

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 28 February 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.07 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: I apologize for being a little late. I was looking into a matter that I had been asked to consider.

Members will no doubt wish to join me in expressing deep sympathy to Mr Bob McCartney, whose sister died yesterday. He has gone to be with the family.

FORUM: STANDING COMMITTEE A (EVIDENCE)

The Chairman: Once again I have a request to allow the introduction of a motion at short notice. As Members know, this can be done only if the Forum gives leave. The terms of the motion, put forward by the Women's Coalition, are as follows:

"In the light of the refusal of the Public Order Committee to respond to the personal request of the Chairperson to review and change its decision not to extend the deadline to enable the Committee to meet the Garvaghy Road residents and Northern Ireland Flute Bands Association, the Forum appeals to the Chairperson of the Forum to use his powers under Rules 3(1), 3(2) and 13(1) to suspend the operation of the Public Order Committee until its inconsistent procedures and the conflict of interest of certain members of the Committee have been fully investigated."

I must make it clear that I do not believe that I have the authority that the motion seeks to place on my shoulders. Even if there is any question of the motion's being debated, I do not believe it to be correct. I propose to allow the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition a few minutes to explain why it thinks that the Forum should debate the motion and then to give the Committee Chairman, Mr Wilson, a few minutes to respond, if that is the wish of the House.

Several Members: No.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Leave is not given.

The Chairman: So we do not have unanimity.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. Last week you allowed Mr Cedric Wilson to respond to a proposal that a motion be accepted. On the basis of that precedent we feel that we have a right to be heard.

Mr Cedric Wilson: The Record of Debates for last week shows that leave of the House was sought and that the Forum was asked whether it wished to hear from me as Committee Chairman and then from Mr McBride. The correct procedure would be to establish first whether leave is given and then whether the Forum wishes to hear from the Women's Coalition or from me. I have no desire to elaborate, as the facts speak for themselves. However, I suggest that you, Mr Chairman, make a ruling in relation to the scurrilous attack upon the working of the Forum and its Committees. Those who are boycotting the Forum are attempting to bring into disrepute — *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: You are making a speech. This is precisely what I was asking the Forum to decide.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. You applied Rule 3(1) last week. We did not vote on whether Mr McBride should be heard. You overruled a suggestion that we should vote, and your decision allowed Mr McBride to be heard.

The Chairman: I am going to rule that unless there is unanimity neither the Women's Coalition nor the Chairman of Standing Committee A will be heard.

Ms McWilliams: I object, Mr Chairman. We met you this morning, and you did agree under Rule 3(1). Unless Members have very short memories they will recall that it was under that Rule that Mr McBride was heard last week.

A Member: By leave of the House.

Ms McWilliams: The House did not agree that the Alliance Member should be heard. Indeed, had we had a vote he would not have been heard. The Chair, following all the arguments in the House, ruled under 3(1), and Mr McBride was heard. We ask that that precedent be applied to us.

The Chairman: I am not going to take any more of this. I have ruled that neither Member will be heard. Let us move on.

Ms McWilliams: So what was done last week is not being done this week. This is the sort of thing that makes us concerned about the Forum. We have played a full part, and the Forum should show some concern about the fact that four parties have now withdrawn from Committee A. There are only four left — something that merits serious thought.

The Chairman: Let us move on to the motion in the name of Labour.

Mr Gardiner: Before we do so, may I, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, extend sympathy to Mr McCartney on the death of his sister.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I want to associate the DUP with Mr Gardiner's remarks.

Mr Neeson: The Alliance Party too extends its sympathy.

Mr Casey: Labour too wishes to be associated with the expression of sympathy.

Ms McWilliams: Although we in the Women's Coalition disagree with your ruling, Mr Chairman, we extend our sympathy and condolences to Mr McCartney.

Mr McMichael: I too extend my sympathy and that of the Ulster Democratic Party to Mr McCartney.

FORUM COMMITTEES (CONFIDENTIALITY)

Mr Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I understood that you were to make a ruling in relation to a matter concerning the Alliance Party, which was raised last week. Do you intend to do so?

The Chairman: A matter concerning the Alliance Party?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On Mr McBride's breach of confidentiality.

The Chairman: Mr McBride submitted a motion, and then the question of confidentiality was raised most vehemently by Mr Maginnis, who was supported by a number of Members. Unlike the talks being conducted by the three independent Chairmen, the Forum has no Rule on confidentiality. There is a convention of good order and good manners that people do not go to the media and reveal what takes place within committees. That is a convention which I thoroughly commend. I believe that it would be good to have such a rule, but good order and good manners are something else. If we survive, in the sense of being invited to continue after our statutory year is up in May, we shall be in a position to consider how the Rules might be revised in the light of experience. In the case of a totally new body, there must be a learning curve. Unfortunately, Mr Maginnis, who raised this matter, is not able to be here today. I intend to write to inform him of my conclusion.

Mr Cedric Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. You are quite correct. Yesterday the Business Committee recognized that in respect of the matter of confidentiality the Rules are inadequate.

**FORUM: STANDING COMMITTEE A
(EVIDENCE)**

Mr Cedric Wilson: I should like you, Sir, to rule on a more serious matter. Not only did Mr McBride breach confidentiality, but on Monday his party released to the press a statement to the effect that the Forum and the Public Order Committee had refused the Garvaghy Road residents' request to make a submission. That is inaccurate, and I want you, Mr Chairman, to ask the Alliance Party to correct its statement. At no time did the Forum or the Committee vote to exclude a submission by the Garvaghy Road residents. This was a deliberate attempt to misrepresent the facts and mislead the press.

As the Committee's Chairman, I greatly resent the attack upon the integrity of its members. It is a disgraceful slur to suggest that because people are members of honourable Orange Lodges and other associations they are not fit to serve on the Committee. It is strange that the Women's Coalition, which is perceived to be very much in favour —

The Chairman: You are making a speech.

10.15 am

Mr Cedric Wilson: I am making a point, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: You have made your point very well.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I ask you to deal very seriously with this matter.

The Chairman: I will deal with it in the same way as the request from the Member on my left.

Mr Jim Rodgers: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: Please wait until I reply to this one.

With regard to the point about confidentiality, there is no Rule to prevent a Committee member from coming out and making any statement. However, it is only right that the confidentiality of proceedings should be respected. That applies not only to conversations with media personnel and others but also to statements put out in the manner described.

I want to move on now. We do ourselves little good by going over such matters.

Mr Jim Rodgers: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

TALKS / FORUM

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: There is a very important point that I want you, Mr Chairman, to consider and, in due course, give us your judgement on. Has the Secretary of State been in touch with you about the proposal, being considered by both Governments, that the talks at Stormont be suspended and not just adjourned? Under the legislation the Forum will be unable to meet if the talks are suspended, but it will be able to meet if they are adjourned.

We have seen an orchestrated attack upon the Forum. Last night on a BBC television programme a Member questioned your integrity and that of every other Member. He said that people had been and were being hunted out. I refer to remarks by Mr McBride, a transcript of which I will submit to you, Sir. The House of Commons is going to provide me with a copy. The world knows that we wanted the SDLP to be here, and we made it clear that Sinn Féin could not be excluded from a body to which it had been elected. Their reason for not coming is that they do not want to debate anything in a body where democratic Rules apply.

I am surprised at the lawlessness among Members who are always talking about upholding the law. There are Rules and laws that govern the Forum, and we all have to obey them. But there are some people who cannot abide by laws. That is not democracy.

These are matters of great concern to those of us who are trying to work the Forum. We cannot all get our own way all the time — a lesson that those who are new to politics need to learn quickly.

The Chairman: A lesson that I learned a long time ago is that I cannot always get my own views expressed. I am not going to breach confidentiality by describing how a certain Committee got on yesterday, but if the Member is good enough to give me a transcript of the remarks to which he has referred I will study it to see whether it contains anything serious.

FORUM: STANDING COMMITTEE A (EVIDENCE)

Mr Jim Rodgers: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. As you know, I tried to get in before Dr Paisley.

The Chairman: Well, you are in now.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Thank you.

I wish to refer to remarks attributed to a Mrs Barbara McCabe, a non-elected member of the Women's Coalition, in last night's 'Belfast Telegraph'. Members should study these very carefully. As a member of Standing Committee A, I greatly resent what I regard as a slur on my character and integrity, and I do not intend to allow the matter to rest. I am sick of non-elected people trying to tell us how to run our affairs. According to them, Unionists are always wrong.

The Chairman: I will study that too. It seems that I am going to have a lot of studying to do.

Mr McBride: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: Would it not be a good idea to let us study in serenity?

Mr McBride: Having been mentioned a number of times, I think I am entitled to make a very short and non-controversial comment.

The Chairman: Please make it short.

Mr McBride: With regard to the remarks of Mr Cedric Wilson about comments concerning Members and their associations with Loyal Orders, may I make it clear that neither I nor any other member of the Alliance Party made any such comment. We have no difficulty on that point.

Then there is the question of the Committee's vote not to hear the Garvaghy Road residents. That is a matter of fact, and one stands over it.

FORUM

Mr McBride: As for the attitude of parties here to different views and their tendency to shout people down and drive out dissent, that too is a matter of fact, as is clear to anybody who has been here or has read the Record of Debates.

The Chairman: The Member will have heard my rulings about the ordinary cut and thrust of debate and a certain amount of heckling. It would be a very odd Chamber if we did not have that. However, shouting down is something that I do not approve of.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Or stealing other people's chairs — hooliganism, political vandalism.

The Chairman: There are lots of chairs now. If they come back we will give them their choice.

EDUCATION: FINANCE

Debate resumed on motion (21 February 1997):

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. — [Mr Curran]

The Chairman: I am sure that Mr Benson is boiling to speak in the education debate that we were not able to complete last Friday.

Mr Benson: Before dealing with the question of the cuts, I want to make reference to a press release issued by the Department concerning the overspend by the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I think that most Members have copies.

As the Department did not do so, I want to make it clear that the overspend can be traced back to lack of finance. The South Eastern Board, of which I am chairman, has always taken a very pragmatic approach to resources for schools and, as far as possible, despite Government cut-backs, has tried to protect the child in the classroom. It has tried to help schools to manage deficits in a phased manner to avoid serious damage in the classroom. Until this year it has achieved this by cushioning the impact of very severe cuts through anticipation of additional Government funding in September. This enabled schools to avoid declaring in April more teacher redundancies than were necessary. Unfortunately, owing to the Government's decision to move more funds into the law-and-order budget and the need to claw some money into funds to cover the proposed reduction in income tax, the supplementary allocations from the Department did not materialize this year.

Local management of schools requires the board, through its contingency fund, to make provision for the movement of any unusually high number of pupils, as well as for emergency repair work arising from vandalism. This resulted in a major drain on our finances. With regard to vandalism — a very severe problem — I emphasize that while bodies such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and others in the voluntary sector are allowed to take out insurance, we on the controlled side are not. Thus we have to replace broken windows and damaged computers from our funds. Our contingency fund was exhausted, and when the Department failed to produce additional funds in September we were left in an overspend situation. The public ought to know that this was not the result of bad management. In fact, an over-caring board was given insufficient funds to carry out its function.

Mr Gardiner: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I do not think we have a quorum.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: There is a quorum.

The Chairman: I am very grateful to you, Mr Gardiner, for your scrupulous concern about the quorum question.

Mr Gardiner: We do now have a quorum. I apologize for the interruption, but it is not good to have a debate so sparsely attended.

The Chairman: Mr Benson, are you saying that certain education bodies are not allowed to take out insurance against damage?

Mr Benson: That is correct. The education boards — the controlled sector — are not allowed to take out insurance. Thus, when computers or other items are damaged or destroyed, there is no means of replacing them other than by expenditure from board funds. We have been very caring, as I am sure all the other boards have been. We do not want to have children in classrooms with boarded-up windows. Sometimes the cost of replacing glass runs into many thousands of pounds. The same applies to computers. We have always invested in such replacements, but the additional funding from the Department, which usually came through in September, did not materialize this year. That is how we find ourselves in an overspend situation.

The Chairman: This is news to me.

Mr Benson: I shall now get down to the substance of the motion.

I am very concerned that the funds that schools have received for the financial year 1997-98 are totally insufficient to meet their needs. The resulting cuts will be so severe that there will be irreparable damage to the education system, which has taken years to build up and of which we in Northern Ireland are justly proud.

The allocations are such that with inflation, incremental rises in teachers' salaries and the cost of the teachers' pay settlement, there will be a reduction of 5% to 7% in real terms. As teachers' salaries account for 80% of the budget, some boards will lose 200-plus teaching posts. Some schools will have to make up to 10 teachers redundant, and several of the smaller ones therefore face the prospect of being unable to deliver the statutory curriculum. This will mean school closures and the consequent disruption of families and communities.

Even in the case of schools which can deliver the curriculum, there is no doubt that the quality of education will be seriously damaged by a substantial increase in class sizes. In some schools classes are already quite large. For example, 35 children in a primary 1 class is not uncommon. We believe that the pupil-teacher ratio in Northern Ireland is just adequate to meet children's needs. The 1997-98 financial allocation will result in very high pupil-teacher ratios in all our schools, and class sizes will be unmanageable in some cases.

I am concerned about the rumours of the resignation of governors who find the present situation totally unacceptable. These are all members of the public who volunteer. I would fully understand governors, on being asked to make five or six teachers redundant, saying "We are not going to do it."

The Government continually remind us of the need to raise education standards, yet they continually reduce resources. The impact of mass redundancies on the morale of teachers will be disastrous. There is no doubt that the quality of teaching of those remaining will be seriously diminished.

10.30 am

The Government, while failing adequately to resource schools to meet the statutory requirements, continuously increase the funds earmarked and held back for special initiatives. When various initiatives, including RSSI (the one on standards), were introduced three or four years ago we all looked on that as a great idea. Of course, we thought that they were going to be funded by the Department. But the money has been taken out of school budgets, leaving a great shortfall. This is the wrong way to go about things. Surely the priority should be to meet the basic requirements of the classroom. Teaching should come before discretionary initiatives.

The really serious issue is that over the past three years the Government have refused to finance the teachers' salary rises. This has resulted in a continuous reduction, in real terms, in the amount of money available for education in the classroom. We all know that the future economic and social welfare of Northern Ireland depends on ensuring that the quality of education is enhanced. We must be able to meet the challenges of the global economy and the increasing pressures in a rapidly changing society. If we fail to put pressure on the Government to provide adequate resources for the education of our children, future generations will judge us harshly.

I support the motion.

Mr Neeson: This is a very important issue. In Northern Ireland there is now a major crisis in education. It has been reported that about 550 teaching jobs are at risk. As a former teacher, I realize that the morale of those in the profession is at an all-time low. Bearing in mind the influence of the teaching profession throughout the years of the troubles in Northern Ireland — teachers having dealt with some of the most difficult situations — I regard this as a major slap in the face. The Government are prepared to plunder the education budget to pay for tax cuts and security measures. Education is an easy option when they are cutting.

Northern Ireland is being punished by Michael Ancram and the Department of Education for forcing the Government into a U-turn on the question of the number of education boards. The boards are the piggy in the middle.

On Tuesday Mr Ancram made his announcement about the new capital programme, which now has a budget of £23 million. For the last two years the amount was £111 million. The budget for capital programmes has been decimated. It is a disgrace that the Government can get away with forcing such unjustified and serious cuts on the people of Northern Ireland. The Minister referred to the fact that some funds would now come from the private finance initiative. He said that six major new projects are being pursued under this scheme. He went on

“Coupled with the prospect of additional capital investment of over £50 million under the private finance initiative, it will lead to a further improvement in the schools' and colleges' estates and is also good news for the Northern Ireland construction industry generally.”

Would that that were true. Would that that could be achieved.

The Minister said that if good value-for-money PFI proposals could be secured, these would lead to new or improved premises for the schools and colleges. I suggest to him that while PFI may have got off the ground in other parts of the United Kingdom, it certainly has not got off the ground in Northern Ireland. PFI is aimed at major capital projects, and a place the size of Northern Ireland simply will not have such projects in great number. The Minister, I suggest, is misleading us by suggesting that PFI can be the saviour, that it can make up for the financial cut-backs that he has forced on us.

I have to register very deep concern and anger at the Minister's refusal to finance the East Antrim Integrated College. That school had a proposed pupil intake of 126 for the coming year, but the Government are not going to provide the money. One wonders whether they are as supportive of integrated education as they try to suggest. I am glad that, owing to the determination of the parents, the project will go ahead. They decided to go it alone.

At the moment there is a great sense of frustration among teachers, parents, pupils and even the trade unions. In last night's 'Belfast Telegraph', Tom McKee, head of NAS/UWT, the teachers' union to which I used to belong, demonstrated clearly the frustrations that are now being felt. According to him, the education authorities are authorities in name only. They are dependent on Government hand-outs, under-funded, fragmented and increasingly irrelevant. Above all, they are not delivering equality of treatment for pupils. This is a sad reflection on the Department of Education and the Government. Not only is there frustration among the bodies to which I have referred, but, as Mr Benson has shown, the education boards are experiencing problems because of Government cuts.

The whole range of services is affected — the lollipop-men (a problem with which we are all well acquainted), books, equipment and youth facilities. And I must deplore the Government's refusal to bring Northern Ireland into line with other parts of the United Kingdom in respect of nursery provision. The people of this province are being treated as second-class citizens. This is indicative of the Government's attitude to us.

And there are other cut-backs. This morning I received this letter from a constituent in East Antrim:

"On 27 February I had cause to contact the student awards department of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. My inquiry was on the subject of discretionary awards or grants. The member of staff whom I spoke to informed me that, although applications would be received, it was doubtful that discretionary awards would be made this year."

Education at tertiary level will soon be affordable only to the wealthy. Once again, the people in need are the ones being left out of the system.

Good education goes to the very heart of a progressive society. Yesterday the Economy Committee dealt with the question of cut-backs in workshop training. Even those leaving school at the age of 16 face difficulties. Provision for workshop training facilities has been cut back throughout Northern Ireland. Then there is reduced provision for research at the universities.

If we are genuinely concerned about education we must face up to the financial realities. The 1p in the pound that was taken off tax could have raised an extra £1.7 billion

for education, health and other services in Northern Ireland. The democratic deficit here is at the core of Northern Ireland's current problems. The people who make decisions for us are accountable to nobody. The sooner we can reach an agreement on an Assembly to make the faceless bureaucrats accountable, the better for us all.

I support the motion. Even since it was tabled a crisis has arisen. What we resolve should reflect the nature of that crisis.

Mr Nesbitt: I note Mr Neeson's comments regarding the democratic deficit, and I shall return to that important matter.

In the Economy Committee's meetings with various representatives of the business community the need for an educated work-force kept coming through. With all the technological development that is taking place, and with the evolution of what is called a global economy, this is an absolute necessity. No longer are people in jobs for life. There will be a continuing need for retraining, as well as for education in the general sense. This is why the education cuts are so detrimental to Northern Ireland.

We all realize that this province is highly dependent upon the public sector. People are living longer, and it costs more to keep them in good health. But the necessary money must be found for education. It is a well-known fact that Northern Ireland has very high achievers at "A" level, but there is a lengthy tail of very low achievement. This is an area in which more finance is needed.

There is a political dimension. The Secretary of State often talks about shifting funds to security from education and industrial development. I heard Mr McClure of the Institute of Directors on Radio Ulster this morning. I agree with him that if what is being done here were to happen in Birmingham, it would not be tolerated. I refer, of course, to the transfer of funds from education to security. We suffer from the block-grant problem. When money is needed for special security measures it is taken from education, housing and health. That would not happen anywhere else in the United Kingdom. So I endorse what Mr McClure said. Security is used as an excuse for the reduction in education spending. As I listened to Radio Ulster this morning I noted that nobody from the Department of Education was available for comment. The kernel of the problem is the lack of accountability — the democratic deficit.

10.45 am

But I will leave Mr Neeson's comments about an Assembly and refer to a point made by his Colleague yesterday on the 'Hearts and Minds' programme. According to Mr McBride, Unionism is busy saying no and is not seeking an accommodation. As I have often said, that is untrue. Unionism does want to make progress within Northern Ireland. Unionism wants a governing structure in which Unionists and Nationalists work together for the good of Northern Ireland. It is they who should decide where the funds go. We want accountability to the people of Northern Ireland, but unfortunately we are faced with a certain Nationalist attitude.

The Chairman: We are discussing education.

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, Mr Chairman, and I am responding to a point about accountability.

We are faced with Nationalism that says one thing: "You cannot have any form of devolved government in Northern Ireland unless you agree to an all-Ireland dimension." That is political blackmail of the highest order in the Frameworks document, which the two Governments commend to us as the way forward. So I say to Mr Neeson that accountability is indeed the kernel, but I also ask him "To whom do you point the finger with regard to the reason for the lack of accountability?"

Mrs Beattie: It is with great concern that I speak about the proposed cuts in the education service. Northern Ireland is about to experience its biggest-ever financial crisis. The five boards are bracing themselves to make unprecedented cuts of about £16 million. It is expected that between 500 and 600 jobs will go. The vast majority of these will be teaching posts, and many of the redundancies will be compulsory. One senior administrator has said "They are the biggest cuts we have had to make since the boards were established in 1973." The greatest number of job losses — expected to be 200 — will occur in the South Eastern Board's area. About 60 teaching jobs and 30 non-teaching jobs — most of them headquarters staff posts — are forecast to go in the Southern Board's area. The Belfast Board anticipates a £3 million deficit and 75 redundancies, while the Western Board is looking at cuts of £2.7 million and the loss of about 90 jobs — 60 to 70 of them teaching posts. The North Eastern board will be the least seriously affected, with cuts being kept to an estimated £1.3 million, compared to the £3 million at first feared. However, up to 100 jobs could be axed. A spokesman warned that there would be a severe reduction in the funds available to run key education services over the next 12 months.

I am sure that Members need no reminding that morale among teachers is at its lowest level ever. It is increasingly obvious that more and more teachers are being treated for serious ailments. Recently a teacher was sent home and put on invalidity allowance after being diagnosed as suffering from occupational stress. And there will be many more similar cases when schools are forced to shed staff. Class sizes will go up considerably. For example, a primary school in East Antrim combined last year's three P6 classes into two P7s, although the number of pupils remained the same. There will be fewer teaching staff, and they will be trying to cope with an increased work-load. Young teachers will be denied long-term employment. Subbing is their only source of work and their only modest chance of gaining experience.

In conclusion, may I say that I have found that the Government are simply not putting enough money into health and education services in Northern Ireland.

I support the motion.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Like my Colleague Mr Nesbitt, I want to refer to the interesting speech made last evening by Mr Alan McClure of the Institute of Directors, of which you, Sir, used to be chairman. We need more people like Mr McClure from commerce and industry to speak out. When we go to meet Ministers we are told "You politicians are always complaining." Those of us who are members of education and library boards are dismayed at the way in which, in many cases, people from the industrial and commercial sectors are

interested only in doing the Government's dirty work of implementing cuts. This is terribly sad. What we need is a concerted effort involving politicians and community representatives, as well as the business sector, so that the pressure can really be put on.

I am dismayed at the letter we received this morning from Baroness Denton. I was going to suggest that Michael Ancram, the Minister responsible for education, be invited to address the Forum on the reasons for these cuts and that we be given an opportunity to question him, but I shall just quote from the last paragraph of the letter:

"As the Training and Employment Agency officials have already explained the position to the Forum's Economy Committee, I feel there is little I wish to add to what they have told you and therefore have to decline your kind invitation. Nevertheless, I hope that the Forum Members will find this reply helpful."

I am suspicious. Is this yet another Minister who does not want to get involved in the Forum or recognize it? We need to have these people here to probe them about what is behind the cuts, which I do not for one minute accept have anything to do with events in Northern Ireland last summer. Ministers seem to forget the previous 25 years of continuous IRA terrorism.

Furthermore, I have been unhappy for some time with Michael Ancram's contribution to the Department of Education. I firmly believe that, as in the case of many other Departments, it is senior civil servants who dictate policy and decide where the money should go. Like Mr Neeson and Mr Nesbitt, I am concerned about the unaccountability of Ministers who fly in one day and out the next. They are not answerable to the people of Northern Ireland. It is disgusting.

Just 10 days ago I was on a Belfast Education and Library Board deputation to Rathgael. We wanted to talk to Michael Ancram about what is happening in education. With regard to the disgraceful decision to remove the lollipop patrols, we thought that the Minister might be sympathetic. Five minutes into our meeting he made it crystal clear that there would be no further finance for any education board. He was not really prepared to listen. We were pushed to the side.

We need a devolved Parliament or Assembly, with people who were brought up in Northern Ireland in charge. Otherwise we will find ourselves in this situation, whether the Government are Tory or Labour. My party wants a Stormont body with meaningful powers. We will continue to work to achieve this, but we are not prepared to have cross-border bodies with executive or legislative powers. We have no difficulty whatsoever about bodies to discuss matters of mutual interest, such as education, agriculture, health, training and the environment. The people who are always sniping at Ulster Unionism should realize that this party has worked night and day to bring such a situation about. But talk of a new Ireland, a united Ireland, a 32-county Irish Republic, will get us nowhere.

Our school buildings are now the worst in the United Kingdom.

The Chairman: You are back on education. Good.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Buildings are crumbling. Schools cannot afford to replace windows. They have to use hardboard — even cardboard. That is how disgraceful things are. We have mobile classrooms and totally demoralized teachers. Consider the number of head teachers and others who want to get out because of the pressures, the stresses and the numerous changes. And who has been bringing about all the changes? Let us not blame Michael Ancram. Let us point in the right direction — at senior civil servants, many of whom have no experience whatsoever in teaching. We need an overhaul in the Department. Maybe that would result in new ideas and a bit of encouragement for hard-pressed teachers.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I share the Member's condemnation of the civil servants who apply this policy, but what is wrong and corrupt comes from the Government. Until we get rid of them, or their policy, we will not have a better education system.

Mr Jim Rodgers: I accept some of what the Member says, but I doubt whether a Labour administration would be any better.

Another thing that concerns me is the major disparity between controlled and maintained schools. There is gross unfairness in the treatment of controlled schools in respect of allocations from the Government's social deprivation fund. One of the determining factors is the number of children at a school entitled to free meals. This matter needs to be examined very carefully. There is no doubt that the whole education re-organization, including finance, has been a disaster.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that one example of the discrimination against the controlled sector was seen this week in the capital building programme — 75% of the finance going to the maintained sector (a ratio of three to one)?

Mr Jim Rodgers: Yes. I was going to refer to the way in which the Minister, on a visit to Belmont school, which is in my area, made a big point of this expenditure. What he did not tell us was what Mr Weir has just said. I have repeatedly made the point that I am against discrimination of any kind. I hate sectarianism. I want to live and let live. I want people to work together for the good of Northern Ireland in particular and the United Kingdom in general. The Minister is not fooling us. He needs to address this problem now. We are watching very carefully, and we will expose what is going on. We are not at all happy with these expenditure shares. What is being done has got to stop now.

I have great pleasure in supporting the Labour Party's motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: This debate is integrally related to the security situation. The Government have made it clear that these cuts are being made because money has to be transferred from education to security. In our discussions, that must be kept in mind. The whole subject is overshadowed by security. There is no escape from that. If the Government were dealing with the IRA, making headway towards defeating the terrorists, we could take some comfort in doing without certain moneys. But security policy is totally disastrous. If the Government had taken a large chunk from Manchester's education budget following the bomb there, the people would have been outraged at being told that there would be no lollipop men to see their children across the street. And the same applies in the case of Canary Wharf.

11.00 am

What is happening? It is the good people, the law-abiding people, the decent people, in both sections of the community who are penalized by this decision. We are being punished for something we had nothing to do with. Who had everything to do with it? A Government whose security policies are disastrous. We have heard much about the Garvaghy Road and Drumcree, and no doubt we will hear a lot more. If the right decision had been taken in respect of the Garvaghy Road we would not be in this situation. We are being judged for something for which we have no responsibility. In the House of Lords this week Baroness Denton said

"Some may well find it abhorrent that in this Bill we should be contemplating the decommissioning of the weapon which was used to murder Stephen Restorick. The necessary loss of evidence which decommissioning would entail must be weighed against the opportunity to ensure that the weapons will never be used to do murder again. I emphasize that there will be no decommissioning of the crime itself, although we are destroying all the evidence."

That is the nonsense that is put down the throats of the Ulster people. It is that flawed security policy which lies at the core of the cancer in the body politic.

Today Mr Neeson beat his chest about being a defender of devolution. Let us look at the history of attempts to secure devolution in Northern Ireland. Which party destroyed any hope of our getting devolution? It was Mr Neeson's party — the Alliance Party — whose former Leader went down, cap in hand, and said "You must destroy the Prior Assembly."

Mr Neeson: That is not correct.

The Chairman: We are straying from the motion, which is rather specific. May we leave it there.

Mr Neeson: This goes to the core.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is most interesting that Mr Neeson can tell us that he is for devolution, although his party opposes any moves towards it. Alliance was more at home in the Forum in Dublin, shaking hands with Gerry Adams and the destroyers of this province, than it is interested in getting proper devolution.

Mr Neeson: This is factually incorrect, and Dr Paisley knows it.

The Chairman: Perhaps we could get back to education. If Mr Neeson has been walking the road to Jericho, that is very good. May we please get back to education.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am trying to give Mr Neeson a lesson in good education. He was too long in a bad education system, which corrupted his thinking. It is about time he heard some of the facts. I was there, and I know what happened when Mr Cushnahan — now a Member of the European Parliament, representing a Southern Irish constituency — was the Alliance Party's Leader. That is the sort of Leader that Alliance has had — shaking hands with Sinn Féin and then running away.

Mr Neeson: I must be allowed to correct the —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: If the Member wants to raise a point of order let him do so, but he cannot —

The Chairman: Are you making a point of order, Mr Neeson?

Mr Neeson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. The Member is not giving the full facts. Believe it or not, it was the DUP and the Alliance Party that kept the Northern Ireland Assembly going while the Ulster Unionists boycotted it. We left because it was not fulfilling its statutory function.

The Chairman: You have spoken.

I hoped that we might have a 15-minute break after this debate. May we now move on.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: An old preacher used to say that if you threw a stone among a lot of dogs the one that yelped loudest had been hit hardest. I am glad that the weapon I have used today has got under the skin of the Gentleman from Carrickfergus.

I believe in devolution, but devolution is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland alone, not for the people of the Irish Republic. I reject any ties with cross-border bodies, whether consultative or anything else, because they would be only the foot in the door to our destruction. Let us have an Assembly of Ulster people for Ulster people. And I mean all the Ulster people, regardless of their religion.

Why will the Nationalists not come to the Forum and look us in the face? I heard a very strange thing today. We were told that parties here were against these things. Which parties? Parties that represent infinitesimal percentages of the population. Some of them could not get anybody elected to the Forum but got in by means of the wonderful new top-up system. The strange thing is that topping-up was not done in proportion to parties' electoral support. Every party in the top 10 was given two seats. The Official Unionist Party, as the largest group, and the Democratic Unionist Party, as the second-largest, would have had six top-up seats if there had been proportionality.

The Chairman: We are getting very far away from the motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: You can blame the Government, Mr Chairman. They tied this into security. In the House of Commons we always say that when the Government tie anything into anything you can say anything about anything. I hope that you understand that, Sir.

The Chairman: You are giving a very good demonstration.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: This Forum has given you a crash course in political debate and argument.

The Chairman: It certainly has.

Mr Jim Rodgers: He has done a good job.

The Chairman: How good the job has been, I will leave to Members.

Mr Hussey: As I rise to speak in this debate on education cut-backs I wonder if I am perhaps one of the 550 under threat.

As a former member of a teachers' union I agree with Mr Neeson. Mr Allen, of my union — the Ulster Teachers' Union — described the situation as obscene and immoral. The areas that are likely to suffer have been well aired: teacher-pupil ratios; the library service; the youth service; curriculum support; and the push, which is being discussed by the Education Committee, for an improvement in pre-school provision. All these things are going to be affected by budget cuts. Then there are the summer schemes. I agree with the chairman of the Institute of Directors, who said last night "What message are the Government giving to our young people when we are witnessing what has been described as the dismantling of our education service?"

A member of one board described the block grant as the worst financial settlement he had seen in over 25 years. Add to this the drastically reduced capital budget. What is provided can best be described as a token sum. The Government are condemning the physical structures of education to ongoing decline. To what sort of educational environment are our children being condemned while, as was pointed out last week, the Department's mandarins in Bangor plan to spend millions on their palatial surroundings?

Mr Jim Rodgers: Mr Hussey refers to the mandarins at Bangor and the palatial buildings they are going to have. We learned last week that the money is coming from the Department of the Environment, not the Department of Education. I understand that this is now Government policy. Where the money will come from ultimately I do not know, but it is an important point.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Member for that information. It appears that at some stage we will be discussing lack of money in the Department of the Environment if funds are going to be diverted all over the place.

For many years boards have been endeavouring to give value for money, but the financial noose has been gradually tightened. Now somebody has come along and grabbed the feet of the boards and given them a tug.

Like everyone else in this Chamber, I regard education as an investment in our future. With the message that the Government are sending to our children, what hope is there? There will be serious pain, and it is the ordinary decent people of Northern Ireland who will suffer.

Mr Weir: I have great pleasure in supporting this motion. My remarks will be brief, not least because all aspects of the subject have been covered.

Quite clearly there is a massive problem in education. When the head of the Institute of Directors says that there is a crisis and that the Government are to blame, we have to sit up and take notice, mainly because the institute is not an organization noted for kicking the Government. In the last few weeks Ministers have created a number of smoke-screens. The first, which has been gone into in great detail, is the idea that the education budget is suffering because of escalating security costs. If extra money for security were being spent well, it would not be so bad, but, as has been highlighted today, we do not have an effective security policy. In any event, additional security expenditure should be covered by new money, as the protection of the citizen is the first duty of any Government. What we see is a smoke-screen. The Government are using the deteriorating political and security situation to enforce cut-backs, and I think that they are doing it gleefully.

The second smoke-screen, which has also been mentioned, is the capital building programme that was announced this week. There was great Government publicity about a handful of schools that were getting some money. What about the large number across the province whose need is very great but which have been ignored? My constituency is in the area of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, in the whole of which there is not a single penny to be spent on capital works. For the last 20 years Bangor has needed an additional secondary school. Provision at Glenlola and at Bangor Girls' High in particular is inadequate, and has been for as long as I have been involved, yet not a penny has been spent. Glenlola — the girls' grammar school — has 24 prefab classrooms. It is a shame and a disgrace that should not be tolerated. And North Down's need is writ large across Northern Ireland.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I am sure that the Member shares my deep concern at the fact that Government promises of money are not necessarily honoured. In last year's financial round a school in my constituency was promised money for a new-build project, but within eight months the Government retracted and the money went to a school in a different sector.

Mr Weir: I take that on board. We all know that Government public-expenditure commitments are at times inadequate. Projects can be given the go-ahead and then have the rug pulled from under them.

A deep problem in the university sector has been highlighted. The league tables, about which the universities are fairly unhappy at times, have shown a slight improvement for both Queen's and the University of Ulster, but it has to be said that among the 59 old universities — those that are not former polytechnics — Queen's was ranked 49th and the University of Ulster 56th in the research tables. There is a great danger that universities such as Queen's and the University of Ulster, which provide a good service, are being starved of cash. The low performance indicated in the tables suggests a need for an urgent injection of cash. Over the past 10 years we have seen a massive increase in the number of students at Queen's, yet staffing and financial provision, taking inflation into account, have barely changed. There is clearly a need for much greater investment in third-level education.

Much is made of the advantage of prevention. It is always said that prevention is better than cure. We hear about preventive medicine and crime prevention. In this respect there is a vital role for the Government in education. By putting money into the education of young people we would help to prevent many problems in later years. Making savings in the

education budget is, in many ways, a false economy, and it will damage Northern Ireland in years to come. Partly because of its grammar-school system, Northern Ireland has a good reputation in terms of academic success. Much of this can be attributed to the hard work of teachers. It is an ethos which is encouraging for the parents and children of both communities. But these potential cuts put that in grave danger.

11.15 am

It may be a cliché, but children really do represent the future of Northern Ireland, and if we are not prepared to invest in that future we face a very bleak society. I urge all Members to support this motion.

The Chairman: I call on Mr Curran to sum up.

Mr Curran: I am very privileged today in that my son and two of his student colleagues from St Patrick's Grammar School are in the Public Gallery. I am delighted that they have been able to come to listen to what for them is probably one of the most important debates that will ever take place in the Forum.

In my adult life I have had an extremely privileged existence, but it was not always so. I come from a very poor, working-class background. My father was a manual worker, but I had one tremendous advantage in life: I had a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, and they instilled in me, from my very earliest days, their understanding, as working-class people, of the importance of education. I was one of the first products of the 1947 Education Act, and through all the time I went to school and on to college and university they impressed upon me the importance of education. My father was an unlearned man, but he used to say to me "Son, educate that you might be free." He was not talking about freedom in a political sense; he was talking about freedom of the individual. He said "Education is easy carried. The most important thing that anyone can have is education."

We have discussed this question in the Forum's Education Committee, chaired so ably by Mr Gibson. When we were talking about administration one point that came out very clearly was the substantial number of young people who are leaving school without educational qualifications. Mr Benson referred to this today, saying that the future of Northern Ireland depends on an educated work-force. Without education, our young people are going nowhere. It is vitally important that education be given its proper place.

Labour came to the Forum wanting to talk about social and economic matters. It grieves me to hear divergence and differences of opinion, because there is so much that unites us. Today's debate on the whole issue of education has clearly illustrated how deeply we all feel — regardless of our politics — about this extremely important matter.

I turned on the television this morning to learn, with great glee, that the Wirral South by-election had been won by the Labour candidate with a majority of 7,500. To turn a Conservative majority of some 8,000 into a Labour majority of 7,500 six weeks before a general election has given me one hope for the future — that within six weeks a Labour administration will be in power in Britain. The Labour Party has made it very clear that education is at the top of its list of social and economic priorities. It is incumbent on

everyone in Northern Ireland, in taking note of this, to recognize that we must bring every influence to bear at Westminster, or wherever, to ensure that the province's education service is given the resources it so richly deserves.

We have all talked about the crisis. It is a major crisis that we are facing — redundancy for 550 teachers. I meet teachers regularly. I talk to the unions, and they tell me "Disaster is staring us in the face." When Michael Ancram and his colleagues talk about what they are doing for education and how they are improving the classroom setting, who believes it? None of us.

During the course of this debate I have been extremely heartened at the unanimity among all the political parties represented in the Chamber. My only regret is that we cannot have the same unanimity on all matters that affect Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

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.

The Chairman: As somebody who has much to do with the Institute of Directors, which does not get many plaudits, I shall send a copy of this debate to Mr Alan McClure, the institute's chairman. It will be encouraging for him and for his 700 members.

The meeting was suspended at 11.26 am and resumed at 11.49 am.

CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY

The Chairman: I call on Mr David Ervine to propose the motion on the Child Support Agency.

Mr Ervine: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum, recognizing the hardships incurred by single mothers and the unduly harsh assessments made on fathers with second families, calls upon Her Majesty's Government to reassess the role and functions of the Child Support Agency, with a view to:

1. prioritizing the need to locate absent fathers; and
2. introducing fair criteria for assessing fathers, taking into consideration second families.

I do not propose to enter into statistics or lists of facts and figures about the Child Support Agency or its work — I am more inclined to look upon this as a human issue. From a cold and particularly brutal Government that legislated to set up what is erroneously called the Child Support Agency, this is a mechanism merely to cut back on state benefit.

The evidence for that is that when the agency began its work, when it started its illustrious career, it immediately targeted those fathers who were already making contributions to their children, based on decisions of the courts. Those who were making their contributions and honouring their commitments as the state saw fit found themselves hounded and pushed below the poverty line — especially those who had second families. Little attempt has been made by the Child Support Agency to deal with the difficulty of absent fathers who have reasonable incomes and who should be doing the moral thing and supporting the children that they deigned to bring into this world. They have abdicated that responsibility, but, rather than tackle the difficulty, the agency deals with those who are easy targets.

There can be no moral argument about who should support children. But to call this body the Child Support Agency is inaccurate when all that happens is that the benefit that a mother has coming in to sustain her home and children is cut, pound for pound, with every contribution from the father. That is legitimate if we can find the absent fathers, but absent fathers are not being found, and when on rare occasions they are found, it is the responsibility of the mothers to identify them. The Child Support Agency, I am afraid, does not do its investigative work and seek out those who abdicate the moral responsibility of looking after their children.

For the agency the choice is very clear: it should target those who immorally refuse to do that which society dictates they should do. Instead, it demands that the mother disclose the identity of the father. The father may well be on income support, or he may live a few streets away and have a history of physical abuse towards the woman. The woman, in her desperate need, is told "If you do not tell us who the father is, we will take punitive action against you." She tells who the brutal father is, and he resumes his domestic violence, seeking her out in the shops, perhaps at her place of work, or wherever she may be.

It hardly suggests that the Child Support Agency is living up to its name when we find circumstances in which children are not being supported any better than they were — indeed, sometimes they are worse off — by the honourable parent. There are many cases of this. For instance, a man, having been divorced for 18 years, decides that he will start a second family. He does so on the basis that he has the wherewithal to pay for it and on the basis of the amounts he has to pay already decided by the court at the time of divorce. He is an honourable man, deciding to start a second family that he can support, and along comes the Child Support Agency. I know of one case where the man's requirement went from £40 per week to £95 per week, leaving him, his wife and his new-born child in very debilitating circumstances.

If that is the answer to child support, which children are we going to support? It is absolutely honourable and fair that the first family should be adequately looked after, but is it reasonable to push the second family far below the poverty level? Is it real, or is it a mechanism of the Government to cut benefit? Members may not agree with every sentiment that I will expound in the next few minutes, but they will surely agree that the mechanism set in place most certainly does not support children. Court-room agreements made amicably between two parties at the time of separation or divorce have now been thrown out of the window and are no longer acceptable. Two people can make an arrangement designated by the court, but now the court immediately demands that details of the children be passed to the

Child Support Agency, which then deals in the business of cutting state benefit, rather than supporting the children.

I have argued this basically on the human level; I did not ask the Child Support Agency for facts or figures. I hope that in the debate we can continue to flag up the human tragedy that is, in the case of the first family, the broken home and no benefit at all, beyond what it was getting in state benefit, and, in the case of the second family, people being driven below the poverty line because the father is prepared to do the honourable thing and carry out his duty as seen by the courts.

I hope that all Members will accept the motion because it calls on the Government to look at this matter. One hopes that it will be a new Government that has the job of doing so. This is an opportunity for the representatives of the people of Northern Ireland to flag up their dismay, as they did in the case of the jobseeker's allowance, and as they did about how we suffer severely because of the security situation — and Dr Paisley pointed adequately to the Government's attitude to security. What is happening is absolutely unreal and absolutely unfair, and I ask the Forum to support the motion.

Mr Clarke: I rise to support the motion.

There should be some investigation into this agency. I must admit that when it was mooted, and when it came into being, many of us agreed with it. It seemed that it would be targeting those fathers who did not want any responsibility to look after or contribute towards their children. We saw the Child Support Agency as a way of making them accept their responsibilities. But when you look at the activities of the agency you find that those fathers are not the ones being targeted: it is the responsible fathers who are doing their bit, who love their children and who want to care for them as best they can.

Recently one of my constituents came to me and asked if I would go with him to the appeal board of the Child Support Agency. It is a sad case. When the family broke up, the wife left the home and went to live with her mother, taking the two children. They came to an arrangement that he would pay so much per week. When the Child Support Agency got onto the case it said that any money would have to be paid through the agency. An assessor looked at the case and determined that my constituent should be paying less than he was actually giving his wife. But he wanted to support his children, to do all he could for them, and he agreed to continue paying the same amount. He decided to mortgage his house and give his wife half its value — all to support the children, to help them in every way he could.

Then, on reading the Child Support Agency's booklet, he discovered that if you contribute a portion of money or a lump sum you can be reassessed and have this taken into consideration. So he asked for a review of the case. In the meantime, he had been working for a firm, and at certain times of the year he had to do overtime. This meant working late at nights and sometimes on Saturdays and Sundays for about two months. Then the work would level out and he would have normal hours. The new assessor asked for details of all his earnings for the past year, and his firm supplied a computer print-out. During the year in question he had been taken seriously ill and had had to go into hospital for a serious operation. He was off work for about six months. His firm had let him go back at reduced hours until he was fit enough again to work normally. The assessor increased his payments

by over 30%. When assessed in the previous year he had been earning more but was asked to pay less.

At the appeal board questions were put to the representative of the Child Support Agency. He was asked how he had arrived at the amount and where he had got it. It appears that a three-month period is picked, and the assessor had deliberately chosen the period of high earnings when the man was working overtime and had completely ignored the times when he was off ill or working for a lower wage.

This was blatant crucifying of someone who was trying to do his bit. The board threw the assessment out, and he won his appeal. But it should not have come to that. The chairman of the board said to me "You must understand that this is a young department and it will make mistakes." I have my doubts about whether it was a mistake.

12.00

Mr Weir: Will the Member also take into account that distress and distrust have been caused in families by administrative mix-ups and mistakes? People have been written to who have no connection whatsoever with the child referred to. At times a letter has been for someone with the same name in the same town.

Mr Hunter: Does the Member agree that another sad problem is that persons who have been so wrongfully accused have absolutely no legal redress? It causes considerable concern that you cannot take appropriate action against this Government body.

Mr Clarke: I certainly agree with everything that has been said. The motion calls on the Government to introduce fair criteria. This matter should be looked at thoroughly.

I support the motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I support the motion. This is a human problem. We realize, as I think everyone in the Forum does, what happens when a marriage breaks up. Children go through a terrible period, almost of despair sometimes. Then cases are reopened by this so-called Child Support Agency.

Today the Government are not supporting the child. They are supporting a system that brings them financial benefit. That is what this is all about. It is a way for the Government to get out of people money that they should be paying to those who are in need.

What Mr Ervine said about the first family is right. But why should the second family be driven under the poverty line? What is more, why should an agreement entered into in the courts on separation be unravelled? I had a most tragic case of a family breaking up. I have fought many such cases on appeal at the board. The family had a court settlement. The home was sold, the money was divided, and all was settled. After a while the father married again. Then the Child Support Agency wrote to him and said that he would have to make certain commitments concerning his children. It demanded that he pay something like £110 per week to his first family. This devastated him. He had a nervous breakdown and, as a result, his second marriage broke up.

All over the country we have the litter, the debris, of broken families because of the Child Support Agency and the disgraceful way it handles people. In another case that I handled, a man who happened to have a name similar to that of someone the agency wanted to contact was notified that he was to be investigated about a child. His wife opened the envelope. When he came home he had an irate wife with a hatchet in her hand, saying "You never told me about this." He said "It is not true." "Oh," she said. "It is true. It is on Government paper." He had a terrible time getting out of this. We laugh, and rightly so, for there is humour in it, but there was no humour for the man or his wife. Nor was there humour for the children of the second marriage to which I have referred. This is a disgrace, and the body concerned should be put out of existence altogether.

The whole system needs to be looked at again. When the Bill to set up the Child Support Agency was passed in the House of Commons we were told that it was going to go after the fathers who would not take any responsibility for their children. We were told that there would be a detective system, that it would find these people and would make them pay up. It has done nothing of the sort. It is the innocent husband, the innocent father, the man who did right by his first family and who is trying to do right by his second family who has become the criminal and been pilloried. We need to say today that we are against what is happening and tell the Government that they must look again. And as for all the excuses the Child Support Agency makes, if this is what a department does when it is young, God help us when it gets to old age.

Mr McMichael: I too support the motion, and I thank Mr Ervine for bringing it forward.

Many people are suffering directly and being persecuted because of the actions of the Child Support Agency. An important point that has already been touched on is that the people who are being targeted by the agency are the ones who are easiest to find — those who have already been through the court system and have done right by a previous marriage.

The terms of a settlement are reached in court, and nine times out of 10 it is amicable. One of the considerations taken on board in reaching a settlement is the welfare of any children of the marriage. But then the Child Support Agency comes in and changes everything. As Dr Paisley has said, it unravels what has already been agreed in the courts.

Many people are suffering because of the actions of the Child Support Agency. The welfare of the child has to be paramount in all our minds — of course it does — and I fully support measures to ensure that the child is protected. But is the welfare of the child being advanced by the agency? It is not. The agency does not put any more money into the hands of the person who has custody. The Government offset payments against the money that they pay out. The only people who benefit are the Government themselves. The child does not benefit, nor does the mother. In fact, in more and more cases, if the mother is on state benefits, they are offset. In the case of some single-parent families the mother's only source of income is that which is directly related to the agency.

Fathers are being persecuted and hounded by the Child Support Agency. Friends of mine have gone through the court process and through the traumatic experience of marriage

break-up but have ended up on fairly amicable terms with their former wives. But they are now being persecuted. They have had to leave well-paid jobs because they are actually better off on the dole. Never mind what that does to a person's pocket after years of satisfactorily keeping up the maintenance for his dependants. Think about what it does to a person's self-esteem when he has to sign on every fortnight rather than go to work every day. This is not because of inability to do the job, but because the Government have forced him onto the dole. It is something that we need to look at.

Another aspect that has already been mentioned is those fathers who go into second marriages. It is not just the father who suffers, but the entire family. His second tier of dependence may mean not just new children but also elderly parents. That is not taken into consideration in any way by the Child Support Agency.

Let us look at the agency itself. Where there is a need for sensitivity because of trauma, distress and sometimes very difficult circumstances, we have civil servants, not guidance counsellors. They are called the Child Support Agency. Well, there is very little support for families when they go in and turn everything upside-down. All they want to know about is getting money. The psychological impact on the families does not matter — they do not give a damn about that. They just want their money.

We need a system that is sensitive to the problems and is efficient. Mr Clarke talked about the inefficiency of the agency. In the short period of its existence two cases against it have already been supported by the Ombudsman. These were cases of inefficiency and wrong-doing by the agency in its approach to particular matters, and many hundreds of others are being brought forward as protests. There has to be a system which deals with this matter in a sensitive, practical and efficient way. It needs to be taken out of the hands of a body like the Child Support Agency. There must be some kind of family court or tribunal system to look into all the contributing factors. And it is of paramount importance to ensure that the maintenance and welfare of the child are protected. We must also ensure that the system does not persecute families, making an even more negative impact on society as a whole.

I support the motion. I call on the Government to dismantle the Child Support Agency and put in place a system which will truly deal with the needs and welfare of children and with the very complicated issues that come from the breakdown of marriages. Unfortunately, the truth is that the only function of the agency is to try to protect the Government's pocket. But none of us should be surprised about that. At present 90% of Government policy is directed by such motives.

Mr Eric Smyth: I am glad about the way this debate is going, though I was a bit worried at the beginning. But there is something that needs to be pointed out. Where are the Members from the Women's Coalition? They tell us that we men do not fight for women's issues, yet 90% of the people here fighting for women are men, and the Coalition — the great defender of the women of the province — is not here. They are like wee children running into their little room crying "Mummy, somebody will not give us our ball".

A Member: Steve McBride drove them out.

Mr Eric Smyth: Who?

A Member: Steve McBride.

Mr Eric Smyth: Oh well, that is Mr McBride for you.

They are not really interested in the issues unless they get their own way. They have to grow up. Many's the time we all get flack. I get more than most people, but I am still here. I stay and stand my ground. We have to learn that this is what politics is all about.

12.15 pm

I am a great believer in the concept of the Child Support Agency — the idea that irresponsible fathers should be caught and made to pay up to support their own children. It is not the responsibility of the state to look after my children; it is my responsibility. I brought them into the world, and I am responsible for looking after them. Every man is responsible for his family. We know of people who have children all over the place and run away from their responsibilities. It is right for a mother to denounce and name the father of her child, so that he can be made to pay for the fun he had and the fact that he left somebody with a child. That that is the proper procedure, but, as Members have said today, the real issue is that the Government are only out to save money. They are not interested in the welfare of the child.

My wife and I are foster-parents. We foster children that come from problem homes. We had one child whose father entered into a second marriage. His second wife, who wanted nothing to do with his boys, threw a child out. And he allowed that to happen. I have no sympathy for people like that. The authorities could not take enough from them, so far as I am concerned. The man I am talking about should be prepared to take responsibility for his child — a child who now has serious mental problems that we and social workers have to deal with.

There is also another side to the matter. There are genuine cases where a man whose marriage breaks up, for whatever reason, is looking after his family. He gets married again and continues to look after the children, but then this organization — the Child Support Agency — comes in and upsets things. We all thought that it was meant to catch those who were not meeting their responsibilities as men.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Does the Member agree that this agency does not operate as was intended? Any study of the legislation and, indeed, of Hansard shows quite clearly that Parliament had a very different intention. Crafty civil servants have twisted this into a thieving and, indeed, child-slapping-down agency. It is not a child-supporting agency.

Mr Eric Smyth: I entirely agree.

It is also irresponsible of the Government to try to force money out of somebody who does not earn it. Imagine trying to take money from a person in that position. How is he going to pay his bills if the money is not there? The Government need to look at this, and it is up to us politicians, including the province's MPs, to fight it for the benefit of all children because it is the children who suffer.

On many occasions I have had to deal with marriages that have broken up. Under the old system the mother had to go to the court-house to get her money. When she arrived the money was not there — the father had kept it. Letters were sent out, but he still kept the money. The mother may have had to go to court to make him pay, but the day before the case he paid the money into the bank. For all those weeks the mother had to do without. She had to run here and run there. She had to fill in social services forms, and there was terrible pain for her and her family. I hope that that has stopped. It is certainly beneficial for the mother to know that the money is there without having to worry about an irresponsible father who is not willing to look after his children.

I support the motion, and I am pleased that the Member who moved it led off in the right fashion.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Today I am going to be brief because most of the points have been adequately covered by Mr Ervine. I too would like to congratulate him, not only for bringing the subject before us, but also for the way in which he dealt with it. He covered most of the facts. But a few things do need to be said.

Dr Paisley said that when this system was introduced we all felt that it was the guilty fathers who were to be targeted, yet no attempt has been made to do that. I do not know of any case where the guilty father was punished. The cases that I get are ones where people have gone to court. They have done their best to pay up, and, all of a sudden, they are the ones being punished.

So the first thing that we need to establish is that the Child Support Agency has failed in its duty to tackle the guilty fathers. Much has been said here, some of which I would challenge. We have repeatedly stated that this was a money-saving exercise for the Government. I agree that that is what the Government set out to do, but I suggest that, following this debate, we should ask them to supply us with facts. These may prove that, rather than saving money, they are losing money in this whole venture. Take the cost of the agency alone. Look at the massive running costs, and then examine the cases that the agency has dealt with and — and this is my point — consider the number of people it has forced out of employment.

Mr McMichael touched on this point. I too know of scores and scores of people — people in my area alone — for whom, when the figures are totted up, it does not make sense to work. A young lad who is a friend of my family fathered a child — it was unfortunate in many ways. He was earning £120 a week and was told that he had to pay £55 a week for the upkeep of the baby. He was also paying £30 a week to his mother. That boy left his job, and the chances of his ever getting a job again are nil, because it will not pay him to work unless he is earning over £200. Furthermore — and this is equally important — the chances of his getting married are practically nil, because there is no way he could afford to get married with that £55 hanging over his head.

What do boys like that do? They go and live with women and have more children. The Government are paying both ways. Exactly the same thing happened in the case of the fathers that Mr Ervine and Dr Paisley mentioned. Many of them entered into second marriages. They were paying, through the courts, a fair amount of money and were able, with

a great deal of difficulty, at least to keep their second family. But when the Child Support Agency got its hands on them that was not the case. So what did those men do? They too left work, with the result that, rather than saving money, the Government have to finance the upkeep of not one family but two. Multiply all those cases and you will doubt very much if the Government are saving money in this venture.

Of course, I cannot see them admitting that. In the event of a change of Government or, depending on what happens at the general election, a change of Ministers at the very least, I hope — and I know that Dr Paisley is in favour of this — that all the province's elected representatives will come together, as they have in the past, and demand an end to this madness. We should ask for the facts and figures. If this were any other Government Department, someone would be asking what the financial benefits are. Is the agency winning money? That was the intention, but Mr Ervine is quite right: the child is not benefiting. Indeed, nobody is benefiting.

When they introduced this system the Government thought that they were taking us all in. No one, but no one, would have opposed their going after guilty fathers. But we all know that that was not their intention. Their intention clearly was to save money, but that has backfired on them dramatically. The agency has cost the Government money. It has also caused people to leave jobs, and those people will never be employed again. It has caused people who might have got married to just live with someone. The woman may have two or three children to such a man, but he can leave, with no responsibility. He is not going to be caught. He has no money; he is on income support. He then goes and lives with someone else and fathers two or three more children. Have the Government saved money? I suggest not.

I support the motion.

Mr Hunter: This legislation is typical of how we have been seduced by the current Government over a number of years. It was a good enough idea, but, unfortunately, when they got it down on paper as legislation it was ill-conceived and ill-thought-out. Mr Hugh Smyth made the point about punishing guilty fathers. The initial intention of this legislation was not to punish people but to make sure that individuals who brought children into this world were made to pay to support them. This is a further example of the way in which the Welfare State is being dismantled. Problems have been encountered because the agency has not bothered to attempt to go after many of the fathers. It has simply taken the pool of material, so to speak, of which it was already aware.

When a mother goes to the social security office and says that she is a single parent or is separated from the father of her child, she is immediately told to go to the Child Support Agency to start the whole procedure. One of the problems with the legislation is that it leaves absolutely no room for discretion. The schedules basically contain mathematical formulae, so you have to write down " $a + b \div c = d$ ". There is no discretion whatsoever. Furthermore, as I understand it, the computer system on which this is based is a model taken from the state of Florida in the United States of America, which has a system totally different from that enjoyed in this country. That was the basis for the original system. Transitional arrangements were put on our statute-book, but they have never been brought into force. So we are left with this crazy system that allows no discretion whatsoever.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: With regard to the matter of discretion, I dealt with the case of a prison officer. He had been married and had a settlement through the courts. He got married again, and the Child Support Agency followed him up. When assessing him it would not take into consideration the fact that he needed a telephone, both for security reasons and so that he could be contacted. He also needed a car to get to work, but the agency refused to take that into account. It said that that was his business and that it had no discretion.

Mr Hunter: Yes. That is one of the major difficulties. Dr Paisley has referred to the fact that there was originally a court settlement. No matter what people think, the courts very often still take a common-sense approach to these things. They look at the two parents and at their respective incomes and outgoings. They can also take into consideration the factors that led to the breakdown of the marriage, in terms of who is to blame. This legislation does not allow for an equitable financial settlement for that at all. If you are basing it on a mathematical formula you have no discretion to apply common sense. That is why we have problems like this arising on a regular basis.

Even with an equitable agreement and financial arrangements settled between the parties in the court, a parent can be forced by a statutory body, such as the dole office, to go back to the Child Support Agency, and the original agreement does not stand. People end up facing serious financial difficulties. Not content with interfering through the agency, the Government introduced a further piece of legislation last year — the Children Order, which is also causing turmoil in the legal system. It is change for the sake of change. In many ways that is what happened in the case of the Child Support Agency.

12.30 pm

When you cannot use common sense you end up with this type of system. There are not fair criteria even to assess fathers with a second family. The legislation needs to be extensively reconsidered and rewritten. Quite clearly, it does not follow directly from what Parliament initially had in mind. It has caused grave financial suffering, depression and distress in countless families up and down the country. It really does need to be changed. It is a sad reflection of the woolly thinking of a Tory Government that is interested primarily in getting good publicity for doing something, rather than in being concerned about what is good for people.

I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I rise to support the motion introduced by Mr Ervine. It is probable that all Members who are councillors have had representations from constituents on this matter. Unfortunately, the Child Support Agency has lost sight of the goal that it set for itself. Perhaps that is where the problem really lies.

People's responsibility for their children has become a real issue in modern society. As the fabric of society and, in turn, of the family unit comes under pressure as a result of divorce and broken homes, we encounter more and more problems. The victims of break-up are very often the children. It is they who need to be considered first and foremost. That is where the Child Support Agency falls down.

The traumatic effects on children extend to personality, school work and present and future relationships. The current system does not address the position in which many fathers find themselves. Other Members probably agree that the need for parents to be responsible for their children is paramount. People must be financially accountable for the children of a first marriage. If they try to build a second relationship the burden from the first marriage pulls them down. Indeed, in some cases it has led to suicide.

The agency needs to be adjusted and the criteria changed to take new circumstances fully and fairly into account. The welfare of the children is paramount. Those from first and subsequent relationships must have equal rights and equal representation when financial maintenance is being assessed. Parents must contribute towards the upkeep of their children. It is incredible that payments can affect such matters as access arrangements. The family home must also be taken into account in the maintenance equation. Sometimes that has not happened.

The children must be the beneficiaries of maintenance payments. In this respect too the system falls down. More often than not the children are not the beneficiaries. I suggest that a maintenance disregard should apply to income support, family credit and disability working allowance. This change in the system could — would, I believe — provide an incentive for the non-custodial parent, who would see direct financial benefit for the children. The alleviation of child poverty should be the goal, and the maintenance system should focus on that. The guiding factors should be income-sharing, both parents' ability to pay and both parents' right to retain an independent adult income.

Mr Hussey: I happen to be divorced. A factor that causes suffering for many caring fathers is that the courts sometimes do not recognize that the children might be better off with them than with the mothers.

Mr Shannon: One of the problems is that the circumstances can be looked at very coldly. The decisions are not always right for the children. This is something that I would like to see remedied.

The Child Support Order creates almost total dependence on child maintenance as the source of family income. In that respect too it falls down.

The Child Support Agency's reassessments should be carried out annually and should take full account of the original decision of the court or the panel with regard to special circumstances. Matters should not be left indefinitely. This can result in an accumulated financial burden that is impossible to cope with. As several Members have pointed out, many people who are investigated and assessed by the agency find it beneficial to be on the dole. That is absolutely unfair. It is also unwise. Here again the Government have fallen down. Mr Hunter hit the nail on the head when he said that it is all very well to have these assessments but that, in practice, the system breaks down. Perhaps there should be more forethought.

There must be legal redress for those who have been wronged. Dr Paisley referred to men wrongly accused of having fathered children. Then there is the question of incorrect

financial assessment. We need a system of appeal and a means of recompensing people who have been wrongly assessed or accused. Such people suffer both physically and mentally.

Mr McBride: As the subject has been covered very fully, I rise simply to say that we concur with the sentiments expressed by other Members and will have no difficulty in supporting the motion.

Mr Carrick: We have heard comments about many issues arising from the operation of the Child Support Agency — for example, sensitivity, equity, parental support, children's welfare and social consequences. I do not propose to go into those areas. I would like to look at the question of administration and, in particular, the maintenance formula, which appears to be unnecessarily complex.

The whole system is a bureaucratic nightmare for those who unfortunately find themselves involved in these procedures — people who have experienced breakdown in matrimonial and domestic relationships. The form-filling required to enable the agency to determine levels of support is an administrative jungle. Completion of the maintenance-assessment and evidence forms by the respective parties has proved to be a very frustrating exercise. Requests for detailed information are very often duplicated because of what appear to be overlapping inquiry forms, and fathers and mothers have been left exasperated.

It is vital for caring and non-custodial parents to understand the rationale behind the range of detailed questions. The inquiry forms must be reduced in number, and the format of those that remain must be streamlined so that ordinary people can understand them and have a reasonable chance of filling them in accurately. The complexity of the procedures must be reduced. At present many parents have to obtain professional help in order to complete the forms. This, of course, means an additional financial burden for people who can least afford to pay professional fees. I have been told of cases in which parties, out of sheer frustration, contacted Child Support Agency staff and eventually extracted apologies. Staff have apologized for what have been termed mistakes, misunderstandings and oversights, as well as for the loss of forms, the mislaying of information and staff changes. Of course, there is the standard explanation: unavailability of the file.

If the agency is to remain, there must be a complete review of its procedures and systems. There must be more open accountability, more transparency and more sensitivity, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the procedures and administration systems will definitely have to be improved radically.

I support the motion.

Mr Ervine: I am heartened by the attitudes that have been expressed, but no one will be more heartened than those outside who suffer in silence. Whether for the single mother or for the unfairly treated father in a second family, this Forum can do good work.

No doubt, Members do good for their constituents every day — perhaps all day every day. If we had the capacity, the authority and the budgetary control we could certainly put together a system that would get for the children concerned the support to which they are

entitled. Instead, we have the remote, pathetic and brutal financial attitude of a sad, tired Government. The representatives here have spoken eloquently. What they have said will mean something to the people who need our help.

I hope that the Government, when they receive the Record of this debate will pay serious attention. Indeed, they need to look seriously at others who suffer in silence, such as people involved in ACE schemes, the elderly, the disabled and the victims of paedophilia. So many matters have been debated in this Chamber — matters that affect daily lives. With regard to economics, education and all these other things, we must force the Government, of whatever party, to listen.

I appreciate the parties' response, and I am delighted that we will be sending a message, loudly and clearly, to the Secretary of State.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

The Forum, recognizing the hardships incurred by single mothers and the unduly harsh assessments made on fathers with second families, calls upon Her Majesty's Government to reassess the role and functions of the Child Support Agency, with a view to:

1. prioritizing the need to locate absent fathers; and
2. introducing fair criteria for assessing fathers, taking into consideration second families.

12.45 pm

FORUM: PRESS COVERAGE

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mr Chairman, may I ask you to use your good offices to secure some press coverage of debates such as the one we have just had. It seems that the media are interested only when there is controversy in the Forum. When we are doing other things for the good of all the community the debates are not reported. Today we have discussed education and child support, and we have still to have a debate on cardiac surgery. These are matters that affect everybody, irrespective of religion. Will you, Sir, talk to the press? They are here to cover controversial issues, and then they disappear. We gave them access to our wonderful catering facilities to get them amongst us, but what good did that do? If we had kept them outside they would be more eager to come in and report a debate like the one we have just had.

The Chairman: I have the greatest sympathy with this point. Indeed, I have been to see the BBC television people and have spoken to all the others in the media that I know — and I know quite a few. If anyone can tell me what more I could do I will certainly listen. It might be worth considering an invitation. I think there is still some money in my entertainment budget. *[Laughter]* It seems that it is spent by everybody except me. It might be a very good idea for me to have a lunch or something for them.

Mr Gibson: May I suggest that you invite the party Leaders and the heads of the press for a meal.

The Chairman: That was my intention.

Mr Gibson: We have heard from time to time how the press follow the frivolous and ignore what is important to the people we represent. It is negligence to fail to take serious debate seriously.

The Chairman: That is a good suggestion. Are you all agreed that I should do that?

It was so decided.

The meeting was suspended at 12.48 pm and resumed at 2.15 pm.

CARDIAC SURGERY

Mr Hugh Smyth: I beg to move the following motion:

The Forum expresses grave concern about the situation where patients in need of cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland are not obtaining it. People have the right to know exactly what is happening, and we demand that the Government carry out an urgent inquiry and make their findings public.

Members will be delighted to know that I do not intend to speak for too long. In fact, when the Committee brought this matter to our attention because of press reports it was the intention that I would simply move the motion and ask the Forum to support it. That is still my wish. We have all had a very long, hard day. There have been many good speeches, as usual, and some very good debating, so I am hoping that Members will give the motion their full support. I believe in being brief, but there are a couple of questions that need answers, hence the idea of calling on the Government to carry out an urgent inquiry.

The long and the short of it is that someone is telling lies, and I want to know who it is. We are all aware that the Royal Hospital charges something like £6,000 per heart operation for the first 900 cases in any financial year. Apparently the arrangement with the board stipulates that charges for operations over the 900 are to be at a lower rate. I find it difficult to understand how the Royal was able to treat 100 private patients last year. Let me emphasize, lest anyone try to turn this into a political football, that I do not care whether these patients come from Southern Ireland or Southern France — that is not the point. What I want to know is how we can have 500 people on a waiting-list when we are being told by the experts that they have their waiting-list down to approximately 13 months. I want to query that because I know people who have been on the list for three years.

I want to get to the truth of the matter. A GP fundholder has gone public, claiming that a number of fundholders were willing to pay for operations and that the Royal was made aware of this. The Royal has denied it. Someone is telling lies. I am not suggesting for one moment that it is the Royal, nor am I suggesting that it is the fundholders, but it is one or the

other. Members of the Forum and, more importantly, the general public have a right to know who is telling lies because this is not a political football. We are playing here with people's lives; people could die.

I ask the Government and also the fundholders whether they are playing God in all of this. Are they waiting for the January sales? Is that why the Royal has the time and the facilities to take 100 private patients? Are there fundholders who do not want to go in at the start of a year and have to pay £6,000, knowing that if they wait until the 900 operations are completed they might be able to get a job lot — 10 operations for £4,000 each? Are there GPs doing this? If so, I condemn their actions. And because we do not know, we need a public inquiry.

It is right and proper that the Royal should try to use the facilities it has. In fact, I think it is Government policy that it is allowed to use one twelfth of its time to perform private operations. This helps, naturally, to subsidize the hospital. But I ask again whether there are people on the waiting-list who are being pushed aside to bring in private patients. Incidentally, these patients do not pay the £6,000 that we are being charged. The Royal can negotiate fees of between £7,000 and £10,000. So, is this about health or is it about money?

I said I was going to be brief — and I have not done too badly — but these questions need to be answered. I cannot answer them. No one in the Forum can. It is the duty of Malcolm Moss, who is the Minister responsible, to investigate this. Rev William McCrea, along with Rev Martin Smyth and others, went to see him the other day, and I know that they were far from satisfied with the explanations they got. We have to clear the air and find out the truth for our constituents. In my area people are knocking doors, wanting to know why a father or mother has been waiting for a heart operation for over 12 months when they can pick up the 'Belfast Telegraph' and read that 100 people from Southern Ireland have had operations at the Royal.

The fact that they come from Southern Ireland does not come into it — people come from much further afield to have operations in the United Kingdom. I will not deny anybody the right to have an operation that might save his life. That is fine, but our people have paid through the nose, through their taxes, for this treatment, and they are entitled to it. If anyone — be it someone in the Royal, be it a fundholder — is holding back for financial reasons, God forgive him.

I ask the Forum to support the motion.

Mr King: Like the Chairman of Standing Committee C, I shall be brief. It gives me great pleasure, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist members of the Committee, to endorse fully every single sentiment Mr Smyth has expressed.

A number of points have come into the public domain over the past week that merit the fullest possible inquiry at Government level. As the only representative body in Northern Ireland today, the Forum has a duty to conduct an inquiry.

We quite clearly have conflicting statements from some fundholding GPs and the Royal Victoria Hospital. As Mr Smyth said, somebody is telling lies. These lies go to the

very heart of current health service provision in Northern Ireland. These lies are causing deaths in hospitals outside Belfast and within the metropolitan area. These lies go to the provision of urgent, necessary, life-saving cardiac surgery. These lies are of such a serious nature that those who are telling them must be brought to book.

Yesterday Standing Committee C interviewed the chief executive officer of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. In response to questioning from some Ulster Unionist Members she said quite categorically that hospitals do have the equivalent of the January sales. At the end of each financial year, as Mr Hugh Smyth pointed out, fundholding GPs can purchase cardiac operations at a marginal price, saving between £3,000 and £6,000 per operation. What sort of health service do we have? Do we have a health service that is free at the point of access for everyone, regardless of need, whether his GP is a fundholder or not? Or do we have a health service where the accounting methods of some doctors affect the lives and health of those making use of it? They are fundamental issues and these are issues that nobody here can address. These are issues that require an inquiry at Government level, if only to dispel the public disquiet. I am sure that Forum Members from every party have had phone calls and letters from constituents raising concerns about them.

We are told that the waiting-list for cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland is being tackled and reduced. But we all know of people who have been waiting for 24 or 36 months for a very basic angioplasty. Yet, according to the 'Belfast Telegraph', private patients and patients benefiting from fundholding are leaping the queue, apparently because of the cheapness of operations performed in February, March and April.

These are worrying statistics, and if they are false — which I hope they are — the lie should be nailed. But if the accusations are true, we, as representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, should be told, and we should use the influence of the Forum and any other voice we have to change the system.

The entire question of the funding and the financial structure of the Health Service in Northern Ireland is currently under investigation by Standing Committee C. It is valuable work that concerns the entire community, and it would be a great shame — and I want this message to go out today — if the political process were to stall or create a vacuum whereby this necessary cross-community effort was halted. How can anybody justify suspending an investigation into fundholding GPs, the funding of the Health Service and the provision of health care? That would be wrong. We ask that, no matter what else happens in the political panorama of Northern Ireland, we be allowed to continue this investigation of the funding of the Health Service in Northern Ireland.

It gives me great pleasure, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, to support the motion.

Mrs Parkes: I want to endorse the sentiments expressed by Mr Hugh Smyth, speaking on behalf of Committee C, and support the motion.

The present state of the Health Service is a matter of great concern for us all. We have had many debates on the service over a number of months, and we have seen its continuous dismantling by a Government more interested in profits than in patients. These

cut-backs are having a detrimental effect on the whole service. We have also seen over a number of years the establishment of the internal market, with the purchaser/provider split and the resulting two-tier health system.

The present funding arrangements are totally inadequate and need to be reviewed, particularly as providers like the Royal have said that they have the capacity to do more cardiac operations. The Royal has a ceiling of 1,100 per year and was able to do only 1,080. The shortfall resulted, as we all know, in people coming from the Republic of Ireland for essential surgery. Nobody here would have any quibble about that if we did not have a waiting-list of 500 in this country. We deserve better. We have patients now waiting even longer for operations, and lives are being put at risk. One begins to wonder if those who make the decisions are waiting until some of these people die, so that they will not have to do the operations at all.

There is something seriously wrong with a health system which forces providers to look outside Northern Ireland in order to make a unit viable, particularly when — and once again I stress this — there is a long waiting-list of patients here needing urgent surgery. It is a health sale, and it is scandalous. We hear reports of GP fundholders having funds available to pay for operations but not being consulted. That is appalling. As Mr Hugh Smyth and Mr King have both said, we have also heard it suggested that the Royal has given preference to private treatment because that allows it to charge more. It is charging higher rates and bringing in more funds. This has been denied by the Royal, but we need these questions cleared up. The people of Northern Ireland deserve — and expect — an answer.

Then we have the suggestion that there may be an incentive for GP fundholders to wait until later in the year in the hope of securing cheaper treatment for patients.

Those are two fundamental questions which need to be addressed. If funding is not available, it needs to be made available to ensure that vital facilities are fully utilized by people from Northern Ireland. And I repeat that nobody would quibble about the fact that the Royal needs to use its facilities. But if we have a waiting-list, surely we deserve better than this. Consideration must also be given to better resource planning. If the boards, the GPs and the Royal plan in November for these operations, surely there needs to be a bit of forward thinking.

I trust that we will not find this sort of situation arising every year. As Mr King said, we need a Committee or process to worry the Government into addressing these issues. People must come along to answer these questions. All Forum Committees do a good job in that area. We appreciate the people who come and try to address various situations and give us some answers. A vacuum will be created if there are no Committees to do this work.

The Health Service does need additional funding to ensure that the quality of patient care improves. If an individual has spent his working life paying into the Health Service, surely it is his right to expect the best medical treatment. However, this does not seem to be happening.

Mr Neeson: I am grateful that this subject is before the Forum today. Regrettably, cardiac disease took my father's life — it is a family problem in many ways — so I share the

deep concern about resources not being provided to deal with the tremendous need that obviously exists in Northern Ireland. Bearing in mind that this country has one of the highest rates of cardiac disease in the world, it is important that the necessary facilities, particularly for surgery, be made available. Cardiac surgery has changed lives, so it is important that the necessary facilities be provided.

2.30 pm

I am also pleased that the motion put forward originally was changed — particularly the reference to foreign nationals. I know where it was being aimed, but I have discovered that under the 1949 Ireland Act people from the Republic of Ireland are not foreign nationals. It is pleasing that at the Health Committee yesterday there was agreement to change the wording.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of confusion about the extent of the problem, and there is confusion about the waiting-list. That is why I welcome the part of the motion that calls for an inquiry into the precise needs in Northern Ireland. The sale of hospital services will impact even more on us in the future, and there is no doubt in my mind that one of the factors in the decision to site the new hospital in Antrim was the proximity of Aldergrove Airport. At least within the European Union, the number of people travelling to other countries for specialist treatment will increase. Yesterday we heard of the widow who may now travel to Belgium to have a child from the sperm of her late husband. This concept of moving throughout the European Union is one of the things that we have to accept.

The bottom line, though, is that if we want the services, we are going to have to pay for them. That is why I raised earlier the cut in income tax that the Government made in the last budget. If that 1p had remained, £1.7 billion could have been set aside for services and facilities, including health and education, in Northern Ireland.

So I welcome the fact that we are discussing this issue today. I hope that an inquiry will be held as it is an issue of great concern. It does not matter whether people come from the Republic of Ireland or any other country — and I know that that is very much the feeling of all Members — but we must safeguard the interests of the people in Northern Ireland first and foremost.

Mr Gibson: There is a great danger of repetition, but I want to support the motion and the Chairman of the Committee.

It is obvious to everyone, even from reading the newspapers, that there is a contradiction in evidence. The answers that come from the Department, the boards and, indeed, GPs are contradictory. This calls for a full-blown inquiry because you cannot explain it to very sick people who are on what is really a danger list for surgery. I have encountered one of those very difficult situations. Someone begged "How can I be moved? I have been waiting for 18 months, and the doctor has told me that if I do not have an operation within the next three months he is afraid that I can no longer really expect to live." Such is the situation facing people on that two-year waiting-list. Therefore the fact that someone from another country can come here and have cardiac surgery does concern everyone. I have no objection to where he comes from so long as we are providing for those who have paid for the service.

I support the motion without reservation, and I support the idea of a full-blown investigation into the provision of cardiac services in Northern Ireland.

Mr Cedric Wilson: The United Kingdom Unionist Party notes with concern that there are some 500 people on the waiting-list for cardiac surgery at the Royal Victoria Hospital, yet operations have been sold to non-United Kingdom nationals. As a party, we will be seeking through our representation at Westminster an explanation of the increase of 13% since last year in the waiting time for cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland, compared to a 2% increase in Great Britain. Those figures are supplied by the Government. We demand, as I believe the Forum should, equality of health provision for all individuals living in the United Kingdom.

Let me quote:

"There has been a decline in the differential between Northern Ireland health spending and the UK average, taking into account the greater incidence of coronary heart disease in Northern Ireland, which has a heart death rate 20% higher than that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has surgical waiting times which can force an employee to be absent from work for up to 31 months at a time, when employees may reasonably expect to have a job kept open for no more than a year. There is an apparent lack of funding for packages of care for stroke patients in the community."

That is from a very interesting document, produced by the British Heart Foundation, called 'Coronary Heart Disease Statistics'. The statistics were published by the Chest, Heart and Stroke Association, which is to be commended for taking up the cudgel on this issue.

The Chest, Heart and Stroke Association makes a very interesting comment on something which is at the very centre of the difficulty facing people in Northern Ireland with regard to health care. It is that the quality of information from the Department of Health and Social Services is such that it does more to confuse than to enlighten. The best assistance that this body could give the Health Committee would be to charge it to launch a drive for a full public inquiry. And until that occurs, the Health Committee should demand from the Department information to assist it in looking at the issue. It should also be asking very important questions about what we have heard the Committee's Chairman and others say. The statistics and answers that are being given with regard to these important issues are not at all satisfactory. There seems to be an attempt to keep the facts from the people. I trust that the Forum has a role in uncovering the true nature of this problem and that we will be part of the finding of a solution to it.

The Chairman: I wonder if any thought has been given to the parameters for the inquiry that Members have been talking about. If this were a business issue, one would say — I am just thinking aloud — that what we have here is a remarkable market, with the highest rate of heart disease in Western Europe. We have the most skilled doctors here — I happen to know, having had a heart operation myself five years ago. Is there a wealth-creation opportunity for us to service the market, not only in Northern Ireland but elsewhere, without interfering at all with the priority that should be given to National Health Service patients and to the need for the numbers on the waiting-list to decline?

I wonder if Mr Hugh Smyth, in his winding-up speech, might give us some thoughts on that.

Mr Eric Smyth: I want simply to support and congratulate Mr Hugh Smyth and his Committee on a fine report. We are all sometimes baffled by the antics that involve hospitals and doctors in a political game that I am sure the doctors do not like. They have to balance their books and think about money. And it is sad that many good nurses are resigning from the profession because they cannot take the pressure any more.

We can see the cracks appearing in the system. We know about people who have serious heart trouble. Hospitals want to get them back home as quickly as possible. I know of one person who has been in hospital about four times inside three weeks — in and out. He was sent home even though he still needs a serious heart operation. He has been waiting more than a year. So what the Government are saying is not true. We all know that, yet the Government will not provide the money to help.

I agree with what Mr Neeson said about the income tax cut of 1p. That money could have been used to help the hospitals. There is no spare money for taxes to be cut if anyone still needs an operation. We all understand that there must be some control. We realize that what happened years ago — you went into hospital or to the doctor and got prescriptions here and prescriptions there — needed to be tightened up. But the Government have gone overboard, and the situation is affecting people. It affects not only those who need an operation but also their families. It puts a great strain on family and home life. It is not good for a wife and children to watch a husband and father with a heart problem suffering, knowing rightly that he could die at any time. This brings a lot of strain.

I am sure many of my Colleagues have been down this road. It is sad that the United Kingdom has got into such situation. We know where it is heading. We know that there is a day coming when the Health Service will collapse completely and there will be serious problems.

I support everyone who has spoken here today and the Committee. We need a public inquiry to find out where the fault lies. Actually, we have no doubt about where the fault lies, but it will take a public inquiry to bring it into the open.

I have no doubt why many people do not want the Forum — because, as Mr Hugh Smyth said, we do good work. As at Westminster, we have arguments and disappointments. Sometimes Members do not adhere to the Rules, and there can appear to be chaos. But real work is being done, especially in the Committees, where we look at subjects in detail. Probably what is wrong is that the Government do not want us to tramp on their toes. Now that we are finding out what is going on and are making political soundings, they do not like it. Perhaps that is why the Forum is to be wound up.

2.45 pm

Mr Speers: The debate today has been about coronary care, but it seems to me that what has been said applies right across the board. You, Mr Chairman, made a suggestion about the possibility of developing a business whereby the country could set up centres of

excellence for health care, which could be sold to whomever. That may very well be a good idea, but the people of this country who have made national insurance contributions down the years must be protected. They should get priority over people from outside this jurisdiction. Outsiders should not be able to jump the queue and get care that should be going to people who live here. Any review or inquiry should concern not only coronary care but also other aspects of health provision, which could similarly become an issue if this principle is allowed to continue.

Mr Eric Smyth: I agree completely. It is obvious that money comes into this. Northern Ireland citizens cannot get operations, but people from outside the United Kingdom can because money talks. Life is life — nobody in the United Kingdom should be denied his right to an operation if he needs it. We and our forefathers paid our taxes so that we might have this service.

But the day is coming again when the ordinary working-class person will be pushed aside and those with money will get priority. The health of those who do not have money will get worse and worse. That is a sad indictment of the British Government. If there is a Labour Government, I hope that they will not go down the same road. But I doubt if it will make any difference — they are all the same. What annoys me is that they talk about manifestos, but when they get into power they do their own thing. I hope and pray that it will not be long before the present Government are brought down. The Ulster Unionists should waken up and stop propping them. We need a fresh Government, but there is no use in condemning the Conservatives when the Ulster Unionists MPs are keeping them there.

The Chairman: We are liable to have some heart attacks if we carry on like this.

Mr Taylor: The Member makes a point that is worth replying to. The one occasion when the Government could have been defeated was the debate on the Scott Report. They won by only two votes, and all three DUP Members were absent.

The Chairman: Heart attacks all round.

Mr Hugh Smyth: How we got from heart attacks to Westminster is beyond me.

There is very little for me to say by way of summing up, other than to thank the Members who have spoken in support of the motion. In particular, I want to thank my deputy, Mrs Parkes, who has been very supportive of both myself and the Committee.

I have a few points in relation to the question you posed, Mr Chairman, about the type of inquiry we might be looking for. I have in mind a two-part inquiry. The first part, as I stated in my opening remarks, should be an investigation into who is telling lies. One fundholder — whom the Government can interview because he has gone public — has stated that he requested operations and that the Royal Victoria Hospital was aware of that. On the other hand, the Royal has issued a denial. Obviously someone is telling lies.

I am told that the Royal Victoria Hospital asked boards and fundholders in November about their plans for surgery for the rest of the year because it appeared that the hospital

would not carry out all 1,200 operations. It was on the basis of the responses that it carried out 100 private operations. The second part of the inquiry should deal with that.

Mrs Parkes pointed out, quite rightly, that there are 500 people on the waiting-list. We are told that the hospital has all the facilities and the expertise, but we are also told that it will not do all 1,200 operations per year that it was contracted to do. I want to know why. Is it because fundholders are holding back in the hope of the January sales that were referred to, in the hope of getting a job lot? Or is it simply because they do not have enough finance to apply for operations? That is what the inquiry needs to get at. We have all expressed our views, but we do not have the answers.

I am simply asking the Government to tell me, as an elected representative, who is telling lies. I have a right to know, and my constituents, like those of every other Member, have a right to know. More important, I want to know why the Royal, which has the equipment and the expertise, is not doing the 1,200 operations a year that it says it can do, although there are more than 500 people on the waiting-list — some of them for two or three years. That is the basis of my request for an inquiry.

Let me conclude by saying how much I agree with Mr King about the great need for the Forum to continue its business. Mr Eric Smyth got it right when he said that he was beginning to wonder if we are becoming too professional at what we are doing. Maybe the Government would like us to fall into the trap that some people — those who have left the Forum and those who are still in it but evidently do not support it and have a go at it at every opportunity — accuse us of falling into. There are times when, unfortunately, we do stray off the path, but, as Mr Eric Smyth said, one has to accept that all of us occasionally lose the head.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough the great need for the Forum to be allowed to continue its work. I was going to say that I am not worried about what goes on in the talks, but of course I am. However, I hope that you, Mr Chairman, will make your feelings known because there is no one better placed than you to judge the performance of the Forum. We go off on a different path at times, but when one sees in the Record of Debates the vast number of subjects that have been covered — and I say this with all due respect to Mr Taylor, the only MP here at the moment — it is clear that the standard of debate here compares favourably with that in what is supposed to be the Mother of Parliaments. When I look at the antics of Westminster, particularly at Prime Minister's Question Time — and these are educated people — I wonder why it is that if we happen to stray off the path that is laid down for us the papers pick it up and television, assuredly, captures and shows it.

I doubt very much if any of the important subjects discussed here today will be reported tonight. If we happen to fall out with one another, that is a different matter. It is a certainty that the first part of our proceedings today will be well publicized. But when it comes to something like saving people's lives, that seems to be unimportant. You, Mr Chairman, have a duty to make your feelings known to the Secretary of State.

Those of us who are involved in the talks must express grave concern at any rumours — and Dr Paisley has already put this on record — of a move to suspend them. Suspension, as I said at the talks three weeks ago, will mean the end of the Forum. That

would please many people. It might be very convenient for the Government to forget to renew our contract as we are due to finish in May anyway. Time is not on our side, but there is no reason for the talks not to continue until the Prime Minister announces the date of the general election. When he does that, we should adjourn rather than suspend the talks to enable the wonderful work that this Forum and its Committees are doing to continue. I can honestly say that it is a privilege to serve with my Friend Mr Gibson, who chairs the Education Committee. That was the first Committee to be appointed, and it set the standard for the others.

The Chairman: If you do not mind my saying so, I think we have wandered a little from the motion. I so enjoyed what you were saying that I allowed you to go on.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I am trying to justify the hundred quid.

Mr Chairman, you say that I have strayed off the subject, but I have not. We are in the middle of an investigation into health. If the talks are suspended, the Forum is suspended, and it will not be able to continue this important inquiry.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hugh Smyth: Where did that come from?

Mr Nesbitt: Here. I hope the Member is not judging whether to give way by the person who has asked him to give way.

A Member: He is, actually.

Mr Nesbitt: Humility gets you everywhere.

I endorse Mr Smyth's comments. Just last week the Economy Committee asked certain pertinent questions of Mr Loughran of the Department of Economic Development and Mr Walters of the Training and Employment Agency. They are to meet with us on 20 March, but were the Forum to be put in limbo, as it were, those questions would not be answered. It is easy to ask questions, but it is the answers that are needed. That is why I endorse what Mr Smyth has said regarding the Forum's contribution to Government accountability in Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Mr Hugh Smyth: I have made my point about the Forum. I fully support it, and I deplore those who try to bring it down, be they in this House or elsewhere. We have a job to do, and I am asking you, Mr Chairman, to play your part in emphasizing that to the Secretary of State.

With regard to the motion, I thank all Members for their support, and I ask you, Mr Chairman, to write to the Minister responsible, on behalf of the Forum, demanding an inquiry into the situation concerning heart operations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

The Forum expresses grave concern about the situation where patients in need of cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland are not obtaining it. People have the right to know exactly what is happening, and we demand that the Government carry out an urgent inquiry and make their findings public.

The Chairman: I have pleasure in confirming that the motion has been passed. I will certainly write to the Minister, using the word "demand". Of course, the Minister concerned — indeed, all Ministers, including the Secretary of State — will see the report of the debate, including the references to some matters which touch on the future of the Forum. I hope that these will be noted. I will certainly do all in my power to ensure that the good work which is done here is not brought to an end, and I will be most grateful for any help that anybody can give me in that effort.

Amazingly, we have completed our business an hour earlier than usual. I wish you all a very happy weekend.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.01 pm.