that the resources are there, and we do not accept this argument that money should be taken from our hospitals, schools, the elderly and from community services in order to deal with IRA terrorism. That is a duty which the Government must carry out, and carry out from whatever resources they can lay their hands on in the same way that they dealt with the emergency over the Falkland Islands in the early 1980s, and in the same way that they would deal with any other emergency elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Ms Bell: I am getting a bit concerned. This time last week I spoke just before the lunch break, and I am now speaking just before we close. If I am going to speak at a similar time in future — it is always the star who is at the end — I will expect a drum roll.

I rise to support this motion and I do so enthusiastically.

Many comments have been made which I endorse. I will not repeat them because of the lateness of the hour. The one thing that I should do is to pay tribute to every single teacher in Northern Ireland today for their unfailing commitment and loyalty to their pupils. I congratulate them for the courage they have shown many times during the last 27 years. They have endured bombs, vandalism, persistent intimidation, not to mention all the pressures caused by curriculum changes, administration reforms and inferior pay reviews. They have still managed to ensure that the education system in Northern Ireland is regarded as one of the most successful in the United Kingdom and Europe.

Teachers have seen their roles as educators and pedagogues changed to include administration and evaluating and monitoring their pupils to such an extent that there has been a huge increase in pressure. That has led in turn to early-retirement applications and many illnesses caused by stress. There is not a school or college at any level that does not have concerns about low morale amongst the staff with a resultant lowering of enthusiasm in both students and teachers. The pupil/student ratio has degenerated to the extent that difficulties have increased amongst all grades and types of student. This cannot be tolerated from a Government Minister who is consistently reiterating that his aim is to improve standards in schools.

These concerns have been obvious to even the most casual observer and the education and library boards have been attempting to address them with the appointment of curriculum

advisory officers, training seminars, et cetera. But, with the cut-backs, even those will be severely restricted. We have had some success in the South Eastern Education and Library Board in maintaining a good level of pupil/teacher ratio, and this is in spite of all the financial restrictions of previous years that have been talked about. This level of pupil/teacher ratio was clearly seen to benefit both pupil and teacher. Unfortunately, because of cut-backs, this will be severely knocked back, as all schools have now been asked to make reductions in their staff complements. It think it was Ms McWilliams who said that in primary schools, at least, a letter was sent out asking principals not to take on any more temporary staff or substitute teachers.

We in our board have a huge deficit, and it is well-documented that the other boards are the same. But still the Government state that they cannot and will not reverse their decision on the cut-backs in resources for education even though they know that this will mean a reduction in teachers across the five boards. In my own board alone it will mean a reduction of around 200. I also know that there are a number of schools — including some on whose boards of governors I sit — that are saying that it will be dangerous for the future of their schools, for the pupils and for the pupil/teacher ratios to decrease the number of teachers and are therefore keeping their staff on at present. Board officers have started to go out to all schools to advise principals on the best method of dealing with this situation. This is on top of all the other pressures — local management of schools, curriculum programmes — and that is an awful burden for any teacher who started off in his profession to educate children, as far as possible, on a one-to-one basis so that he could enhance their success and develop their potential to the full.

The budget allocation given to each board for 1997-98 does not take inflation into account or the 1996-97 budget deficit that each board has been carrying, and that has already been mentioned. That means that the boards are starting this year in a perilous financial state, and one of the first areas to be affected will be staffing and, in due course, pupils and schools.

When will this Government realize that it is just not feasible to manage a vital area of society such as education with the mechanisms of the market? Good, experienced, well-trained teachers are not a luxury but a very necessary investment for all our futures, and it is disgraceful that the Government, instead of recognizing this, are eroding the whole system of education to the detriment of our children. If these measures are not redressed and teacher numbers are not increased, we will very soon have a situation in which class numbers will rise even more than the average 30 plus. In fact, I have heard that that is happening already in some schools. Teachers will then become more disillusioned, pupils and students will become more disinterested or regressive. As a result society will be in an even worse state than it is now.

In conclusion, it is a pity that our Westminster representatives, of whom I do not see too many here with the exception of my own North Down MP. *[Laughter]* I should say the MP for North Down — he is my MP.

A Member: Did you vote for him?

Ms Bell: Of course.

It is a pity that our Westminster representatives did not take the opportunity in the House last December to address, to some degree, the resource question by voting with the Liberal Democrats and others to put a penny increase on income tax which would be specifically delegated to education. If this had been done, Northern Ireland would have received £1·7 billion for the education budget and this in turn would have meant that teachers' jobs would be more secure. Ancillary jobs like those of the lollipop men would be saved, class sizes could be reduced, nursery education could be expanded and some improvement in school buildings could be made. If our MPs had supported that motion, there might have been no need for this debate today. Nevertheless, they did not appear to do so.

I support the motion.

The debate stood adjourned until Friday 28 February 1997.

FORUM PROCEEDINGS: PUBLICITY

The Chairman: I promised to consider the publicity that is being given to our proceedings. I have not yet had a chance to look at the papers which were mentioned, but I will do so and give my decision next Thursday at the Business Committee.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.51 pm.