NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 7 March 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.03 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

TALKS / FORUM

The Chairman: As you will know, the talks under Senator Mitchell and his two colleagues have been adjourned until Tuesday 3 June. This has raised much speculation in the media and among Members as to what it means for the Forum. Yesterday afternoon I was invited to meet the Secretary of State to discuss the implications for us. I put to him the view agreed at the Business Committee yesterday, that since the talks had been adjourned to a specific date and therefore neither concluded nor suspended, he did not, under the terms of the legislation, need to bring the Forum to an end and should not do so. I said that the Forum would act responsibly and, as the Business Committee had previously agreed, would voluntarily suspend its plenary meetings when the election was called. This would have the benefit, at least, of allowing Committees to continue to operate.

The Secretary of State told me that his judgement about what he should do was governed by the criteria he must apply in accordance with the Act and that he had not yet reached a concluded view. He went on to say that if — and it is only an "if" at this stage — he were to decide that under the terms of the Act he had no choice but to bring the Forum to an end prior to the election period, the parliamentary timetable would probably mean that the Forum would be wound up late in the week after next. This means that we probably have one more meeting after today's. Whether we meet beyond that depends upon the Secretary of State's decision and when the Prime Minister calls the election.

I would have liked to be able to give you a clear-cut answer today as to our immediate future, but I am afraid that that is not possible. When the Secretary of State makes his decision I will let you know immediately.

Mr Peter Robinson: May I, on behalf of my Colleagues, thank you, Mr Chairman, for conveying the views of the Business Committee to the Secretary of State. I trust that he will take on board the remarks that you have made. The Entry to Negotiations Act provided for an election for two purposes: to supply the delegates for talks and to establish a Forum comprising those elected. If the Secretary of State were to end the life of the Forum, he would be dealing with one element of the process in a way different from that in which he was dealing with the other.

The participants in the talks, as masters in their own house, were allowed to take their own decision, and their determination was to adjourn to a specific date. The Business

Committee has made it very clear — and I am sure that you, Sir, passed the message on to the Secretary of State — that our intention would be to discontinue plenary meetings when the Prime Minister called the election. As masters in our own House we would be concluding the business of plenary meetings until after the general election.

If there is to be equivalence of treatment for the talks process and the Forum, the Secretary of State should allow this body to take the responsible and sensible decision that it has already indicated it would be taking in those circumstances, rather than bring its life to an end. He should not allow himself to be persuaded by those who have absented themselves from the Forum though they are entitled to be here — those who do not like elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland to show them up as failing to do the job for which they were elected by boycotting the place.

The Chairman: I not only made that point rather vehemently but also wrote to the Secretary of State today to reinforce it. I very much hope that by the beginning of next week — possibly Tuesday or Wednesday — we will have heard his decision.

Several Members *rose.*

The Chairman: We have a heavy programme today, and if everybody talks about this matter we will not get the business done.

Mr Neeson: I seek clarification, Mr Chairman. Like Mr Robinson, I want to thank you for your efforts on behalf of the Forum.

The Chairman: That is very courteous of you. I appreciate it.

Mr Neeson: There will be a meeting of the Forum next week, and we all want to see it revived in June, with a new Order in Parliament. It is important that we act responsibly. As the Prime Minister is most likely to call the election the week after next, we should voluntarily accept next week's as the last plenary meeting of this session, in the hope that we would be coming back at the beginning of June for a further year.

Mr Taylor: I wish, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, to thank you, Mr Chairman, for your initiative in this matter. I hope that the indecision which clearly dwells with the Secretary of State will be brought to an end very quickly. I do not understand it. The Ulster Unionists want to make it clear that closing the Forum will mean the end of the talks as well. They go together, and we want to see both continuing after the election.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Did the Secretary of State indicate to you, Mr Chairman, how long it would be before he could close the Forum? He argued at the talks at Stormont that he would have to lay an Order in the House and that there would have to be a period for consultation. I and my party would be very angry if we were to come here next week not knowing that it was the last day of the Forum. It seems to me that the Secretary of State is playing for time so that the Forum can be stopped between next week's sitting and the first date thereafter on which it would be legally entitled to meet. The position of my party is that if the Forum is not in existence the talks cannot go on. That is it. If the Secretary of State cuts the throat of the Forum he will be cutting the throat of the talks as well. Did he tell you,

Sir, that there would have to be a period of consultation, that he could not close the Forum immediately? That is very interesting.

The Chairman: Did I give the impression that there was going to be a debate with other parties as to whether we should go on? That is up to the Secretary of State. What he decides to do about it under his statutory obligation is his own affair. However, I know that one of the things exercising his mind and those of his officers is the parliamentary timetable and the introduction of an Order in Council in the event of his deciding to close us down.

I would caution people slightly. It is up to Members what they say, but I am not at all sure that people react predictably when threats are made to them. I have a feeling that we ought to be cautious about threats. However, people are entitled to say what they wish. All I can say is that my conversation with the Secretary of State was most cordial. Credit — not total, but a good deal — was given to the Forum, and I believe that we have a sporting chance of survival. But let us wait, hope and, in the case of those who wish to do so — maybe some will not — pray.

Mr McCartney: I should like to add the thanks of the United Kingdom Unionist Party to those which have been expressed by other parties to you, Sir, for the way in which you have defended not only the rights but also the potential of the Forum and its continuance. But I would add perhaps not a threatening note, *in terrorem,* but a cautionary note: that participation in the talks was undoubtedly linked to the existence of and to participation in the Forum. Indeed, section 7 of the enabling legislation provides that on suspension or conclusion of the talks, section 3, which predicates the life of the Forum, will cease to have effect.

Therefore the future, both interim and permanent, of the Forum depends to a very large extent on whether or not the Secretary of State decides that what happened on Wednesday of this week amounts to a suspension. If it does, he is obliged, under section 3, to lay an Order in Council to terminate the Forum.

10.15 am

It seems to me that the only thing being discussed at present is the parliamentary timetable — the length of time it will take to pass the legislation necessary to bring the Forum either to a temporary or to a permanent halt. We are being granted, at most, a certain remission of sentence — and we must bear that clearly in mind. But if there is any suggestion that the Forum is going to be closed permanently, I have to express the view that in that event participation in the talks will inevitably go. I do so not to terrorize or to threaten but because that would follow as day follows night.

The Chairman: That point was made quite clearly so that everybody might be aware of it. The very first sentence I used — *[Interruption]*

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: You were surely not threatening.

The Chairman: No, I certainly was not. I asked the Secretary of State to hear me before we would hear from him, and he courteously allowed me all the time I wanted to make

a number of points. I will not bore you with what you already know. Those who were at the Business Committee meeting and who briefed me so well will recall all that they said to me. I recapitulated as best I could what we nearly all agreed at that time.

Mr Calvert: Mr Chairman, may I thank you very much indeed for bringing this matter before the Secretary of State. I am very interested in your words about consultation. Can we have an assurance that the Secretary of State will not consult with the likes of Dick Spring and others who would get great enjoyment from bringing the Forum down, that he does not have to run to Dick Spring for permission to keep the Forum in existence? Certainly the view of my party is that Dick Spring should keep his nose out of the affairs of Northern Ireland.

The Chairman: I am sure that the Secretary of State will not spring to Mr Spring, that he will not trouble him by asking for his opinion between now and some time next week.

Our discussion on this has been very helpful to me. I am most grateful for the kind things Members have said. I have done my best.

However, we ought to move on. We have three motions, and one of the debates could last quite a long time. I am particularly keen that we should give attention to the Chairman of the Agriculture and Fisheries Committee, Mr David Campbell, on the serious matter of potatoes.

POTATO INDUSTRY

Mr David Campbell: I beg to move the following motion:

That this Forum adopts the report on the current state of the Northern Ireland potato industry prepared by Standing Committee D (Agriculture and Fisheries Issues) and asks the Chairman to forward it to the Minister responsible for agriculture and fisheries, Baroness Denton, with a request that she give serious consideration to all its recommendations.

The Committee undertook this review following representations made to it during the course of the BSE crisis. Members were advised not only that beef producers were suffering financially over the past year, but also that high yields of potatoes throughout Europe had resulted in a potato glut and corresponding extremely low prices for ware, or consumable, potatoes. In Northern Ireland, production costs were averaging £80 per tonne minimum, and market prices were between £20 and £30 per tonne — if a producer could sell at all.

It is not difficult to appreciate the problems that potato growers have been facing over the past year. However, the Committee decided to review the potato industry's performance over the past decade. Therefore, evidence was taken from representatives of the ware- and seed-potato sectors and from the Department of Agriculture. The Committee also heard from farmers on the ground through field visits and public meetings. The resulting review indicates a malaise in the ware-potato sector and a deeper decline in the seed-potato industry, going far beyond the mere effects of seasonal price fluctuations. Particularly in the case of the seed sector, this malaise is putting in question the very continued viability of seed-potato production in Northern Ireland.

In 1984 there were 5,725 registered potato producers. Last year there were 1,700, of whom only 400 grew potatoes as their main enterprise. While increasing yields have maintained ware output, the seed-potato output declined from 73,000 tonnes in 1984 to only 25,000 tonnes last year — a drop of just under 70%. What are the reasons for this decline? Firstly, there has been a lack of support. While other sectors of agriculture have been subjected to European regimes and market support, the potato sector has received no support whatsoever, and farmers have freedom of entry to and exit from potato production. This is an example of a free-market economy at work, but it poses a big disadvantage to those farmers whose main enterprise is potato production.

Secondly, Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland has not prioritized potato production for support, and whatever Government grant-aid is available is for capital improvements, such as the provision of temperature-controlled storage facilities to maintain potato quality. Access to that grant-aid is perceived as being impossible or, at least, difficult. Little or no support has been made available by the Department for the marketing of potatoes. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in other member states of the European Union, which commit thousands of pounds annually — millions, in fact — to their potato sectors.

Thirdly, there has been a lack of co-operation in the industry itself to co-ordinate the marketing and processing of home-grown potatoes.

Fourthly, there has been a shortage in the development of new potato varieties to meet changing consumer demand, not only in Northern Ireland in particular and the United Kingdom as a whole, but also from the countries to which we traditionally export seed potatoes.

Continuing decline in the potato industry would not, in the opinion of the Committee, be in the best interests of Northern Ireland agriculture or the Northern Ireland economy in general. I regret to have to say that the Department of Agriculture has permitted the industry to decline to a critical point, where the very viability of some of its sectors is in question. The Committee recognizes that producers are committed to preserving their industry, to producing high-quality potatoes and to maintaining the excellent plant-health standards in Northern Ireland. However, help is required, and the Committee's recommendations are designed to stimulate recovery in this sector.

I wish to cover the recommendations in general terms, and members of the Committee will then elaborate on specific points.

First, and most important, the Committee recommends that the Department assess or reassess the access available for the potato industry to existing grant-aid. The industry should be given easier access to the funds available for the provision of suitable facilities. The Committee recommends that the Department conduct an examination of the grants which could and should be made available to the industry and that it be given greater priority. The Committee recommends that work on the introduction of a Northern Ireland quality-assurance scheme for the potato industry be expedited by the Department and completed as a matter of urgency. Quality assurance is a byword for the nineties and will be a prerequisite for agricultural production as we approach and enter the new millennium. An

effective price-reporting system and a market-trend-information system are required for potato growers in Northern Ireland.

The Committee recommends that the Department take the lead in encouraging farming organizations and the wider potato industry to co-ordinate their efforts and promote greater co-operation for the future good of the industry. We recommend that the Department, as soon as possible, commission a survey of all potato producers to ascertain views on the need for the introduction of a European potato regime, which would contain market-support measures and a quota system, if desired. If it became clear, as a result of a survey, that there was support for the introduction of such a regime the Committee would recommend that the Agriculture Minister use every avenue possible to secure its implementation.

The Committee was impressed with the aggressive marketing stance adopted by the Horticultural Development Board of the Republic of Ireland and other European Union member states and recommends that the Department of Agriculture learn from these examples and devote energy and resources to the marketing of Northern-Ireland-produced potatoes.

We are concerned about the state of the potato industry in general and the seed-potato sector in particular. Conscious of the need to protect the high disease-free status of Northern Ireland potatoes, and aware that, as in other agriculture sectors, quality assurance and traceability are the keys to success, the Committee recommends that only certified seed potatoes be planted.

Further, the Committee recommends that the Department monitor the disease-free status of Northern Ireland and reintroduce in the future the one-in-five-year planting rotation system, if found to be necessary.

It was pointed out to the Committee that seed-potato farmers have difficulty in acquiring suitable disease-free land, at a reasonable price, for the production of seed crops. The Committee therefore recommends that the Department actively seek a change in the rules for the issue of set-aside land and that the growing of seed potatoes be permitted thereon.

The Committee is aware that Seed Potato Promotions Ltd recently presented to the Agriculture Minister a request that, given the current crisis in the industry, inspection fees be waived. There is a precedent for such a course in years of difficulty, and the Committee backs the demand of Seed Potato Promotions Ltd that fees be waived for the past year. The amount for the year would be only £66,000, so the Minister should reconsider her decision not to waive the fees. She should take action to treat Northern Ireland as a special case in order to provide some relief for hard-pressed growers.

Finally, the Committee is inclined towards conducting an independent review of plant breeding in Northern Ireland. Several issues relating to the breeding of new varieties have been brought to our attention, as well as several concerns about the Department's commitment to future plant breeding at Loughgall. It was our hope to visit the Loughgall plant-breeding station and the research facilities at Newforge. These visits were being scheduled for the next month or so, but, regrettably, other events may now preclude them. We are reserving judgement on this matter until we can, at some stage, take further evidence.

We do contend, though, that without new varieties coming on, our seed-potato industry is in the gravest peril.

In conclusion, I express the hope that the Forum will resume its business after the elections to allow this and other issues to be completed by the Committee. I wish to place on record our thanks to all those who contributed to this review and to Mr Barnes and the Forum Secretariat for their hard work in preparing it for Members. My personal thanks are due to the Committee members for their diligence and regular attendance at meetings.

Before commending the report to the Forum, I refer Members to its first page and to a comment from Mr Armstrong, the vice-chairman of Seed Potato Promotions Ltd, a co-operative organization of potato merchants and seed-potato growers. This perhaps sums up the current state of the seed-potato industry in particular:

"Some of us are maybe old enough to remember that we had a flax industry in the province. I just mention it as an example. We are afraid that if we are not careful and if action is not taken fairly quickly the seed potato industry could follow the flax industry into oblivion."

We hope that implementation of this review by the Department will represent that action and that it will be undertaken quickly.

I commend the review to the Forum.

10.30 am

The Chairman: If I may say so, I think that this report demonstrates once again what can be done by a Forum Committee. I congratulate you, Mr Chairman, and the other Members of Standing Committee D on your excellent work and on what I regard as an excellent report.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I should like to associate myself, Mr Chairman, with your remarks. The Forum is indebted to Standing Committee D for its work on agriculture and fisheries and for this report.

I want to make a few remarks about the importance of maintaining the potato industry in Northern Ireland. I received a deputation of young people — some of them in farming, and some anxious to go into farming. Indeed, they have a delegation in the Chamber today. They pointed out to me that because of BSE it is impossible to go into meat production, and the quota system keeps them from taking up dairy farming, unless they have the money to purchase quotas. Seed potatoes and ware potatoes are the two activities to which there is an open door. But it is not an open door to a fruitful occupation. The price of ground and the cost of sowing seed mean that there is not a profit to be made. Thus, in effect, another door is shut to young people who want to go into farming.

Agriculture is, of course, the basic industry of our economy. Any weakening of the basis weakens the whole economy. The attitude that the Department of Agriculture has taken to the potato industry down through the years is very sad. I was thinking today that during the prior Assembly we had had a similar crisis because of very bad weather. Seed farmers, especially in the South Down area, were almost put out of business — indeed, many were —

yet there was resistance to every recommendation aimed at easing their plight. It seems that the Department resists any solid financial help for the potato industry. In fact, the only real bust-up in the Assembly's Committee, of which I was Chairman, occurred when potato farmers and civil servants almost descended to fisticuffs because of the Department's attitude.

It is an absolute disgrace that £66,000 cannot be found to waive the inspection fees for certification. Here is an industry in peril of destruction, yet the Department cannot raise £66,000. It is a very small amount, but it would be something. The situation is absolutely ridiculous. The Baroness travels the world, telling people everywhere what they can do to support industry. The reality is that she should be supporting it at home. Down through the years the potato industry has solidly and quietly been doing a very good job without one penny from the Government. To save it — to keep it from going the way the flax industry went — the Minister needs to be even-handed. Instead of saying to people of a different skin colour or a different culture "You are welcome to Northern Ireland, and there is the money on the table", she should look at the colour of the skin of the Ulster farmers and do something for them. I hope that today she will receive from this House the message that charity begins at home.

I salute the young people of Northern Ireland who want to go into farming. They should be supported. But what can they do if the doors are closed or if the only open door leads to an unsuitable area? The time has come for the Forum to tell the Baroness that she must consider financial support for the industry.

How different is the attitude of the Republic's Government to their farmers. They have squeezed £6 million a day out of Europe, whereas, to this day, we have not even got back what we paid in. The Republic knows how to exploit opportunities in Europe and elsewhere, in the best interests of its people. Surely we should be ahead in this field.

I trust that this report will be highlighted by the media. They are very good at highlighting differences in the Forum, but not great at drawing attention to the things about which we all agree — things that are for the betterment of all the people of Northern Ireland.

There is one other matter that I must mention. It is time we had a farmers' retirement scheme in line with what is happening on the continent, so that those wanting to leave the industry to younger folk might do so with support in recognition of their years of service.

This is a very important debate. It is a pity that we are not going to have the Committee's report following visits to Loughgall and other places. That is just one of the things that happen in political life. I trust that the report will be completed eventually. It will be a historical document recording what Northern Ireland's public representatives of the time thought about this crisis.

Mr McCarthy: I wish simply to pay tribute to the Committee's Chairman, Mr David Campbell, and to all the other members for the very businesslike and constructive manner in which this report was put together. Also, I join in the thanks to the Committee Clerk and his staff for all their support.

The potato industry must be regarded as being very important. Certainly from the representations made to the Committee by people engaged in this activity, it appears that very little support has been forthcoming from the Department of Agriculture. I am sure that Members are angry about this. On the very first page of the report, one comes across a comparison with what happened to our once-thriving flax industry.

The Chairman: I am sorry to interrupt you, but we have had this already.

Mr McCarthy: But it is worth repeating. In a few years' time, if we do nothing now, potatoes will be in the same position as flax.

The Chairman: We all agree.

Mr McCarthy: Exactly, and the report says that this must not be allowed to happen.

Most of the important points have no doubt been made by other Members. The recommendations are reasonable, and I am sure that the Forum will support them fully.

I have said before, and I say again, that the Ulster people, the Northern Irish people, and we as their representatives should and could be in charge of Northern Ireland affairs. We would undoubtedly make a better job not only of the potato industry but also of everything else to do with Northern Ireland. If only we could rise above the prejudices and suspicions and come together to form a partnership administration. *[Interruption]* I hear growls and moans. Shame on those concerned. We have the will and the ability to get together, if only they would catch themselves on. It could be done. Indeed, I have no doubt that it will be done at some time. Let us make it sooner rather than later. I appeal to all Members of this elected Forum to put country before party. Then we shall all enjoy prosperity and peace.

I sincerely hope that the current powers that be will read this report and act on it immediately.

Mr McCartney: Mr McCarthy's remarks are of considerable interest insofar as, as I understand it, there are Nationalist potato farmers. It is singularly unfortunate that, despite the thirst for unanimity and concord, those largely representing that community have chosen to absent themselves. Mr McCarthy should address his remarks to the absent Members.

I join you, Mr Chairman, and other Members in congratulating Mr Campbell and his Committee on the excellence of their report. The Committee Chairman has brought to the job a background of farming experience, rational analysis, assiduity and determination, and for that he is to be congratulated. But he deserves congratulations also for the manner in which this report is put together and the things that it highlights.

The recommendations are all very important, but there is perhaps an absence of emphasis on the need for urgency. There are some young potato farmers here today with whom I have consulted. I think that Dr Paisley too mentioned this issue. These people are in serious danger of going under, financially and professionally. Baroness Denton and other Ministers talk about how they are going to divide up the money. Funds are to be taken from the Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes and given to the Industrial

Development Board (IDB). Substantial funds should immediately be allocated for the preservation of jobs that have been the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy since 1921. We are paying money to attract multinationals — and I agree that the business they do and the employment they provide are essential — but ignoring the backbone of this community, which is the agriculture that farmers have sustained for generations.

What we need is an immediate grant. When someone is drowning he hardly wants to hear "Don't worry, old chap, there will be a rescue boat along for you next week." Even a helicopter in a couple of hours' time would be of little use. The Department needs to take up the very sensible and acute recommendations of the Standing Committee, and we need to emphasize the urgency of the matter.

A young farmer who is here this morning is faced with a dilemma: does he sell some land, or does he attempt to persuade his bank manager to give him an increased loan just to keep his business afloat? That young man, in his twenties, is accompanied by several others, who say that it is only a matter of months before they hit the same problems and face the same dilemma.

I fully support and recommend this excellent report, which I would point out to Mr McCarthy is an example of what the Forum and all its Members who are here can do. I hope that it will be accompanied by a strong recommendation that there be an urgent injection of grant money to preserve this industry.

As a young barrister I was retained on behalf of the now-defunct Seed Potato Marketing Board. At that time seed potatoes from Northern Ireland were sought all over the world, from Cyprus to Egypt. The statistics were mentioned by Mr Campbell: 80,000 tonnes in 1984, down to 25,000 tonnes currently — a reduction of about 70%. Northern Ireland seed potatoes were in 1984 what Irish linen was in 1910 — a prize product. Our linen industry has gone, and our seed potato industry is going.

10.45 am

Is there some machiavellian intent in running down and failing to support Northern Ireland's agriculture when at the same time the Republic is giving all the support it can to its agricultural industries? Is there a plan to make much more attractive to our farmers, to the backbone of our community, some sort of economic unity with the Republic by which they would be able to enjoy the benefits that the Republic is currently experiencing?

Indeed, the disinterest of the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland in our indigenous agricultural industries is such as to make one wonder whether it is the result not of disinterest but of deliberate policy. If Baroness Denton were to curtail her air fares, in a matter of months the £66,000 needed for inspection fees would be found. If she would sit on her backside here in Northern Ireland and direct her attention to our problems, instead of scouting the world for very questionable applicants for IDB grants, we would be a sight better off.

Mr John White: On the presentation of this review of the current state of Northern Ireland's potato industry, I would like to commend the Chairman of the Committee, Mr

David Campbell, for his skills and expertise and for the capable way he chaired the many meetings. May I also acknowledge the positive contributions of the Vice-Chairman, Mr Stewart, and the many Committee members, whose knowledge and experience were invaluable during our deliberations and when taking evidence from the many interested parties we met. I concur with the praise for the skills of Mr Barnes and his staff. The quality and efficiency of the service provided to Committee D were outstanding, and I want to acknowledge the assistance we received in compiling this report.

The review clearly shows a decline in the potato industry, as evidenced by the reduction of 26% in total output from 1984 to 1995. The seed-potato output declined by 66% in the same period. The potato industry is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland, with more than 1,800 farms growing 8,700 hectares of potatoes in 1995. The total harvest in that period was 279,000 tonnes, bringing the total value of the crop to more than £34 million. The industry relies heavily on exports to Great Britain and the Mediterranean, and that provides a healthy balance of trade contributions. But it continues to decline. The number of farms growing potatoes fell by 40% between 1990 and 1995, and hectarage dropped by 17% in the same period.

The potato industry is thriving and continues to develop dramatically in the Republic of Ireland and in many other countries throughout Europe. This is because of increased investment in storage, grading, packaging and other facilities and co-ordinated and structured support. The reverse is true in Northern Ireland. Here, there has been only limited investment in storage, grading facilities and research into new varieties, creating an unstructured, unco-ordinated system of production and supply.

Our markets for fresh potatoes have reduced in size, while almost all chips are imported, and the crisps market is becoming more competitive for Northern Ireland processors. The report recognizes that if the Northern Ireland potato industry is to be competitive in this market it will have to develop its marketing and processing facilities and grow new varieties. To do this, growers will need proper information on the varieties that should be grown and on the production techniques required.

One of the recommendations of the Committee is that the Department of Agriculture should develop and introduce a market-trend-information system for potato farmers. I am in no doubt that if such a system is developed it will make a very positive contribution to the potato industry. The report covers many other aspects of the industry, and I hope that Baroness Denton will give serious consideration to all its recommendations.

This review of the potato industry has left me wondering how the decline came about and why. I am in no doubt that if we had had control of our own affairs — politicians being accountable to their electorate — the decline would not have been allowed to happen. To ensure that our industries receive the support they deserve we need a devolved administration and the power to control our own affairs, with politicians who can be held accountable.

I commend this report to the Forum.

Mr Gaston: I too was going to quote Mr Armstrong, but in the light of your ruling, Mr Chairman —

The Chairman: I think we have all got Mr Armstrong and flax well to the forefront of our minds.

Mr Gaston: If we are not careful, and if action is not taken fairly quickly, the seed-potato industry could go the way of the flax industry. I am long enough in the tooth to remember the flax industry — indeed, to have worked in it. It created a considerable amount of work, but that was 40-odd years ago.

How often do we hear present-day farmers being encouraged to diversify? Yet a generation ago the average family farm worked on a crop rotation of potatoes, oats, flax and hay, or grass seed, and had two years' grazing of cows, young cattle and other stock. Economic pressures forced farmers to concentrate on one or two lines, from milk, beef and other types of livestock and, on the arable side, mainly grain and potatoes. Farming changed from the mixed rotation, but the change has not been for the better. Not all potato producers agree with me, but I think that in the interests of healthy crops, potatoes should be grown in the same ground only once every four or five years.

It came out fairly clearly in the evidence that, where acceptable, varieties are kept in a controlled environment. Northern Ireland potatoes are quite suitable for chipping, unfortunately, however, there are not nearly enough proper stores, and producers without stores can find their potatoes unacceptable for chipping if they are chilled in frosty weather. Stores are very expensive, and the average grower finds it almost impossible to finance their construction or even to benefit from the grants available.

The average Ulster farmer is a very independent person, but this is one circumstance in which, if his operation is not on a big scale, he should try to form some sort of co-operative with his neighbours. Sadly, since the enforcement of direct rule some 20 years ago, the Department of Agriculture has lost its touch in trying to understand the problems facing the local farming industry. Things are now allowed to drift. If the potato industry drifts much further, it will be gone. Some of the problems lie outside Northern Ireland, and a strong, dynamic attitude is needed by all concerned to save a once healthy and vibrant potato industry.

The Agriculture Committee took evidence from a fairly wide field, and this has been expertly compiled by Mr Barnes and his staff. I hope that the report will not be left on a shelf to gather dust. I expect all concerned to get their act together.

I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion moved by Mr Campbell. May I also take this opportunity to thank the Chairman and, indeed, all other members of the Committee for their hard work and for the effort that they put into producing this report.

I am sure that many Members agree that there is nothing nicer than sitting down to a plate of floury potatoes with a big dollop of butter. That is what many of us enjoy, and that is what we remember. Many older Members remember being reared on potatoes and probably nothing else.

The Chairman: Well, they all look very healthy.

Mr Shannon: This report will tickle the taste-buds and whet the appetite. Potatoes are a very important part of the farming industry and are very important to the community. The Committee received many deputations and had many deliberations before making this submission. We have made 11 recommendations.

Mr McCartney spoke about the need for grant-aid. That is part of the solution; but at the same time if we are to improve things — and this is in our recommendations — we need a market. We need the doors to be opened so that we can go out and sell our product on the world stage. That is one of the ways forward.

In the last year agriculture has suffered from BSE and the cold winds of economic blight on potato producers, and in the last few months we have had Newcastle disease. For many farmers, beef and potatoes were the main parts of their enterprise, though some had a chicken-house or two as well. Of course, the Government cannot be blamed for Newcastle disease — even if there are those who blame them for Garvaghy Road. Anyway, potatoes and beef were staple parts of most farming enterprises in the province.

The facts and figures are there, and I do not intend to go over them. I will say, however, that there has been a marked decline in potato production over the last 11 years, though the value of the crops has risen — something that we certainly welcome.

I want to touch on two of the recommendations — those contained in paragraphs 5.1 and 5.5. I have felt for a long time that there is great potential for further processing in the potato industry. Paragraph 5.5 says

"The Committee is aware that DANI supports the development of contract growing of potatoes and understands the need to encourage contract growing for a known market. The Committee recognizes that there is a need for the industry to pull together" —

that is important — and

"... recommends that DANI should take the lead in encouraging the farming organizations and the wider potato industry to co-ordinate their efforts and promote greater co-operation for the future good of the industry."

That recommendation is very important and sums up exactly what we as a Committee have tried to achieve. We have farmers who are able to grow a particular type of potato for a specific market. Some produce a certain variety and type of potato for Tayto, the crisp manufacturers. About a month ago Tayto had an advertisement in the paper for more growers of this type of potato. It wanted to increase business. That is an example of where the Department of Agriculture could co-ordinate the approach so that more farmers would grow the type of potato that is needed.

We also have a very large chip market. This is almost entirely supplied from Holland, France and other parts of Europe. Why do we not grow the potatoes to supply our own market?

One of the reasons is that the Department and other organizations, such as the Local Enterprise Development Unit and the Industrial Development Board, have not been forthcoming in giving grant-aid to people who want to go ahead. We have an industry, and we have a home market and people with ideas who want to push it forward. Unfortunately, the money that is needed has not been forthcoming. The Department could and should be the catalyst to galvanize energies to produce a potato, whether for chips or crisps, and whether for the home market or for further afield.

11.00 am

The recommendation contained in paragraph 5.1 makes it obvious that we must do more than just produce a good potato. I will probably be shot down by some people for saying that the Comber spud is renowned throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, for many it is the premier spud. Of course, other Members will say that the potatoes from their part of the country rank just as highly. But the Comber spud is the first one on the market every year. It is the first that everybody tastes, and it is the one that people enjoy just that tiny bit more.

There must be help for further processing so that the finished product can come directly onto the market. The whole technical process is arduous and painstakingly slow. Some of those to whom we spoke during the last month or so told us that they had been trying for two years just to get to the starting-line — not past it: just to it. They have had two years of red tape and paperwork and are no further forward.

Contrast this with the Republic of Ireland, where there is a positive and proactive policy to help the potato industry. The finance from Europe certainly comes in very handy, and that is one of the reasons they have the money to spend. But their Government are prepared to match some of those grants. Our Government should take note of that lest we lose yet another industry that once led the world.

We have the product — the good old potato — growing here in the province, and we have the ideas to process the humble spud. What we need is a system that is not tied up with bureaucratic red tape — a system that is simple and helpful and can be activated in a short time. In addition, the Department must provide grants to facilitate further processing and marketing in the right direction — and quickly.

Without doubt, hundreds of jobs would be created if the Department and the Government were to recognize the need and the potential. This is important. Farmers, processors and elected representatives recognize the massive market, but we need financial help and less red tape to reach the goal of a strong potato industry, once again leading the world, creating jobs and putting money back into the economy. That is our challenge, and the prize is very obvious. If circumstances can be changed to help the farmer and the processor, surely that is worth aiming for.

I support the motion.

Mr Taylor: I want to speak very briefly on this matter.

First of all, I should like to join with my Colleagues from other political parties in commending Mr David Campbell and all the other members of his Committee for this excellent report. It is an example to the Alliance representative for Strangford of how parties in the Forum can co-operate in the interests of Northern Ireland.

We speak at a time when the agriculture industry of this province is in dire straits because of BSE and the general damage that is being done. For the past year the beef industry has been supported by substantial funding from the Government in an effort to smooth over the great damage resulting from the BSE crisis. But that funding is coming to an end, and the agriculture industry is going to have an even worse year. You can see this already in that the price of land in Northern Ireland is falling. That is a sign of bad times ahead.

I want to make three points in this context. One is that the Government should waive the inspection fees of £66,000. A Government that cannot support an industry with a mere £66,000 is not worth keeping in office. *[Interruption]*

Mr Peter Robinson: Get them out.

The Chairman: This is what I call carefully rehearsed spontaneity.

Mr Taylor: The Gentleman from East Belfast falls into the trap. The last time the Government could have been beaten was during the debate on the Scott Report two months ago.

Mr Peter Robinson: Two weeks ago, when the UUP propped them up.

Mr Taylor: The Government were saved by two votes. And who were absent? The Member for East Belfast and —

The Chairman: I think we should get back to the potatoes. *[Interruption]*

Mr Taylor: DUP Members saved the Government when they could have been beaten.

The £66,000 should be scrapped.

A Member: A spud too far.

Mr Taylor: Do I hear a chip off the old block?

My next point is that parties working together in Northern Ireland would have concentrated on the damage being done to our potato industry. The importance and size of the industry are put in context in the report. We have a great apple industry, as the Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr Speers) will point out later, and we have a great mushroom industry, as Members from Fermanagh and South Tyrone tell us, but, together, they are smaller than Northern Ireland's potato industry. That illustrates the importance and the size of the sector. If Northern Ireland had a system of government which concentrated on the

important economic issues, there would be a Minister and a Civil Service reacting to his or her instructions to help the potato industry.

We are attacking the Department of Agriculture today for not giving priority to our potato industry, but the real guilt rests with its political masters, who have not given the necessary direction. They have not recognized the importance of the industry.

Mr Shannon mentioned the Comber spud — very important in the Strangford constituency. There is a lack of knowledge at Government level about things like the Comber spud. One of our great disadvantages is that we have a system of government that does not reflect the concerns of the people who live here.

My final point has not been mentioned. It concerns something that I followed with some interest during my 10 years in the European Parliament: the proposed European Union scheme for potatoes. I caution against it. Watch it more closely. There is always the feeling, especially in Northern Ireland, that if we are heading towards a problem we should run to Europe and let the EU solve it. A regime throughout Europe could be a trap which would further damage the Northern Ireland potato industry. We should recognize that what is being suggested is simply a light-weight regime, without any intervention support whatsoever — a bureaucracy to control the potato industry across Europe but with no intervention financial scheme to support it.

Subsidiarity should be the issue in the potato industry. We should have it under our control, just as the Republic is supporting its potato industry. We should have political leaders who will give priority to the Northern Ireland potato industry, and not pass the buck to Brussels for more bureaucracy and perhaps more damage.

Mr Gibson: We have heard about the difficulties that farming brings. Indeed, it takes tremendous courage to exist in that industry at the moment.

There are dangers in the red-meat industry and the poultry industry, and, as a result of intensive agriculture, there is a threat to the pork and bacon industry. It is therefore becoming more difficult for the farmer to diversify. We are all probably just old enough to remember that the potato was a part of Northern Ireland's regular crop rotation.

We had some very distinguished potato breeders — people who specialized in producing new varieties. Slowly but surely, we have lost a part of the basic research which is very important for the development of any industry. This has also been aggravated by the Government's lack of support for research at Loughgall. If we lose those who helped to pioneer an industry, that industry will be in great danger.

Another aspect of diversification is important. The potato was beginning to make a contribution to the added value in the chip and crisp industries. We talk about £66,000, but other sectors, such as the crisp industry, have been given millions of pounds to extend and diversify. There is a lack of equal treatment. Agriculture, which provides the primary products, is not being supported, yet the industry that adds value to them is very well enhanced by support from the Industrial Development Board (IDB). I regret this. There must

be a more even-handed approach on the part of the IDB to ensure that Northern Ireland's agriculture industry is encouraged to diversify and that research is fully supported.

In this Chamber I have already made a plea that research — whether in agriculture generally, in the agri-food industry or in the potato industry — be supported. All other industries advocate and support research. My plea today is that the potato industry be supported. The Government must deal even-handedly with the £66,000 that has been mentioned.

Rural diversification is being inhibited because potatoes were always a basic cash crop.

May I make one point about the whole business of the agri-economy. The Department has not given serious consideration to its own industry. This is our single biggest industry, yet the Government will often give financial support only in times of crisis. Admittedly, the beef sector — a major part of the agri-food industry — has been well supported, though the farmer would say not adequately.

I was surprised by Mr Taylor's speech. We were in a position to criticize the Government with regard to the BSE crisis. They could have been brought to task for their mishandling of the whole situation and for not advocating, at European level, that Northern Ireland be released from the embargo. All nine Members from the Gentleman's party, instead of bringing the Government down, sat on their hands. *[Interruption]*

Mr Taylor: Will the Member give way? We got what we wanted. We got Northern Ireland priority —

Mr Gibson: I am sure that Mr Taylor knows that I have no intention of giving way. We should have some regard for our lunch. What would an Ulster lunch be without a good, floury spud?

The Chairman: Mr Speers, please. We have had a good trailer from your Colleague from Armagh.

Mr Speers: As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I am particularly glad to be able to speak on this topic.

Mr Shannon referred to the Comber spud. I too will get in a bit of a commercial. The Member touched on, but did not name, the potato crisp firm from Newry and Armagh — Tayto of Tandragee. That company has indicated that it needs more potatoes from Northern Ireland producers to keep up with demand. The production of crisps has developed into a very vibrant industry in my constituency.

11.15 am

Every time we discuss the agriculture industry we tend to speak about a past crisis, a present crisis or a potential crisis. Well, today's debate is no exception. Last year we debated BSE. The first report of the Agriculture Committee referred to the greatest crisis ever faced

by the industry. Then the Committee addressed the issue of the potato industry. Reference has been made to the fact that a very small initial amount of money could do something dynamic for this industry.

There has also been mention of the fact that the Minister in charge of industry and agriculture in Northern Ireland, Baroness Denton, goes globe-trotting to attract jobs. To the average man involved in agriculture in Northern Ireland it seems very wrong that when jobs in this indigenous industry are at risk, no support can be given or meaningful effort made to sustain them. If one considers the cost of attracting jobs to Northern Ireland, one certainly calls into question the wisdom of the Government's refusal to advance a small amount of money to sustain an industry that provides many jobs.

A particular aspect of the report about which I want to speak is research and development. Not only in the potato sector but, indeed, in many aspects of the industry Northern Ireland led the world with its research and development and its growth. Under the Department of Agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s, we had preferred agriculture for the European economy. We were well placed to beat the world. It is nothing short of a tragedy that that research and development has been put at risk.

Members have mentioned the demise of the research station at Loughgall. The Committee intended to go to Loughgall — and I was very keen that it should — and undertake a major review of the Department's activity in the field of research and development, which is very important if the industry is to have a proper place. If the Committee goes back into action after 3 June we will be able to go to Loughgall and other research locations to do a proper investigation. The penny-pinching that has been referred to with regard to other aspects of the industry applies very much to what is happening — or not happening — at Loughgall and other research stations. In this regard we have a major task to undertake.

I was speaking to the Chairman of the Committee yesterday about what is happening in the Republic of Ireland. Now, I would not want to take my cue from the Republic, but it certainly does no harm to have a look at what is happening there in the area of research and development. I am very cynical about the work of the Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland. Here, every aspect of agriculture has a greater input from local representatives and local people, yet the Department down South seems to make a much more determined effort to sustain and develop its industry.

I had hoped that when the Agriculture Committee got down to the basic question — the review of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland — we could look at the aspects that have suffered as a result of fiddling about. Whether at departmental level or at political level, there is a lack of determination to sustain a vibrant and co-ordinated agriculture industry. In our milk sector — to name but one — lack of co-ordination has led to various parts being hived off to firms from the Republic of Ireland. That is not in the interests of milk producers in the wider sense. I look forward to the Forum's being able to address the issue of the review of agriculture in Northern Ireland.

Much has been said about the agriculture industry. Within the industry, milk has been a sustainable farm enterprise. Often, beef, in isolation, has not. And the same applies to

sheep. In Northern Ireland, beef, sheep and potatoes are all parts of farm enterprise. Beef has suffered a tremendous blow with the BSE crisis; the sheep industry is mediocre at the moment; and those involved in the potato industry are suffering tremendous financial losses. It is a question not of how much money you make but of how you manage to sustain losses.

I hope that the Committee will have an opportunity to investigate this further and that the recommendations in the report will be acted upon by the Government to find ways and means of sustaining and supporting agriculture and developing a proper industry, with a vibrant potato sector playing an important role.

Mr McCarthy brought the subject into the political realm. The potato does indeed play a very important role in Northern Ireland. Since the famine it has always been associated with politics, and no doubt this debate is no different.

I have the utmost pleasure in supporting the report. I would like to congratulate the Chairman and thank the support staff. We asked questions that one might have thought were unanswerable, yet Mr Barnes was able to produce the answers that the Committee required. I believe that the Committee has done a worthwhile job in respect of this report, and I thank those involved for their support.

Mr Poots: While I enjoy potatoes, I do not eat many potato waffles, so I will be brief.

While 1996 will go down as a bad year for farming, with the BSE crisis being the headline-grabber — farmers did suffer, but market support helped to alleviate that problem — the losses in beef farming were nothing compared to the losses that were sustained in the potato industry. I would dearly have loved this report to recommend market support. Unfortunately, under the 1993 Agriculture Act, the potato industry cannot benefit from a market-support system.

Much has been said about the flax industry and its problems. I intend to speak about the seed-potato industry today. I will not give Mr Armstrong's quote, but I will give a quote from Mr Weatherup, who is in the Department of Agriculture and has no specific interest. People in the industry may have an interest in exaggerating things slightly, but Mr Weatherup does not. When I questioned him about the feasibility of the seed-potato industry, his reply was

"Yes, I know what you are saying. Basically, if we go much smaller than we are now, it gets to a point where the quantities are not adequate to supply any of the markets, and indeed it is not feasible to supply outside the province any longer."

That sums up fairly well the current state of the seed-potato industry.

The potato industry was worth £34 million to Northern Ireland in 1995 — a very significant amount. Support should be given in a big way. The extent of the decline from 1982 to 1995 has been mentioned — some 71%. What can be done to halt this trend? Well, research and development is one thing. Certainly more research and development needs to go into producing seed potatoes of the right quality — a product suitable for the European and Third-World-country markets. The decision to sell potato-breeding rights to Agrolon rather

than to a Northern Ireland company has led to research and seed-potato production at Loughgall being transferred to Scotland and elsewhere. That is totally wrong. The Department of Agriculture took a short-term decision. It got a few more pounds at the time, but in the long term the decision has been bad for Northern Ireland and bad for the seed-potato industry in particular. It should be noted that Northern Ireland is a protected area for seed potatoes — only a certain type may be grown. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Northumberland are the only regions in the United Kingdom with protected status.

The Committee also recommends the use of set-aside land for seed-potato growers. I believe that set-aside is immoral in the first place. Farmers should not be paid for growing weeds: they should be paid for growing produce to feed people. At present, because of many support measures for other parts of the industry, it is difficult to obtain clean land at a reasonable price to grow seed potatoes. If set-aside land could be used, that would help.

Inspection fees have been mentioned. We are calling for the £29 per hectare to be waived. This would cost the Government only £66,000. I was glad to hear that Mr Taylor does not have any confidence in Baroness Denton. Where did he get his confidence in Douglas Hogg? He would not vote against the Agriculture Secretary — but that is another matter, I suppose.

The Chairman: Yes, it is.

Mr Poots: It was brought up previously.

Perhaps I should say something about individual problems in the potato industry, such as storage. As a farmer I have bought potatoes to feed the cattle this year because they are excellent value for money. Recently, two contacts wanted to know if I would buy potatoes. One of them has supplied Tayto, which has been mentioned today. Now, he does not have proper storage facilities, and his sugar and starch levels were not correct, so the potatoes that were to be sold to Tayto at £100 to £120 per tonne had to go at £18 per tonne.

I know of another individual who, with the Government's go-ahead, built storage facilities two years ago. He spent some £200,000 but has not yet received one shilling by way of grant. This has been a very difficult year for him, and the Government have not come up with the money despite having given the go-ahead. And I know of other individuals who applied for grants more than three years ago but still have not got the go-ahead. Yet in the South of Ireland new potato stores are being erected wholesale. The Department of Agriculture needs to get its act together, because this industry is going to the wall. If the Department does not waken up, the industry will be finished.

I refer to another case — that of a seed-potato grower who rang me up and said "You were looking for potatoes." I replied "Yes, I am." He said "I have potatoes. I picked them and had them ready to go away, and they were cancelled. I got another order several weeks later, so I took them out of the bags, inspected them in case there was any damage and repacked them — only to have that order cancelled as well." He asked "Could you take them off me?" Those potatoes should have been going for £150 per tonne; instead, he is getting £20. This is an example of the problems of individual farmers.

I commend this report to the Forum, and I congratulate all those who helped to draw it up, including the Committee's Chairman and staff — in particular, Mr Barnes and Mrs Barclay. They are the hardest-working staff in the Committee set-up, having had to produce three reports — the greatest number. I urge Members to give the report their full support.

The Chairman: There are a couple of points with which — if he does not mind my saying so — Mr Campbell might want to deal in his summing-up. One concerns the letter that I might send to the Baroness to support what has been said today. The second is the inspection-free question. Then there is the point, made in paragraph 5.1 of the report, about storage. I see that the Republic has spent a lot of money on storage facilities. What Mr Poots has just said about that seems to me pretty relevant.

I leave it to the Committee Chairman, but it seems to me that it might be fruitful to underline those points.

11.30 am

Mr David Campbell: Thank you, Mr Chairman, for making those points. My thanks also go to Members for their contributions.

On the question of storage, the main point is that for the quality of stored potatoes to be maintained throughout the winter months, they have to be kept at a constant temperature. The lack of proper storage facilities in Northern Ireland has meant deteriorating quality with the onset of winter. This is particularly relevant to potatoes for chips, in that the starch turns to sugars with a drop in temperature. When that happens, potatoes cannot be processed for chip production.

As Mr Poots mentioned, a number of farmers and merchants have got together in co-operatives, and some large farmers have started work themselves to provide storage facilities for perhaps up to 5,000 tonnes of potatoes. Members of the Committee have been approached, individually and collectively, to push the case for grant-aid. As Mr Poots said, the Department initially gave the go-ahead to individual farmers. In one case with which I am dealing at the moment the farmer spent over £200,000 on the back of reasonably high prices last year. Obviously, with prices falling to such a dreadful level this year, his bank is getting concerned. He has approached the Department to see if any grant can now be released. Not only can no grant be released, but the very offer of grant-aid is now being reviewed.

Therefore, Mr Chairman, on the matter of the storage of potatoes, you might mention in your letter the very real difficulty being faced by those producers who applied for grant-aid and received approval up to three years ago but have not received a penny and are in some doubt about whether they will get any financial assistance.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Would the Member be in favour of joining with others in the Forum to ask you, Mr Chairman, to lead a deputation of all the party Leaders to take up some of these specific points with Baroness Denton? There are people in the Strangers' Gallery whose businesses are on the line. Some may even have seen them go. This is urgent. A

deputation would show that we were taking their point right into the Baroness's camp and putting it plain and straight to her.

Mr Poots: It should be said that the grant available is 40% — 35% from the European Union and 5% from the British Government. If someone is spending £100,000 does it not make economic sense for the Government to provide £5,000 to encourage the creation of wealth and, thereby, jobs?

Mr David Campbell: I will take both points on board and amend my proposal accordingly. I ask you, Mr Chairman, to seek a meeting as a matter of urgency. With political events as they are, that would need to be in the next week to 10 days.

With regard to your second point, Mr Chairman, will you refresh my memory?

The Chairman: It was about the inspection fees.

Mr David Campbell: Perhaps your letter accompanying the report could stress the need to waive the inspection fees and ask the Baroness to review the decision relayed in her letter to Seed Potato Promotions Ltd. As many Members have pointed out, £60,000 is not a lot of money in the entire agriculture budget, but it could alleviate what have been short-term difficult conditions for seed growers — conditions which, I imagine, as we approach the new planting season, are forcing many to consider the viability of the enterprises on their farms. I suspect that these issues, like the grant-aid that is available, could best be dealt with in a face-to-face meeting with the Baroness.

I thank all Members for their constructive comments and ask the Forum to endorse the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum adopts the report on the current state of the Northern Ireland potato industry prepared by Standing Committee D (Agriculture and Fisheries Issues) and asks the Chairman to forward it to the Minister responsible for agriculture and fisheries, Baroness Denton, with a request that she give serious consideration to all its recommendations.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I take it that that includes your asking for a meeting, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: If you wish, I will be happy to do that.

It was so decided.

The meeting was suspended at 11.41 am and resumed at 12.02 pm.

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: SUMMER SCHEMES

The Chairman: I have notice of an emergency motion, which can be heard only by leave of the Forum. It is in the names of Mr Peter Robinson and Mrs Eileen Bell and is on the question of the suspension of summer schemes for children with special educational needs. Do Members agree that this matter may be dealt with very briefly?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Peter Robinson: By agreement I am leading off. Normally, of course, having respect for the other gender, I would let ladies go first. But, as it is this Lady's wish, I am leading.

I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum condemns the recent decision by the South Eastern Education and Library Board to suspend the summer schemes for children with special educational needs and calls on the board to rescind the decision as soon as possible.

This is an issue which crosses all party and community divides. Indeed, yesterday evening at Dundonald International Ice bowl there was a public meeting. There were almost 200 parents present. All of those in attendance have recognized the great concern about this matter.

The axing of the three-week summer schemes for mentally handicapped children is a most insensitive and callous act on the part of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The board has put forward excuses — that is all you could call them — about health and safety and about the qualifications of those whom would be available to supervise, but everyone knows that the real reason for the suspension is financial. Several boards, indeed, are strapped for cash. But whatever services one needs to cut to save money, this is not one of them. The board is literally punishing those who are unable to speak for themselves, those who require services most, those who it is recognized require special education. Allowing them to suffer is outrageous, and I am sure that the Forum will join the parents in condemning the action of the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

This decision will have an impact on other board areas. I know that the Belfast Board is concerned about the matter. We are looking to the South Eastern Board to reverse its decision, and I hope that the Forum will lend its voice in support of the motion. The Education Committee may not want to take on another report, but it might want to involve itself in representation on this issue, so that the view of elected representatives, speaking for the people of Northern Ireland, could be heard.

We have appointed boards taking decisions that are out of kilter with the thinking of the community. The lack of democracy in the quango system that we have in Northern Ireland leads to such unfortunate situations. One board official is quoted as having said "This decision is irreversible." That is something that we do not accept. Whether it is a case of being able to persuade the board or of going to the Minister or even, as in the case of other

matters, to the Prime Minister, the decision must be reversed, and I believe that the Forum can play a valuable role in the process.

Ms Bell: I was only too pleased to give Mr Robinson the respect due to him as an MP — it was not a case of respect for a man — and I am sure that he will treat me similarly.

I am grateful for this opportunity. As Mr Robinson said, anyone who attended the meeting last night, or has had any dealings with this issue, has been moved by the parents and children — not just by their words but by their actions. Within 48 hours of the announcement to suspend the summer scheme, they organized this meeting, which was attended by more than 200 people, and they have had dealings with officials. That is people power, as I know it, and it should be listened to. I was also moved by the parents' reports about the attitudes of officials — something to which Mr Robinson has referred. As a member of the South Eastern Board, I will be taking this matter up.

As elected representatives we cannot allow this decision to be implemented. It is clearly wrong to discriminate against the most vulnerable in society. We must ensure that all support is given to this campaign, so that the children may enjoy the highest possible quality of life, including a three-week summer scheme for educational and social development.

I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Dodds: This issue does not affect only the South Eastern Education and Library Board, but it makes a particular impact on that board's area. In the Belfast area there are two special schools whose summer schemes are to be axed — Glenveagh and Oakwood. I do not know whether there are any other members of the Belfast Education and Library Board here this morning — there are other people who, like me, are Members of both bodies — but any who are will know that we have requisitioned a meeting specifically to rescind this decision. In the case of Belfast, it was taken to save the massive sum of £14,000. In the context of the board's overall budget it is a scandal that board officers should have proposed and board members voted for something that went against the wishes of virtually all elected representatives — the suspension of schemes which are of such vital importance to the kids themselves and, for respite purposes, to the parents.

Although, in the case of the South Eastern Board, the suspension is to be for one year, it is quite clear that once the scheme goes, it will not return. It is therefore vital that we raise a united voice to save this service for children who cannot speak for themselves. It is scandalous that these cuts are being targeted at the most vulnerable and needy sections of the community, and it is imperative that we put maximum pressure on all board members to ensure that the decisions are overturned. I am glad to report that the process is under way in the Belfast area.

Mr Taylor: I shall speak briefly, in accordance with your wishes, Mr Chairman.

Last week I condemned the South Eastern Education and Library Board's decision to suspend these summer schemes. I therefore support this proposal. I call upon the South Eastern Education and Library Board to meet urgently and rescind its deplorable decision,

which will hurt children in great need. This is a shameful way to treat parents who carry such a burden.

I hope that the motion will be adopted unanimously.

Mr Gibson: I do not need to comment on an issue that is already settled in everyone's mind. We should consider doing what we agreed to do about the potato issue — adopting a co-ordinated approach for the Leaders of the various parties. The matter should be put back to the board and then, if necessary, referred to the Minister or, indeed, the Prime Minister. We need to do more than have a resolution, which could be ignored by any board that has taken such a decision and carried it through. Our job is to deliver the goods.

Mr Peter Robinson: In the light of the information from Mr Dodds that the Belfast Education and Library Board has decided to suspend some of its summer schemes for children with special needs, may we amend the motion to embrace Belfast?

The Chairman: Do Members agree to that proposal?

It was so decided.

Amendments, by leave, made: In line 1, after "Board", insert

"and the Belfast Education and Library Board";

in line 2, delete "board" and insert "boards".

Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum condemns the recent decision by the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Belfast Education and Library Board to suspend summer schemes for children with special educational needs and calls on the boards to rescind the decision as soon as possible.

POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS / CONTINUING VIOLENCE

The Chairman: I understand that there is a proposal to change the wording of the United Kingdom Unionist Party's motion.

Mr McCartney: Two amendments have been tabled — one from the Alliance Party and one from the Ulster Unionist Party. It has been suggested that a revised motion might meet the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. That version will be distributed presently. It reads as follows:

"The Northern Ireland Forum regrets that continuing violence and the threat of violence has inhibited the progress of free and fair negotiations at the Stormont talks; calls upon any present or future Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to initiate fresh negotiations directed to a democratic settlement within the United Kingdom; and, recognizing that Sinn Fein/IRA are irrevocably wedded to violence, calls for such fresh negotiations to be only between those dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures."

It seemed to me, on reading the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment, that the only difference of substance was the recognition that Sinn Fein/IRA are irredeemably wedded to violence. I see Mr Trimble's head shuttling violently about on his shoulders, and I can only conclude that he is either having a —

The Chairman: It is pretty unusual for one party to tell me what another party wants to say. I would rather hear from the other party. Mr Trimble.

Mr Trimble: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I wanted to invite Mr McCartney to give way so that I might clarify the matter for him.

Mr McCartney: I am happy to give way.

Mr Trimble: It is a pity that Mr McCartney was not able to circulate his revised motion. While he has adopted one of the changes of substance contained in our amendment, he has not accepted the other one. I refer to the inclusion of the word "resumed". The relevant words are

"to direct resumed or future negotiations".

Mr McCartney: I am happy now to proceed with my party's motion. Mr Trimble has helpfully clarified the main thrust of his proposal. The amendments can be moved after I have dealt with the motion.

Mr McCartney *(by leave)*: I beg to move the following motion:

The Northern Ireland Forum regrets that continuing violence and the threat of violence has inhibited the progress of free and fair negotiations at the Stormont talks; calls upon any present or future Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to initiate fresh negotiations directed to a democratic settlement within the United Kingdom; and, recognizing that Sinn Fein/IRA are irrevocably wedded to violence, calls for such fresh negotiations to be only between those dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures.

This motion, in content and timing, should commend itself to all those who value and seek to maintain the Union.

The Prime Minister, Mr Major, in his speech opening the talks — now seemingly consigned to limbo — said

"Negotiations inhibited by violence or the threat of violence cannot be free and fair. The bomb, the gun and the violent beatings must be removed once and for all from the politics of Northern Ireland."

On that basis we should address our minds to the inherent reason for the failure of the talks, to date, to produce anything. The talks were never free from the inhibition of violence and the threat of violence. From their beginning, on 10 June last, to their cessation, which is seemingly complete if not yet permanent, they have operated against a background of actual violence and murder — from Thiepval to Bessbrook. Loyalist beatings escalated from 38 in number in 1994, to 76 in 1995, to 130 in 1996, and the IRA were responsible for 32 beatings in 1994, 141 in 1995, rising to 172 in 1996. This was the peace process in operation. These were the most patent examples of the inhibiting factors that prevented anything from emerging from the talks.

12.15 pm

In an article in the 'British Medical Journal' a leading consultant from Belfast wrote

"To avoid the spotlight of international criticism the terrorists swapped their guns for less emotive devices — baseball bats for the Loyalists; hurley sticks for the Nationalists. Ironically, the injuries produced by these weapons prove more destructive and difficult to treat than a simple knee-capping."

The effect on health care for the needy, from major cancer operations to cardiac surgery and bypass surgery, was disastrous. This increasing and escalating brutality was literally killing people in a range beyond the scope of its immediate victims. Its cost was placing an intolerable burden on an already underfunded Health Service. A beating occasioning only a broken leg, which would be a minor one on the scale of things, would entail a 10-day stay in hospital and would cost £9,000, quite apart from any compensation subsequently payable.

In the meantime, however, every inducement was being offered to make smooth the path of Sinn Fein/IRA into the talks, and the Loyalist paramilitaries were being lauded as unsung heroes for maintaining a cease-fire that permitted them to carry out, in 1996, 130 beatings and 21 shootings.

During the cease-fire Sinn Fein's efforts were to be directed towards exploiting and extending its control by other means. All Members will recently have heard the words of Comrade Adams about what he thought the activists should be doing in relation to the recent street confrontations. Clausewitz described war as "politics by other means". Well, Sinn Fein decided that it would have politics by means of street confrontation and community division. During its phoney cease-fire it moved from the gun and the bomb to a second front, from which, by terror, it dominated its communities. With lies and propaganda, it manufactured resentment on the streets. It then exploited that, fanning it into open confrontation on the Garvaghy and Ormeau Roads and in Londonderry. Conned and

manipulated, the Nationalist community in general, and its constitutional politicians in particular, gave these activities their tacit approval.

Few of us will forget the emotional effect of a distraught Brid Rodgers on our television screens saying "What is happening?" What was happening was that the RUC was permitting the church parade to move past. Sinn Fein/IRA, which, by its violence, had been responsible for extracting British promises to meet the unreal expectations of the minority community, sat back, enjoyed the spectacle and revelled in events which could do nothing but increase its electoral support at the expense of the SDLP's.

This could well be one of the last meetings of the Forum, so I turn to the present and future position of the so-called peace talks. The talks, in their present form, are the product of years of planning and scheming by the British and Irish Governments, the SDLP and Irish America. *[Interruption]*

Mr Chairman, I am having some difficulty being heard over the committee meeting that the Ulster Unionist leadership is holding at present.

When a political process creates new depths of inter-community hatred and division; when it sets neighbour against neighbour, and customer against shopkeeper; when it encourages the expectations of one community at the expense of those of another; when it unleashes new levels of barbarous beatings and cruelty — when it does all that, it seems odd that it should be described as a peace process. This was never a peace process. What it was and has proved to be is a machiavellian political settlement to appease the aspirations of pan-Nationalism at the price of an end to terror.

At the core of the present talks are the framework proposals. Let nobody for one moment think that those proposals have either gone away or disappeared. They were four or five years in the preparation. They have been ensconced as an absolutely elemental and central principle of the present negotiations. Both Governments and the SDLP, to say nothing of the latest expressions of solidarity from Cardinal Daly, say that two elements must never be moved away from — the joint declaration and the framework proposals.

The Ulster Unionist leadership, in the form of Messrs Trimble and Taylor, has committed its party to resuming these negotiations after the election. To that extent, I welcome the refusal of the party Leader to subscribe to the suggested joint motion. He laid much weight upon the issue of resumed rather than fresh negotiations. He told us that the word "resumed" was a cardinal point, a point of substance, that he wished to highlight in his amendment. But renewal of the negotiations, as opposed to fresh negotiations, means accepting the existing ground rules and the essential parameters of the framework document.

Several Members: Rubbish.

Mr McCartney: Listen to the Gentlemen shouting "Rubbish". Those are the people who in the talks permitted the framework document to become the essential parameter and the Union to be an item on the agenda.

At the same time as accepting that the ground rules and the framework document are as essential parameters of any resumed negotiations as of the present ones, they beat their chests like male gorillas and say "We are the strong party. We are the party that negates any suggestion that we would have anything to do with the framework principles."

Well, the Ulster Unionist Party cannot have it both ways. It cannot seek the approval of the electorate for being the goody-two-shoes of the pro-Union people saying "We are the people who want to talk. We are the people who will negotiate. We are the people who will resume these negotiations immediately after the election." and, at the same time, be the party that will not accept the only basis upon which the Nationalist community would talk. There will be no resumed negotiations if the Ulster Unionists say to the SDLP and the Irish Government "Under no circumstances will we discuss strands one, two and three within the parameters of the framework proposals." If they were to come out now and make such a clear statement, there would be absolutely no question of the Nationalist community having anything to do with them in future talks. What do they want to do? They want to persuade the electorate, before the election, that they are opposed to the framework proposals and then, having got a mandate to do something entirely different, resume negotiations on the basis of those proposals.

Nor can the Ulster Unionist Party escape by using the present idea that the Downing Street declaration delivered some new acceptance by the Irish Government of the principle of consent. I have heard Mr Trimble say that the reason his party supported the joint declaration — and it did support the joint declaration — was that it delivered some novel principle, some new acceptance by Irish Nationalism of the principle of consent. It did nothing of the kind — and I would be happy to meet Mr Trimble in any public forum to discuss that issue before the electorate of Northern Ireland.

Consent, as understood by pan-Nationalists, is a very dangerous idea. First, pan-Nationalism limits the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland to the issue of sovereignty. On 4 January 1994, within four weeks of the joint declaration, Mr Reynolds said in a speech at the Mansion House that the only issue on which the consent of the Northern Ireland majority was required was that of sovereignty and that the two Governments had the right to set up for the governance of Northern Ireland whatever political institutions they thought correct.

Secondly, the framework proposals envisage that the institutions of government are matters for the two Governments alone and that these dynamic and cross-border bodies would, over a period, create, factually and economically, one Ireland — a united Ireland — rendering the majority's consent under the joint declaration, which the Ulster Unionist Party supported, nothing more than consent to what would be a totally empty and worthless shell, because by that time there would be actual and factual unification of everything that mattered on this island.

My party is absolutely committed to talks, absolutely committed to negotiation, but totally opposed to the basis of the current procedures, which clearly have no prospect of success and, if they continue in the future, will only engender what they have engendered in the past two years: a deepening of division, bitterness and confrontation — confrontation in which Mr Trimble has played a leading part. That is what the talks have engendered.

Sinn Fein/IRA has been able to exploit, by public confrontation, the bitterness that the negotiations have created, and I believe that if these are allowed to continue, no good can come of them — no good whatsoever.

The talks about the future of Northern Ireland must have a change of emphasis and a change of purpose. The debate — new and fresh debate, not resumed debate — must be not about which state the people should serve but about the kind of state that can best serve the people, and there is absolutely no doubt that that state is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr McBride *(by leave)*: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words after "has" and add

"been used to inhibit the progress of political negotiations at the Stormont talks and calls upon all political parties who have endorsed the Mitchell principles and are totally committed to the democratic process to engage in substantive negotiations when the talks resume on 3 June 1997."

Speaking at this point, one has a slight sense of intruding into a family quarrel. However, our amendment is extremely important.

We meet today in what amounts to a state of crisis in the political affairs of Northern Ireland. That crisis is not about the future of the Forum, however worthy our debates on potatoes and such things may be, but about the failure of the democratic process, through the talks, to show any way forward in recent times. We have been involved in the talks process at Stormont for some nine months, and in that time we have reached agreement on the rules of procedure and on the agenda for the opening plenary session, which has been going on for six months. Nobody can or should call that anything other than failure. And the failure has serious ramifications for the political process here. It has been caused not by violence outside but by the failure of political leadership and political will. It has been caused by political intransigence and refusal to enter into a genuine process of evolving solutions.

The violence is, of course, a real and awful presence, but that should have been a motivating factor. It should have given impetus to the efforts of politicians to show that there is a democratic, peaceful alternative. Instead, it has demonstrated their failure, and the only people who can take satisfaction in that are those who are outside, saying "We told you so."

All politicians should be sitting back in a spirit of sober reflection on the failure of the talks so far. We should be weighing up the damage that has been done. We should be recognizing that Sinn Fein is the only winner in a process in which democratic politics have failed, and we should be dedicating ourselves to effective resumption of the talks in June. We should be committing ourselves to making sure that there is real dialogue and real progress towards a democratic, shared solution for this shared society. Instead, all three Unionist parties have today threatened to pull out of the talks process if this body is not renewed.

12.30 pm

We believe that the Forum has a role to play, and we would like to see it playing its proper role, but let us be very clear about the fact that the talks are crucial — much more

important than what is going on here, however worthy. The talks process is what matters, and its failure will be the failure of democratic politics in Northern Ireland for years to come. We do not need threats to pull out of the process.

But what we are talking about goes beyond the argument about the Forum. We are getting clear indications of retreat from the present process. This is unmistakable in Mr McCartney's motion, with its talk of new negotiations and its clear rejection of the present process. That does not come as any great surprise, but we are getting it from the Ulster Unionist Party also. Earlier this week members of that party were talking about alternative solutions, alternative mechanisms, alternative processes, and their amendment clearly seeks renegotiation of the legislative basis for the talks.

Mr Taylor: Mr McBride has said that our proposals earlier this week were presented as an alternative to the talks process. They were presented as no such thing; they were intended as new initiatives to run in parallel with the existing talks process. The Member should not misrepresent the facts.

Mr McBride: They are recycled old ideas. The fact is that the Ulster Unionists have not engaged seriously, at the talks, in the political process. There has been a great deal of talk about Sinn Fein. But Sinn Fein is not there, having failed to reach agreement with the constitutional Nationalists. The only people who are laughing are the members of Sinn Fein themselves.

The Unionists put forward the notion that there is some alternative. Let us be clear: there is no alternative to the present process. Mr McCartney has said that the core, the heart, of that process is the framework document. It is not. The core, the heart, of the present process is the three-strand approach agreed between the Leaders of the four main parties in 1991, which has provided the basis for negotiations. There can be no retreat.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will the Gentlemen give way on that point?

Mr McBride: I will not.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I was one of the Leaders who made the agreement, so I know more than Mr McBride does. There is no use in lying about it.

Mr McBride: What we are witnessing is retreat from the agreed basis of the talks.

The other foundation of the present talks, which we cannot ignore, is the legislative framework, which also provides this body with its *raison d'être.* Those constitute the only game in town, and the only game that is going to be in town. We have to make that process work. We have to show that there is a democratic way forward. We have to show that democratic political parties can solve problems rather than create them. We have to send that message to the men of violence. Thus far, we have not done so.

The challenge before us is to get the talks back on the rails and running effectively. We have to be very clear that the talk of new negotiations means no negotiations, that the talk of no grand solutions means no solutions. I want to make it very clear that the Alliance Party

is committed to making the present process — the only process — work. We are not going to shrink from the task laid upon all of us by the people of Northern Ireland.

The Chairman: I take it, Mr McBride, that your amendment has been circulated to everybody.

Mr McBride: Yes.

Mr Trimble *(by leave)*: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words after "talks;" and add

"recognizes that Sinn Fein/IRA are irredeemably committed to a strategy of violence; and calls upon the present and any future Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to direct resumed or future negotiations towards the achievement of a democratic settlement within the United Kingdom and among those dedicated exclusively to democratic politics and procedures."

We tabled this amendment for a number of reasons, the first of which concerns some of the opening words of the motion, with which I have some difficulty:

"continuing violence and the threat of violence has inhibited the ... talks".

Of course we deplore the continuing violence, but do we really want to say that violence prevents us from engaging in talks? It has not done so before. We have had talks while violence continued. Earlier talks — we think mainly of Brooke and Mayhew, but there were others — took place despite continuing violence and were not inhibited by it. Certainly I am not inhibited by IRA violence.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: What about the Member's own amendment?

Mr Trimble: That is what I am dealing with.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: What does it mean?

Mr Trimble: If the Member listens, all will become clear.

We are not inhibited by IRA violence. We are quite capable, as I am sure are other parties here, of continuing talks despite the threat of violence. That threat will not influence our actions. Therefore a reference to the talks being inhibited by violence and the threat of violence, if unqualified, would give a wrong impression. We introduced the reference to Sinn Fein/IRA because what is inhibiting the talks is not the violence or the threat of violence but the continuing violence, together with the desire of certain parties to insert Sinn Fein into the talks without its having to give a satisfactory commitment to the ending of violence and the embracing of exclusively peaceful means as the only way forward. The inhibiting factor is not the violence itself but the violence linked with the desire of others to insert Sinn Fein without a genuine end to violence and a commitment to exclusively peaceful means.

The reason for our amendment is that the people, the Government and the SDLP should recognize that Sinn Fein/IRA is committed to a strategy of violence and, indeed, was

committed to that strategy even during the temporary cease-fire. We want to caution people not to be misled by any future temporary cease-fire — and that is all it will be. It should be appreciated that Sinn Fein/IRA is still committed to its strategy of violence. It is a matter of regret that the British Government, the Irish Government and the SDLP have not been prepared to recognize that commitment and to let the talks move into matters of substance on terms that would prevent Sinn Fein from being parachuted amongst us. That is what has inhibited things.

It is particularly regrettable to us that, even after statements and interviews that have been interpreted by some as indicating a desire to separate himself from Sinn Fein, Mr John Hume continued, right up to a fortnight ago, to negotiate, or to try to negotiate, with the Government directly on behalf of Sinn Fein/IRA. I hope very much that the Government will not allow themselves to be sucked into a form of long-distance negotiation by message, that they will not allow themselves to be pulled back into the morass from which they extricated themselves with such difficulty not so long ago. What we need in the present circumstances is that the talks should proceed on the very clear basis that the present participants — those that are committed to exclusively peaceful means — are the only participants and that those who are not able to make that commitment should be left behind.

In circumstances like these, people often talk about catching or missing trains. So far as the Stormont talks are concerned, it must be made clear that if people miss the train, that will be it — that there will be no point in turning up at the station after the train has gone. It is commitments on those matters that we need if we are to resolve the current difficulties.

I want to turn now to the question of what has happened in the talks so far. Those listening to this debate will have found it hard to reconcile the comments made in the first two speeches. We were told by Mr McCartney that the Ulster Unionist Party had accepted the ground rules and the framework as the essential negotiation parameters. On the other hand, Mr McBride said that we had not engaged seriously in any negotiations. There is a certain conflict between those two statements. For anyone who is wondering which of them is true let me make it clear that neither contains any truth whatsoever.

The Ulster Unionist Party has not accepted the framework document or the ground rules. With the assistance of other persons here, we went to great lengths and considerable effort to ensure the adoption of rules of procedure that excluded the obnoxious elements of the ground rules. As for the framework document, I made it clear, as did other members of the Ulster Unionist Party, on the very day of its publication that it was quite unacceptable to us. From that position we have not resiled one iota. At the last session of the talks, held this week, my Colleague presented a paper containing these words:

"It has been suggested that the real agenda here is the framework document. The Ulster Unionist Party's position on this, also made many times on the record, is an utter repudiation of that document, and here again is something that is not subject to change."

What could be clearer? That statement was made this week in the talks, was released to the public, and has been repeated here. There is absolutely no basis for any doubt. But, of course, there is no genuine doubt.

12.45 pm

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Trimble: No. This is a 10-minute speech, and we are three minutes late.

There is no genuine doubt. What we have is electioneering in its crudest form.

Mr McBride's suggestion that we are not seriously engaged is also completely false and quite inappropriate from a member of a party that is the dilettante of politics in Ulster. We have been seriously engaged — more seriously than the Alliance Party — and we have made considerable efforts, but we are not going to commit ourselves to a process as if we were writing a blank cheque in the way that the Alliance Party does. We will certainly engage seriously in this process, but we do not accept things just because the British Government or the Irish Government want them to be accepted. We have our agenda, and our agenda is firmly to defend the Union and repair the damage done to it by successive Governments over the last 25 years. That is what we are endeavouring to do. What we are not going to do in this situation is leave the Union or the Unionist point of view unrepresented.

It is perfectly clear to anyone who looks at the strategy of the Spring/Hume element in Nationalism — I should say the Spring/Hume/Adams element — that what they want to see is a Unionist walk-out from the talks. They want the talks to go on without Unionists so that they can manoeuvre the British Government into imposing the framework document upon us. Those who walk out will play the enemy's game. Those who want to end the talks in a capricious and irresponsible manner also play the game of the Nationalists.

Therefore we are not comfortable with a motion that implicitly calls for the end of the talks, as Mr McCartney's does. We will continue, consistent with our policies, to defend the Unionist position if the talks are resumed, and we will work for improvements in their structure. That is precisely what we did earlier this week when we produced a paper for a parallel process that would be a confidence-building measure and would help to bring about a different context for talks. We would, of course, seek any opportunity not just to change the nature of the talks but also to bring about an outcome acceptable and satisfactory to the greater number of the people of Northern Ireland. This is not an easy job, but we will continue to do it. We are not going to be blown off course by people who are pursuing a purely petty, personal agenda.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: As there seems to be some difference of opinion about what we are debating, I will read out the motion before us:

"The Northern Ireland Forum regrets that continuing violence and the threat of violence has inhibited the progress of free and fair negotiations at the Stormont talks; calls upon any present or future Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to initiate fresh negotiations directed to a democratic settlement within the United Kingdom; and, recognizing that Sinn Fein/IRA are irrevocably wedded to violence, calls for such fresh negotiations to be only between those dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures."

In the past few days we have seen the uncovering of what IRA/Sinn Fein are about. We have heard in this very Forum much criticism of Orangemen and Protestant and Unionist

people. What we have not heard is retraction of the slander uttered by Members who accused the Orangemen of setting up the situation of the past summer.

The leader of the IRA has made it clear that for three long years he and his party concentrated on bringing about what happened in the marching season last year, and they are still dedicated to doing that. One had only to look at and listen to Mitchel McLaughlin to see how angry he was that this iniquitous, murderous and hideous policy had been exposed at last. The irony of the situation is that our own media did not have the guts to do it, for the simple reason that they are playing the peace process. I am glad that Radio Telefis Eireann had the guts to tell the people what is really happening — and not for the first time. I could mention two other matters, but I will not digress.

Today we have Bertie Ahern telling the people of this province how they ought to vote and singling out my party as one that should not be given any votes because it is not negotiating in the process. If anything ever damned the process, it is the remarks of Ahern. I am glad that my party has been specially picked out for denunciation. He goes on to tell the people of Great Britain how they should vote: they should vote the Tory Party out of office. Then he tries to bolster the diminishing support for the SDLP by telling people that they could vote for Sinn Fein if it were to call a cease-fire, but that, otherwise, they should vote for the SDLP.

Keeping all those things in mind, the Forum and the Unionists in it should be saying "Never" to the IRA. The Ulster Unionist amendment says

"The Northern Ireland Forum regrets that continuing violence and the threat of violence has inhibited the progress of free and fair negotiations at the Stormont talks; recognizes that Sinn Fein/IRA are irredeemably committed to a strategy of violence".

If that is the case why does the amendment not go on to say that Sinn Fein/IRA should be excluded from such talks? The motion says they are to be excluded because they

"are irrevocably wedded to violence",

and it

"calls for such fresh negotiations to be only between those dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures."

If Sinn Fein is irredeemably committed to a strategy of violence, why does the Unionist amendment not go further and say that it should be excluded?

We heard the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party today saying that he did not like the first part of the motion. But it is a free-standing clause:

"The Northern Ireland Forum regrets that continuing violence and the threat of violence has inhibited the progress of free and fair negotiations at the Stormont talks".

Of course it has. We all know that. And it is not linked, as the Ulster Unionists are now trying to say, with Sinn Fein/IRA's being irredeemably committed to a strategy of violence. If it were, they would be saying "Let us get rid of them." We believe that any talks process

that keeps the door open to a party irredeemably wedded to violence cannot succeed, and we want no part in helping it.

We have no apology to make to the infinitesimal Alliance Party, which reads us little homilies on what we should do and what we should say.

This is a solemn matter. My party has made it clear that we will not be sitting down, now, tomorrow, nor at any other time with IRA/Sinn Fein. Why? Because we believe that they are irredeemably committed, irrevocably wedded, to a strategy of violence. At nó time will we sit down with them. Not so with the Official Unionist Party. It keeps to the statement of Mr Smyth, when he was Grand Master, that he could envisage a time when Unionists and Orangemen would sit down and negotiate the future of Northern Ireland with IRA/Sinn Fein. The policy of my party has been clear from the very beginning.

The Official Unionists tell us that the rules of procedure are so doctored that everything is all right. Let me tell the Forum and those who will hear reports from here that on Wednesday the rules of procedure were in action. I tabled 17 propositions on decommissioning. The Chairman ruled that they were in order, and he started to go round the table. To my surprise, the Alliance Party was in favour of voting on the proposals, as were the Labour Party, even the Women's Coalition, the two fringe parties on the Loyalist side, the Unionist Party, ourselves and the United Kingdom —

Mr Hugh Smyth: We are small parties — not fringe parties.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Well, whatever the Member wants to call them. They have been called fringe Loyalist parties in the press.

Mr Hugh Smyth: We are small parties.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: All right: small parties. I do not care what they call themselves. I am not trying to make points about that.

What I am saying is that they all agreed. Where was the veto? It lay with the two Governments and the SDLP. They were able to keep the participants from voting on propositions that all the other parties said should be voted on. Those rules of procedure clearly state to me that you cannot ever negotiate a democratic settlement under them. What is the basis of the two Governments and the SDLP — the people that hold the veto and held it on Wednesday? They are dedicated to the framework document — a document that has the united-Ireland goal: Dublin rule. That is what the framework document is about.

1.00 pm

As I understand it, from listening to them, both in the House of Commons and in the media, the Official Unionists have made it clear that they support the Downing Street declaration. In a debate some time ago, the Leader of the party himself said that the orange was safe underneath the green. But, with the new parallel proposals that we have had this week, the Official Unionists are ready to jump into bed with the Southern Ireland Government. They say "We call for the removal of articles 2 and 3" — they just "call" for

removal. They say to Mr Bruton "We do not like your green eiderdown, but we will get into bed with you. After all, the orange is always safe under the green."

Mr McCartney: I am grateful to the Member for giving way.

The Chairman: Dr Paisley has used up his time, so this is borrowed time.

Mr McCartney: In the 'Irish News' on Friday 7 March Mr Ahern, the Taoiseach-in-waiting, said this:

"The next British Government will do everything possible to keep the parties at the table until there is agreement and will honour their commitments in the Downing Street declaration and the framework document."

The Chairman: We will break until 2.15. One of the parties has asked if it may have a little extra time to consult.

The meeting was suspended at 1.01 pm and resumed at 2.15 pm.

The Chairman: We will resume with Prof Alcock, whom I cut off in his prime the last time he spoke. I hope I can make amends today.

Mr Alcock: Two years ago the Dublin Forum — except Sinn Fein — agreed to accept the democratic view that Irish unification could be achieved only with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. If the Irish, Nationalist community accepted that Ireland could be unified only by consent, it has resolutely and deliberately rejected the consequences of that policy: that the two traditions in Northern Ireland would participate in the Government of the province in relation to their respective strengths and that the Unionist community should have its democratic weight recognized.

In the 1994 talks John Hume said he could not accept a Northern Ireland regional Assembly. Why? Because it would certainly have a Unionist majority. Later that year the framework document provided for such a regional Assembly, but with a right of veto, of course, to block any Unionist majority. In 1996 the SDLP did not want the Forum because Unionists would be in a majority. They were glad of any excuse to leave it and finally used the specious one of Drumcree to do so. Now they are applying pressure to have it closed.

Last week Dr Hendron complained about the establishment of a Grand Committee at Westminster because it smacked of integration with Britain. But there was also another reason — namely, that Northern Ireland Ministers could be questioned about their policies and called to account. Their quangos could also be called to account — quangos that are filled with Nationalist and Alliance supporters but with Unionist representation nowhere near its percentage weight in the province. It is the quangos that administer Northern Ireland rather than the democratic majority of the province.

Then there is the SDLP's rejection of more power for councils because, of course, most of those have a Unionist majority. I believe that John Hume was right to try to bring

Sinn Fein in from the cold, but when that clearly failed he and his party should have devoted their energies to inter-community reconciliation and taken as their starting-point the undeniable fact that the Unionist tradition is the majority tradition of this land. Regrettably, the Nationalist community is even going beyond taking steps to deny the Unionist tradition its rightful place: it is attempting to destroy that tradition itself. It wants to abolish, whenever possible, the playing of the national anthem, and the flying of the national flag, and it wants to remove the word "Royal" from the state institutions and inhibit parades of the Orange Order.

The message beamed is always the same: Unionists can be part of the United Kingdom so long as they are not governed like the rest of the United Kingdom, so long as the normal democratic process does not prevail, and so long as they cannot enjoy their symbols and identity — in other words, the emasculation of the Unionist community and rejection of the principle of parity of esteem, which I define as mutual support by both communities to enhance their respective cultures.

The Nationalist community will argue that the experience at Stormont was so bad that Unionists must never rule again, to which I would say two things. First, has the Nationalist community considered its contribution to the crisis — its abstentionism for the first 10 years of the Northern Ireland state and the effect of the 1937 Irish Constitution and its claims to the North? Second, Stormont was imposed on the people of Northern Ireland — on both Unionists and Nationalists. Unionists may have used it better, but that is not the point. A successful outcome to the present talks would lead to a new situation — to a new solution agreed rather than opposed by the traditions — and therefore fear of abuse by a Unionist majority should be allayed.

The Nationalist community speaks much about Europe. Regrettably, for such a great European, John Hume and his party never seem to be able to understand the lessons of Europe. He should consider two in particular. First, it was built on Franco-German reconciliation. But that reconciliation, in turn, was based on the surrender of territory to which the party in possession did not have a right. Here I refer specifically to the view of the Germans that there could be no progress in European integration until Italy let go of the Tyrol. Second, on the question of decision-making in divided communities, there is the example of Cyprus, where the mutual capacity of Greeks and Turks to veto things they did not like led to the collapse of the majority Greek Cyprus Republic. In South Tyrol peace was assured when the Italians learned to work with, not against, the German key majority. Having legislation in the provincial assembly adopted by majority vote meant that it could be challenged before the constitutional court if it was held to violate the equality of rights, or life chances, of the other linguistic traditions.

Two years ago the 'News Letter' organized a conference entitled "Visions of the Union". I said at that time that I did not wish any Irishman or woman to think of himself or herself as being less of an Irish person because he or she lived in this part of the United Kingdom. I argued that policies should be introduced to enhance his or her culture and the lifestyle and life chances of his or her community, so that all cultures could flourish as well in the United Kingdom as if they lived in the Irish Republic. By contrast, the attitude of the Nationalist community seems to be that equality and parity of esteem can be achieved only by

destroying, rubbishing and levelling down Protestant-Unionist culture, rather than seeking Protestant-Unionist co-operation in building up their own.

The Alliance amendment refers to the democratic process. Two or three weeks ago in this very Forum the Alliance Party Leader, Lord Alderdice, eloquently and dramatically condemned what he saw as the continual spitting in the Nationalist face by Unionists under Stormont and the consequences of that for political progress. I would like to ask the representatives of the Alliance Party whether they think that spitting in the face of the Unionists for the last 25 years will bring this province any peace. I ask them if they have ever gone to the British and Irish Governments and the SDLP and told them that those tactics have got them nowhere.

Last week at a conference in London I was told that the Unionists have the ultimate sanction — to bring their people out on the streets. Yes, and they do so because they are continually frustrated, ignored and emasculated. It is really a prime act of hypocrisy for the Alliance Party to refer to the failure of the democratic process and to call for commitment to that process when it has played its part in sabotaging it for the last 25 years.

Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind that the intellectual cowardice and political ineptitude of the pan-anti-Unionist coalition has sabotaged reconciliation and jeopardized the future. I understand that the talks are to resume on 3 June. If that coalition is serious about peace it had better be quick to show it. If it does not, the Unionist parties should draw the appropriate conclusion.

Mr Dodds: It gives me pleasure to support the motion moved by Mr McCartney. It is important that, in doing so, we note some of the comments of the Alliance Party in support of the amendment moved by Mr McBride. He talked about

"the failure of the democratic process, through the talks, to show any way forward over recent times."

He talked about democratic politics having failed. He said that the talks process is more important than the Forum.

The reality is that what has been happening over recent weeks in Northern Ireland is the very antithesis of democracy. Democracy, in fact, has been stifled. Democracy and democratic processes have been strangled and suffocated. Mr McBride and the Alliance Party come to the Forum today and argue that there has been no agreement and no progress. They say that the situation that we find ourselves in, politically and on the streets, is the result of failure of the democratic process. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are in this situation because democratic politics and the democratic process have not been allowed to operate.

Look at the way in which the talks are set up. There is nothing democratic about the way the table in Castle Buildings is arranged. There is nothing democratic about the rules of procedure when it comes to making decisions there. And where there is an element of democracy — namely, in this Forum — we have the Alliance Party denigrating it and withdrawing from Committees. Then we have other parties here that speak loudly about the democratic process and the supremacy of democracy but are engaged, to a greater or lesser

degree, in Committee boycotts and to different degrees in the work of this democratically elected body. Why? Because they cannot get their own way. That is the only reason they will not participate. That is why they withdraw from and will not support the Committees. I am talking in particular about the Parades Committee, from which the Alliance Party, the Women's Coalition, Labour and the PUP have all withdrawn because it has not gone in the direction they wanted it to take.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I am not speaking for the other parties, but I would like to make it quite clear that the Progressive Unionist Party did not withdraw. It never took part in the Committee.

Mr Dodds: Yes, I am happy to have that correction put on the record. In fact, after, I think, two meetings, the party never played any part whatsoever in the Parades Committee or in the report on business boycotts — boycotts which were initiated by Nationalists in the wake of the Garvaghy Road situation.

The reality is that far from what the Alliance Party says is the truth, the Secretary of State, in conjunction with the Dublin Government, has made an arrangement that is anti-democratic and undemocratic and has only one intended outcome: the one predetermined by the framework document that was put on the table by the British and Irish Governments.

I noted what the Leader of the Ulster Unionists and others on his side said about the framework document. Let us remind the Forum of the origin of that document: it originated from the Downing Street declaration. That declaration laid the basis for the framework document. It was the beginning of the process which led to the consultations and negotiations between the two Governments and to the publication of the document. Members will recall that throughout the period from the publication of the Downing Street declaration in December 1993 to the issue of the framework document we were being assured that everything was well, that the Union was secure. There was no need for Unionists to worry, because the British Government could be trusted. After all, did not the Downing Street declaration secure the Union and give us the principle of consent? Only recently we heard the Leader of the Unionist Party saying exactly this: the principle of consent was enshrined in the declaration.

Let me make absolutely clear what the Downing Street declaration actually says. This is important because it is the basis on which the two Governments are approaching the present talks process. The declaration says

"The right of self-determination to decide the future rests with the people of Ireland."

Nowhere does it mention the people of Northern Ireland. It talks about the people of this island — the people of Ireland — on numerous occasions. It is shot through with all-Ireland phraseology, and in paragraph 4 it says that the right of self-determination rests with the people of Ireland. As a waiver and some sort of temporary concession to Unionists, the determination of the people of Ireland will allow the people of the Six Counties, as they put it, the right temporarily to withdraw. But the right of self-determination is with the people of Ireland, according to the Downing Street declaration. That is why this party and other

Unionists who saw what was being laid down and what was going to happen clearly rejected the Downing Street declaration and continue to reject it as the basis for any political process affecting Northern Ireland.

On behalf of my party I say that in any political negotiations we must have the freedom and capability to determine the outcome for ourselves. We must not allow ourselves to become embroiled in or attached to a process of which there can be only one outcome — a predetermined outcome. We must have the freedom to set our own agenda. The people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives must have the freedom to decide for themselves what sort of political settlement should emerge. That has been denied us over the years from the Anglo-Irish Agreement right through the Downing Street declaration to the publication of the framework document, and another such attempt was made with the ground-rules document and the setting up of this process.

2.30 pm

I move on to the question of Sinn Fein/IRA participation. According to the Alliance Party, the continuing violence and the threat of violence has been used to inhibit progress. But that is not so. Violence and the threat of violence are themselves the inhibiting factor. We hear of parties saying "Leave Sinn Fein/IRA behind", but the reality is that some of those parties have not taken any steps to do that. Far from Sinn Fein/IRA being left behind, the door is being kept open for them to come in, simply on the basis of an unequivocal restoration of the previous, bogus cease-fire. And, of course, all the emphasis is put on an unequivocal restoration rather than on a new, permanent, unequivocal cease-fire. Those of us who have been trying to deny entry terms for Sinn Fein/IRA are the ones working to leave Sinn Fein/IRA behind. Others have been keen to keep the door ajar for them.

Mr Bruton recently made it clear that he was adopting one of the key demands of Sinn Fein/IRA by saying that there had to be a fixed timetable for any future talks. He had already agreed their other three conditions — first, that they must be allowed into talks immediately or very soon after the declaration of another tactical cease-fire; secondly, that no decommissioning should be required before they are allowed into the process; and thirdly, that there must be so-called confidence-building measures going along with the talks process. The fourth condition related to the question of a fixed timetable. The Dublin Government have agreed to all four, and the United Kingdom Government have moved a long way down that road.

All that IRA/Sinn Fein have to do in the wake of the election is to declare another cease-fire on exactly the same basis as before. It will not be permanent; it will not be guaranteed to last. It will be tactical and temporary. It will be a question of waiting to see what concessions flow and then decisions will be made about a resumption of violence. It is on that basis that the British Government and the Irish Government will allow Sinn Fein to come in, and unless we are very clear in saying "No, they are not going to get in on that basis", we will be faced with the prospect of Sinn Fein/IRA having the doors opened to them.

This party remains absolutely committed to a process of trying to find a proper form of administration and government for this province within the United Kingdom, but we will not, under any circumstances, be sitting down with IRA/Sinn Fein. And we will not sit

quietly by and allow the door to be kept open for IRA/Sinn Fein to come in on the same basis as before.

Mr Close: I have been involved in talks and in talks about talks for a very long time — from the Atkins conference up to and including the current talks at Castle Buildings. There is no doubt that every one of those initiatives was affected by violence and the threat of violence, but to suggest, as is being suggested, not only in the motion but in the amendments, that violence may have stopped progress and thus prevented a settlement is, quite frankly, wrong — totally wrong. We do not have a political settlement in Northern Ireland today because there is no collective will among democratically elected politicians to find the necessary compromises, to demonstrate the necessary courage or — to put it frankly — to have the guts to put themselves in other people's shoes and try to find a way forward.

In the present talks process the political parties have used every trick in the political book to thwart progress. They have used the prospect of elections; they have procrastinated; they have delayed. But, most obviously, they have proved to be inadequate. They have proved to be gutless, and they have demonstrated, through the absence of any real leadership, that they do not really offer any hope for the people of Northern Ireland.

In this respect I know exactly where the DUP and the UK Unionists stand. I might disagree with them, but I respect them for their stand. They are the great "No" men — no hope whatsoever. That is their legacy. Their epitaph will be "We knew how to say 'No'."

A Member: No surrender!

Mr Close: "No surrender!" — how pathetic. How pathetic that that is the legacy for future generations. I would be ashamed if the epitaph on my tombstone were "No surrender" or simply "No". Let us look forward; let us try to offer the people hope rather than constantly and insistently saying "No".

One other point that I have to make is that the Ulster Unionists, under Mr David Trimble in particular, have attempted to face many ways at the one time. They are constantly looking over their shoulders at the DUP on the one hand and at the UK Unionists on the other. And because they are looking over their shoulders they cannot see clearly in front, so they stumble from one crisis to another. They do not have any clear leadership — any vision for the future. That, too, is a terrible tragedy.

The people of Northern Ireland have to recognize that many of our politicians have made a career out of "Not an inch" politics: "Not an inch", "No", "No surrender", "Never". Some have devoted themselves entirely to tribal politics, to setting one tribe against the other. They have devoted themselves entirely to fear and to the exploitation of fear. Quite honestly, they are pathetic. Super-Prod and super-Taig politics have failed the people of Northern Ireland. Tribal politics have failed the people of Northern Ireland. People have to recognize that if they continue to vote for "Not an inch" politics, that is exactly what they will get — not an inch. They will continue to have "No". If they vote for tribal politicians, that is what they will get — tribal politics, consistently setting one side against the other.

Time has demonstrated such politics have failed. They have failed the people of Northern Ireland, and they will fail future generations. Now is the time for change; now is the time for progress. I appeal to all elected representatives to stop letting Sinn Fein dictate the pace of progress. I appeal to them to stop looking over their shoulders. Stand up; show some courage; show that you have the ability to negotiate an honourable settlement for all the people.

I would like to see those that abuse the democratic process drown in democracy. I want to see an immediate cease-fire and, through an inclusive talks process, to expose those who wear the pinstripe during the day and support those who wear the balaclava at night. I call upon all those who are genuinely interested in democracy — genuinely interested in democracy — to stop playing silly little games that are getting politics a bad name. I urge them to get back to the table on 3 June and show some guts. Let them show that politics is the art of the possible and demonstrate that an honourable settlement for all our people is available if there is the will to grasp it.

Mr Weir: Before providing Mr Close with a little vision for the future — because his vision seems to be very strange indeed — I would like to pick up on one of his points.

He accuses Unionists of constantly being the "No" men in this society. But there is one abominable "No" man whom he did not mention — the man who has blocked everything over the last 25 years: John Hume. He is the man who walked out of and, indeed, boycotted the Stormont Parliament in its last days; he led his party in boycotting the last Assembly; he boycotts the Policy Authority; and he boycotts this very Forum. Every time John Hume has had an opportunity to meet Unionists face to face, he has run away. He is the real "No" man in this society.

It is clear to anyone, even an outside observer, that after nine months of talks we have achieved very little. The talks have moved very slowly. The reason for this impasse, on one level, is disagreement over decommissioning, but it runs a lot deeper than that. The attitude of the Unionist parties has been to provide — indeed, to look for — a political process which can offer a better form of government for Northern Ireland. But that attitude has not been shared by the other participants. They clearly see the objective of the talks as being the building of a peace process. The attitude that is shared by the British Government, the Irish Government, the SDLP and others lies at the heart of our problems. I tend to focus not so much on the structure of the talks as on the attitude and the velocity behind them. If we are to succeed with talks at any stage in the future, there will have to be a radical change of attitude.

So far as I and my party are concerned, the peace process, at least on the Republican side, is dead. Indeed, it has been a sham from day one. It is clear that the 1994 cease-fire was a tactical sham. It was designed to try to rope in concessions from the Government. Attempts to build any sort of structure on a peace process will inevitably lead to failure. There is, however, an opportunity within talks (either these talks or future talks) to look towards a political process — a talks process without Sinn Fein.

With regard to political process, in an ideal world we would not have any need for talks. If the British Government — and I have said this before — were carrying out their responsibility to all the citizens of Northern Ireland, they would be treating us in the same

way as the rest of the United Kingdom, and there would be no need for talks at all. Unfortunately, and to our great shame, we do not have such a Government. Therefore, there is a need for some degree of dialogue to try to improve the government of Northern Ireland. But it requires a fundamental change of attitude.

2.45 pm

Much has been made of the forthcoming elections, but there are many things that will not change after the elections. For example — and this is in the terms of our amendment — we regard Sinn Fein as "irredeemable". I share the view of Mr Dodds when he says that his party will not be sitting down with Sinn Fein at any stage in the future. That is our position too. We regard Sinn Fein as irredeemably locked into violence. Its members cannot go forward in a democratic way. We believe that the Union is the best way forward for Northern Ireland, and it is not something that is up for negotiation. Nor will we be hampered by the parameters of the framework document.

So what type of changes do we want to see? First of all, as has been said on a number of occasions, we want a change in the constitution of the Irish Republic. But it must go beyond getting rid of articles 2 and 3, which make an irredentist and immoral claim on Northern Ireland. It is not enough to change the wording of articles 2 and 3: we must change the attitude that lies behind them. We know from the Anglo-Irish Agreement that the Republic of Ireland clearly sees itself as having a role in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. Irrespective of whether articles 2 and 3 go, that is unacceptable and must end.

Secondly, we want to see a better quality of union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is not just a question of the mere existence of the Union: we want to see improvements in the Union itself. We want to see Northern Ireland treated on an equal and fair basis with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the best way forward for all the citizens of the province because the Union is in their best interests.

I urge Members to support the Ulster Unionist amendment, which looks more to the flawed attitudes of the British and Irish Governments and the SDLP, where the real problem lies, than to the structure itself.

Mr Eric Smyth: I support the United Kingdom Unionist motion.

I could accept what Alliance Members say if they were honest people. But I have not heard one of them admitting to the Orangemen and others who were accused of causing the trouble last summer that they were wrong, despite the fact that a television programme proved that the strategy of the IRA has been to destroy and to bring conflict between the two traditions in this country. If the Alliance Party is saying that we say "No" to a united Ireland, then I am pleased to say that it is right. I have not heard what it would put forward as an answer to the problems of Northern Ireland.

I believe that we have proved in the Forum that we can work together and get on with everyday bread-and-butter issues. The British and Irish Governments are frightened to let us have control of our own country, to put in our hands responsibility for these issues. Keep separate the constitution and the other issues that divide the people of this province. Leave

them to those involved in the negotiations at Stormont. Let us prove that we can do a good job of running our country. We have shown that we can, which is why the SDLP Members have pulled out of the Forum. They have seen that the Unionists can make this body work. In local government we work with each other every day. We pass different things in the councils for the good of the people across the province. Only when some matter causes division do the media make an issue of it. We as politicians are denied our right to represent the people who elected us.

Some other parties, like the Women's Coalition, have told us that they came here to fight for people's rights. Today we debated the crisis in the potato industry, but they were not here to defend those rights. They were not here to support the wee handicapped children. They are like little children rhyming "Mummy, they took my rattle and won't give it back." They are concerned about wee things. Well, we are not here as men and women — we are here as politicians. If you cannot stick the heat, get away from the fire.

As I said last week, we all get slagged. Some people were slagged here today, but they did not walk out like wee children. We all take slaggings. That is what politics is all about. You would think that we were the only body that argues and fights. Watch Westminster. Watch some of the capers in the Dáil. They all fight amongst themselves, and probably do more than that behind the scenes. It goes on everywhere, yet we are not allowed to represent our people and have responsibility for what we believe are the bread-and-butter issues.

We fought an election. We put a manifesto to the people. We were clear about what we told the people, and we brought 24 Members here. The parties that tell us what we should be doing were wiped out. We are here to represent the feelings of the people. That is why I am here today, and I will not change until the people tell me something different. We do not tell people one thing and then do the opposite when we are elected. We stand firm. We are here to represent the people, and the Protestant people are saying "No surrender." You have no right to say what you have said. The vast majority of Unionists have spoken for 20-odd years, but you people have not got the message: no surrender.

Mr Close: May I speak?

Mr Eric Smyth: Just hold on.

We are saying "No surrender" of the constitution of this country. We are British, and we want to remain British. That is all we ask. On the other issues, we are here to negotiate, and it is wrong for you to say that this is a "No" party. We have put ideas to the British Government and to the other parties — document after document. The British Government have not even had the decency to read them and say "That is a good idea" or "That is not a good idea". So no one should say that we are a "No" party.

I guarantee that if you look at the issues that have been debated here since the Forum started you will find that 90% of them were the subjects of DUP motions.

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, I have been patient with you. Will you kindly address the Chair.

Mr Eric Smyth: Sorry, Mr Chairman. I am only answering the attacks on my party.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Don't make an election speech.

Mr Eric Smyth: I do not have to make an election speech. I will be elected again, not because I have made a speech but because I work for my people. I am not like some of those who run around the country putting leaflets through doors.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Name names.

Mr Eric Smyth: Some of your Colleagues.

The Chairman: Let us get back to the subject.

Mr Eric Smyth: We are here to represent the people of Northern Ireland. My party is prepared to listen to anyone, but not to people telling us something that is not true. We are elected. The Unionist party was elected as the main party, and it will have to face its electorate. I am sorry to say that I do not trust its leadership.

Mr Peter Robinson: Neither do they.

Mr Eric Smyth: What Mr Robinson has said is true. If the truth were known, a brave lot of the Ulster Unionists do not trust their Leader. I hope that they are true and that when the elections are over, they will not have failed the Unionist people and allowed Sinn Fein in. I believe that Sinn Fein will be at the talks. I believe that the British Government and the Dublin Government are doing dirty deals behind our backs. Many Members know what is going on and will make sure that these people get in when the two elections are over.

We as a party will stand firm for what we believe. If the electorate of Northern Ireland changes its minds and puts us out, well, that is what politics is all about. But I do not believe that that will happen. I believe that we represent the true feeling in the country. I represent the people of the Shankill Road. I live and work with them every day, and I know that they are very frightened by what some of our politicians are up to, by the treachery going on behind the scenes. We must maintain our fight for the right of the majority. I do not mind members of the Alliance Party expressing their views. They represent a small minority of people, and they are entitled to express their opinions. But they have no right to say that what they want is what the people of Northern Ireland want. The people of Northern Ireland have had many elections since the troubles began, and every time they have voted for the Unionist family and said "No" to the Alliance Party and its policies. Therefore Alliance Members have no right to say what they have been saying today.

As for the SDLP, its members do not want anything to work. If they did, they would be here, like the rest of us, fighting for the bread-and-butter issues. They might not agree with the political balance, but that is what it is all about. They are not here for the bread-and-butter issues, which proves to me and to the people out there that they are not prepared to make the Forum work. No doubt they will come up with some other excuse. Now Mr Hume is saying "If you do not come in, we are going to go on without you." Why?

Because there is an election coming up, and they know that they are going to get a good thumping.

I support the motion.

Mr Hugh Smyth: It will come as no surprise, I am sure, that I will be opposing the motion in the name of Mr McCartney. I will be doing so for quite a few reasons that people should be aware of.

In making his proposal he is at least being honest. He is telling us something we have always known: that he does not want the talks to succeed. Indeed, he never wanted them to succeed. This begs the question: why did he stick it out for nine months? Maybe he had his reasons. He walked out of the talks before. He walked out on the first day, on 10 June, saying that the talks were finished. But he walked back the next day with the old tail between the legs. Mr McCartney talks about fresh negotiations, but he is really using the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein to say that he does not want my party or Mr McMichael's party there. In many ways he is taking a chance in doing so because, with fresh talks, it is just possible that the Government will decide to invite only the three main parties. They might well decide that if you are not a Westminster MP you will not be invited. So Mr McCartney is taking one hell of a chance.

Mr McCartney: Does the Member want to put money on it?

Mr Hugh Smyth: I will be down to see my friend Barney Eastwood.

Mr McCartney gave some very alarming facts — facts that I was not completely aware of — about the number of punishment beatings. My party and I personally deplore all violence, from whatever section of the community. We deplore the punishment beatings. We have done all in our power to see that they are stopped, and we will continue to do so.

3.00 pm

Mr McCartney gave figures for the two years before the cease-fires and made comparisons, but he did not tell us that 75 people had been killed in one year and approximately 60 in the other. As I say repeatedly, the cease-fire is far from perfect, but lives have been saved, though, unfortunately, not enough. It is very important that the Unionist amendment includes reference to "resumed" negotiations and that we should come back and get round the table. I do not accept that no progress has been made. Mr McCartney walked out after day one and said that the talks were finished.

Mr McCartney: That is a lie.

Mr Hugh Smyth: It is not a lie. I will get Mr McCartney the video tape. I keep a brave lot of recordings of Mr McCartney.

When we go back, approximately 12 months will have passed since the talks started. Nine of the parties are still round the table trying to get the peace that this country is looking for, and I suggest that that in itself is progress.

Of course, we have run into difficulties. We have had difficulties over decommissioning. I recall meetings in our early days here, chaired by you, Sir, when we tried to get a set of Rules but ran into all sorts of difficulties. But we parked the difficulties and we moved on. Eventually, and surprisingly, when we moved on and got agreement on some things, we were able to come back to the others, and in the end we got our Rules.

Decommissioning is important. My party is on record as having said that we want the gun removed for ever and ever from the politics of Northern Ireland. I do not believe for one moment that during those two wonderful years of peace decommissioning was number one on anyone's list of requirements. All the people that I spoke to wanted the peace. Their attitude was — and even members of the Unionist Party were on record as saying this — that if the guns were not being used, surely that was the most important thing of all.

The hope was that we could move on, that we could find a political way forward, that we could have an Assembly where we could take responsibility for our own affairs and that through the Assembly we could build up the confidence that is necessary for people to question why they needed guns or bombs. Then they would voluntarily give the guns up. I suggest that that is a way we can move forward, and I hope that we will do so.

I know there are parties here that do not believe in decommissioning. They will admit privately that it is not going to happen. But they use the decommissioning argument for one reason — to keep Sinn Fein out, in the hope that they will be able to get us out. We are the equalizer, and they are scared to talk to us. They cannot meet us because some television reporter might ask them "Why are you meeting the PUP or the UDP when you will not meet Sinn Fein?" It is the easy way out — we are the equalizer.

It is the same in the talks. Their ambition is to get us out so that they cannot be accused of accepting one but not accepting the other. Well, if anybody feels that that in itself will keep Sinn Fein out, he is wrong. I have stated in the talks that the way to keep Sinn Fein out is for us to come together as politicians and move forward on one thing — the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. If we had talks based firmly on consent, people's fear about Sinn Fein entering the talks would be gone for ever, because Sinn Fein will not come into talks that are based on the need for consent.

This was demonstrated in the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. Sinn Fein stayed in it for about 22 months, but when the crunch came, when all parties were asked to sign up to the principle of consent, it left. If we were wise, that is the way we would be dealing with Sinn Fein. We would be doing so not for any underhand reasons but because it was right. We would do so because the two Governments had agreed to the principle of consent. I am not saying that we need to take the Irish Government's view into consideration, but at least they have agreed. The American Government too have agreed that anything that happens in Northern Ireland should be based on consent. If we do go back to the talks, the first thing we should get is a rule, agreed by all parties, that, whatever the outcome of the talks, the people of Northern Ireland will have to give their consent.

Mr McCartney has had a go at Mr Trimble. I am not going to defend Mr Trimble — there are plenty of people in his party capable of doing that.

People talk about deals being done in the background, but there can be no deals because we are all on record as having said that whatever is agreed at the talks must be put by referendum to the people of Northern Ireland. Therein, be sure, your sins will find you out. Therein, the people of Northern Ireland will decide the outcome.

Mr Chairman, you have been pretty generous. You have given me nearly 30 seconds extra.

I could quite easily have supported the Alliance amendment. There is not a lot of difference between what the Alliance Party is saying and what the Unionist Party is saying. At least, to their credit, they are both saying that they are prepared to return to the talks and try to make them work. Mr McCartney has said "No, do away with them. They might succeed, so we had better get rid of them." He would like to have fresh talks, get rid of the minority parties, and get rid of the Women's Coalition and Labour. They all get under his skin. He wants to be allowed to stand there and debate, give us his 40-minute speeches and bore us all to death. You are all lucky —

The Chairman: I think you ought to be a bit careful about boring us all to death. *[Interruption]* I apologize for saying that. I am only trying to give other people a chance to speak.

Mr Hugh Smyth: You are all very lucky. You have to listen to him only once a week. I have to listen to him two or three times a week when we are meeting up there.

Mr McCartney: The Member is never there.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I am always there, as the record will show. Mr McCartney could bet on it. The difference between Mr McCartney and me is that I need to be there. He can nip out and get three grand below, but I cannot do that.

I support the amendment and ask all right-thinking people in the House to do likewise.

Mr Peter Robinson: The Women's Coalition has eventually joined us.

The Chairman: It is very nice to see them.

Mr McKee: My speech will be simple, yet it will be from the heart, and it will be a stand for the Union — more than I can say for some.

I can remember quite clearly the sentiment coming from the opposite benches "I believe the IRA cease-fire is for real." There was the gut feeling. Do not forget the gut feeling. I heard them being interviewed outside Westminster denying the Downing Street declaration. Five minutes later they were supporting it. So where do they stand and how do they know where they are? The gut feeling tells it all. And it tells us all this — where did the first talks come from with Sinn Fein?

I was an Orangeman for 30 years but I certainly could not remain in the same Order with a man who said that he was prepared to sit around the table and talk with Sinn Fein. Do not forget whom he was proposing to talk to. He was going to talk to murderers — those who murdered our kith and kin. I became an Independent Orangeman. I have nothing against the lodge that I was in — honourable, decent men who stand by the Union. But the leader was advocating talks with Sinn Fein, and the then Leader of the Unionist Party was even talking about a quarantine period, as if they had rabies or something. He was prepared to bring them in at a later date and talk to them then. I think that is where it all started. That is when they dipped their toe in the water. That is where the talks all came from — when Martin Smyth said he was prepared to talk to Sinn Fein.

I listened to Mr Close talking about the Unionists being the "No" people. What is Alliance? It is the quango party. It is the "Yes" party, the party that will do anything to get on a board or a body. In the Parades Committee I listened to Mr McBride, the Women's Coalition and the Northern Ireland Labour Party, and despite all the evidence that they heard from the different groups and bodies, they still played the old Nationalist card: they defended the residents' groups.

What does Mr McBride say today at the latest revelation that Gerry Adams was behind it all? He was out there trying to organize people against the Unionist community. My party's policy is simple — we will have no dealings with the IRA. We will not sit down around the table with the gunman and the bomber. There will certainly be no compromise by us.

I could say much today, but it has all been said before. It has all been on before. What is the point? Who is listening? We are all in our trenches, but at the end of the day, the Union is the only thing worth defending.

Mr Close tried to make light of "No surrender". "No surrender" is what our forefathers cried with reference to the Union, and Churchill said "No surrender" to Hitler and to the Fascists. I class the IRA and those who support them — those umbrella organizations, who come to its aid on every occasion — as no better than the Fascists because they are opposed to democracy. They are opposed to the ballot-box and the will of the people, but they are not going to get the Union. The Union will be safe.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I support the United Kingdom Unionist Party's motion. I find it difficult to understand why it is that the Ulster Unionist Party, or at least its Leadership, does not support this motion. I hope that some of the Members from the Ulster Unionist Party may feel able to support what is, quite clearly, a very sensible motion. There is always a difficulty because what you hear outside and what happens when Mr Trimble is here watching the flock are two different things.

This motion is one that should be supported by every Unionist, especially by those who have been privy to the negotiations that have been taking place at Stormont, and I accept that, unfortunately, many Members of the Forum, through no fault of their own, have not been privy to the actual negotiations or to the details. At the beginning of the process at Stormont those who took part were well aware that we had a difficult battle from day one. To use the words of Mr Robinson on that occasion, on which there was a lot of agreement among

the participants, "What all those participating in the negotiations need to do is clear the site." When we went to commence the negotiations we found a lot of debris on the site, a lot of structures had already, to some extent, been put in place by the British and Irish Governments.

3.15 pm

We had the ground-rules document, the tenor of which, had the Unionists been stupid enough to accept and trust it, would have made the position totally impossible — we would have been placed in a strait-jacket. We were aware from day one that the British and Irish Governments, and some of the other parties like the SDLP and the Alliance Party, were more than happy that the skeleton structure that was in place was in fact the framework document. Now many of us were keen from day one to demolish all of those things, those pre-conceptions and pre-conceived ideas that were placed before us, so there was a period of time when demolition was necessary in order to clear the site. The elected representatives and those who were also tasked with going to Castle Buildings actually had to put in place structures agreed by the elected representatives of Northern Ireland. We had an uphill task trying to remove the effects of the ground-rules document, and there is still a ghost and a shadow of that document hanging over the entire process.

The reason I go back to that point is that it is important to understand that it would be foolish to take the position that the Ulster Unionists take, that they are not prepared to accept the United Kingdom Unionist motion today because we are talking about fresh negotiations. I wonder if there is anybody left on this side of the Floor who wants to get up now — and I will give way — and tell me that he wants to recommence these negotiations in June on the basis of where we left off on Wednesday of this week. Anybody with any informed insight into what was happening at Stormont is well aware that what has brought the process to an end is failure on the parts of the British and the Irish Governments — the SDLP put a pistol to their heads, and they refused to allow the participants to deal with the issue of decommissioning.

We call for fresh negotiations. We want to leave this failed process behind, for its stench fills the nostrils of everyone in Northern Ireland. We want a fresh process because — and this should be agreed by every Unionist — Sinn Fein/IRA and those still wedded to the bomb and the bullet will be excluded from it. We do not need to go back to the issue of decommissioning and get bogged down in the mire that we have just left, which is what will happen if we just go back to the present process.

This is a constructive motion. It is not, as Mr Hugh Smyth wrongly infers, our intention to wreck. What we want to do is build upon a solid foundation. The Ulster Unionists have today agreed that the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the structures envisaged in that cannot, and never will, be acceptable as a sound foundation by any section of the Unionist community. So I ask those who have criticized this motion to consider it and think clearly and long before they decide not to support it. There is nothing in this document that any Unionist could find objectionable, or anything that he could not support.

In relation to the talks that we envisaged for the future, as I have clearly said, it is possible that if this body is foolish enough and we, as elected representatives, are prepared to

go back to Stormont on 3 June and recommence this failed process, we will lose credibility in the eyes of the public who, whether Members here believe it or not, think that this process is actually dead.

There is nothing to suggest otherwise — unlike the work of the Forum where people have been able to see the tangible results of what we have been doing. There is not one person in any of the parties here today who can point to one thing that has been achieved in the nine months of negotiations at Stormont.

What we want with this motion is for people to recognize that the process has failed — not because the Ulster Unionists, the DUP, the Alliance Party or anybody else was not prepared to sit down and negotiate, but because the whole structure, and the basis upon which these negotiations were brought about, was fatally flawed and never designed to allow the participants the freedom that the Prime Minister talked about in his opening address. He said that these talks belonged to us, the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, and that we and we alone could determine the outcome. I wish that those comments were true and that we did not have interference from Dublin and other foreign countries who are looking over our shoulders and attempting to steer the whole process.

I ask Members to support this motion.

Mr Brewster: I rise more in sorrow than in anger, yet again, at the remarks of Mr McCartney this morning, and it is not least because he used the quotation that I wanted to use from Clausewitz. Once again it is disappointing that all the headlines tonight are going to be about infighting in the Unionist camp. I appreciate that Mr McCartney is fighting for his political life and is desperate to say whatever he can to try to save his seat. Nevertheless, it is somewhat disappointing that he cannot behave in the more measured fashion that Mr Dodds did when he pointed out the clear differences that there are between our parties — the very reason we are separate parties — but accepted, I hope, as I do of him, that all Unionists have the same starting point. We are all in the business of defending and strengthening the Union and while we may disagree on the tactics, we all have the common aim. It would help perhaps if we had rather more charity from Mr McCartney. I have to say that while his speech was very able, and many of the points did indeed cause us to think, he is not going to get anywhere by personal attacks on our Leader. He can huff and he can puff, but he will not blow this House down.

Turning to the motion, the important question about violence is how one deals with it in a democratic society, and I hope that all of us — even the Alliance Party — accept that it is a democratic society. There are two things that are equally important in dealing with violence. The first is to make sure that those people who choose to use violence are punished, that they know there will be a serious consequence of their actions. Who in this Chamber can doubt that our Government have been lax in punishing the perpetrators to the extent that we now learn that Martin McGuinness, who has never denied being chief of staff of the IRA, is now deemed to be a very important person when it comes to getting civic invitations in Londonderry?

The second thing we must do as democrats is provide a strong and working alternative. Once again we have to lay the blame for the failure there at the foot of the

Government. And what of the people who go occasionally to the talks at Stormont? When I go there I lose my temper — perhaps almost as frequently as Mr McCartney — because I see there the real enemies of democracy. They are not just Mr Spring or Sir Patrick Mayhew. They are the civil servants — the chinless wonders who sit in rows behind the Ministers, cleaning their glasses with their ties, writing little self-congratulatory notes to each other and massaging the ego of Michael Ancram. These are the people who never venture into the real world. They never actually go out and try to sell their draft ideas to the local electorate — the people of Northern Ireland.

The other thing that annoys me — and we have heard it again today from the "Woodrow Wilson wannabe" party — is the trite old saying of Rab Butler that politics is the art of the possible. Anybody who understands politics knows that it is not an art but a science. As with all science, you accumulate data and analyse it logically. If you feel the need to carry out experiments and they do not work, you try to find out why they did not work. You do not just carry out the same experiment again and again and hope that you are going to get the result that the Alliance Party would like — the party that still has not moved away from the idea of an enforced coalition, with cross-border executive bodies.

That sort of nonsense will never work unless politics becomes like Alcoholics Anonymous — Mr Taylor standing up and saying "I am John and I am a Unionist, but I am not going to do anything about it now"; Mr Hume saying "I am John Hume and I am a Nationalist, but I am not going to do anything about it"; and Ms McWilliams saying "I am a hippie, but I am not going to do anything about that either". That is not the real world.

We are all going to have to work in a strong, accountable democracy — something that we have never had here. What happens in Northern Ireland is that they add a little extra dose of the Irish dimension, and we are told that we may have to bring in some more of the various wider extremes. Fairly soon we will even have the Animal Liberation Front in because it too believes in violence. No doubt its members will find it easier to agree with some of the other parties that they really are statesmanlike and should not be in gaol for all the crimes they commit anyway.

We must restore real democracy quickly to Ulster. That would be the surest way of discouraging the terrorist. As somebody who went to the trouble of standing for election — at no small financial and personal sacrifice, like all of us here — I feel insulted at being presented with this body as the democratic "Forum". It is not a bit of wonder that the Alliance Party say that the talks are more important — they are gerrymandered. Alliance members like a nice situation where people who get only 7,000 votes at an election — about half of what I got in my constituency — have the same number of votes at the talks as the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and the Democratic Unionist Party.

This is a ready-made body which could become the dynamic for future democracy. It has produced many able and worthwhile reports. If only the Government were prepared to trust the people of Ulster. However, it would require not only an injection of real power but some backbone, because the Government are going to have to stand up to the SDLP. Members should be under no illusion whatsoever: if there was real power in this body, the SDLP would be here.

We all remember Eddie McGrady fulminating against the Select Committee at Westminster and saying what a terrible integrationist thing it was. Who is happy in the Select Committee now and issuing statements about the great job he is doing there? The same Eddie McGrady — and that is exactly what is going to happen with the Grand Committee.

So we come back to what my Friend Mr Weir has rightly called the abominable "No" man — Mr Hume. Mr Hume has a relationship with Gerry Adams which is something similar to that between a moth and a candle. Unlike the moth, however, Mr Hume is quite prepared to suffer damage to his party. It does not matter to him if old Dr Joe has to dust the stethoscope off in the next weeks, as is bound to happen. It does not matter to Mr Hume if Seamus Mallon has to go back to teaching, because his game plan requires the sacrifice periodically of the SDLP so he can go to London and say "Help my party. We are suffering. We are about to be overtaken by Sinn Fein."

This is dishonest. This is the kind of incestuous relationship that Parnell had with the land leaguers in the nineteenth century. There was a secret relationship between them and he said to them "Go ahead so far, only not too much." Once again we hear that John Hume is still not prepared to say anything about the secret Hume/Adams relationship.

I conclude my brief remarks by saying that in a few weeks time the Forum may well be prorogued, and we should remember that that will also be the 25th anniversary of the prorogation of the Parliament of Northern Ireland — the last time the people of this province had control of their own affairs.

I have to say on behalf of my party that there will be little enthusiasm for any talks process — no matter how gerrymandered and flawed — if it does not take into account the crying need for the continuance of this body as a democratic sounding-board.

3.30 pm

I must warn the Government that we will not be lightly dragged back to any talks, although we are prepared to talk with the greatest of reluctance. I say this to Mr Cedric Wilson: obviously we do not like the present system; in an ideal world we would find it much easier to start from somewhere else. We have been unhappy, and we have fought our corner, though maybe not in the way that he would have done.

It would be easy for us just to talk to the DUP and to the United Kingdom Unionists, and we could agree. But I ask those parties — and in particular the United Kingdom Unionists' Chairman — perhaps to moderate the tone of their disagreement with this party, because Unionist unity may again be required to meet challenges in the summer.

Mr Sammy Wilson: The essence of the difference between the motion and the amendments is the involvement of Sinn Fein in any future talks. First of all, there is agreement that as politicians and political parties we want to do what we were elected to do — represent the views of our constituents, put forward what we believe is the democratic way forward for our country and argue for it.

The big difference between the parties here and those that are absent is over what to do about the poison which has been introduced into politics in Northern Ireland in the form of Sinn Fein. It is not a poisoned chalice from which we as Unionists have volunteered to drink; it is something which has been injected into the system against our will, against our wishes and against what anybody with an ounce of sense ought to know is best for democratic politics in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately there are those who, rather than face up to what has to be done to remove the poison from the system, have decided that they will try to live with it.

Some people openly say that they will live with it. The Alliance Party has never had any difficulty with living with the poison and drinking it. When I heard Mr Close — he does have a good line in rhetoric but that is about all — talk earlier about exposing the people who wear the pinstripe during the day and support those who wear the balaclava at night, I wondered how he fitted that in with the public meetings and the handshakes between his party representatives and Gerry Adams in the city hall. I wondered how he married that with the way in which the Alliance Party has joined the great bandwagon which gives credibility to somebody who has, just this week, admitted that his party and his activists were working hard for two years behind the scenes to ensure that we had street disorders in Northern Ireland last summer. This is the way in which the Alliance Party exposes the poison— by drinking it and welcoming it.

The difference between the United Kingdom Unionist Party motion and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment is the strength of resolve to ensure that Sinn Fein is closed out, locked out and kept out forever from any kind of contact with people who are democrats, and there is an ambivalence there. I have heard what some Members have said about us knocking each other, and we could score even more political points here today, but I must say that the Government are now quite clearly in league with Sinn Fein as a result of encouragement they have received from Unionists who should have known better.

Reference has been made to the time, four or five years ago, when Martin Smyth spoke the unspeakable as far as Unionists were concerned and indicated that there would come a time when Unionists would sit down and talk with Sinn Fein. Other people in his party have said the same. John Taylor has said the same. *[Interruption]* Well, he is on record as saying that he would be flexible, that he would be prepared to —

A Member: Malleable.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Flexible, malleable — it really does not matter. What it indicates is that there are some rubber politicians who would be prepared to sit down and talk to Sinn Fein. That, I believe, encouraged the Government to start making moves to bring Sinn Fein into talks — something which they have always wanted to do. Now we Unionists have got to recoup some of that ground.

Mr Peter Robinson: My Friend may wish to know that I looked at a recording of a programme just two days ago during which Mr Taylor said that he could see a day when the Ulster Unionist Party would be in government with Sinn Fein.

Mr Taylor: Let me make it clear that I do not see any day when the Ulster Unionists will be in government with the IRA or Sinn Fein.

Mr Peter Robinson: It might be better if Mr Taylor were to withdraw the remarks that he made on RTE's 'Prime Time', for that is precisely what he said. I have the video. I can arrange a private showing if the facilities can be provided here.

The Chairman: Mr Wilson, you have been very tolerant, but your time is running out.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Unionists have got to regain lost ground. Unfortunately, having gone down that road and having encouraged the Government to go down that road, we are now left with a legacy which is holding us all to ransom: the Government are determined, whatever the costs, to keep the door open to bring Sinn Fein into negotiations. Many tactics have been used to keep the door open. As has already been mentioned, John Hume keeps his foot in the door by saying that if we close it irrevocably we will be faced with far worse violence. Sinn Fein, tantalizingly, keeps its foot in the door by suggesting that we might have some peace in the future. But the thread running through this debate about whether or not Sinn Fein ought to be in negotiations is the threat of violence. That is where the mistake lies.

I do not mind being branded by Mr Close as a "No" man. If he means that I am saying "No talks with Sinn Fein", I would rather be a "No" man than a snowman. That is what we have here — as soon as the heat is on, they melt.

A Member: They have gone.

Mr Sammy Wilson: They went before I even arrived, so it is not down to me.

Unionists ought not to be ashamed that they are not prepared to get into league with a bunch of fascists and gangsters. If any kind of democracy is going to result from these talks, we have to ensure that we are not infected with the fascism of members of Sinn Fein. And let there be no doubt about the fact that they can claim their mandate. We have already had the SDLP crying rather belatedly about where Sinn Fein's votes come from and where they are likely to come from in the future. I do not care whether Sinn Fein got 10% fraudulently or 100% fraudulently. It does not make any difference to the nature of the people who want to come in and claim to be democrats and negotiate democratically — people who, when they do not get their way, either threaten to go back to violence or point to the fact that they have, by grace and favour, given us a respite from their violence.

The essential point of the motion before us and which we are supporting is that any future negotiations have got to be fresh negotiations. The present talks are based on the premise that Sinn Fein ought to be there. If we are going to make a start without Sinn Fein it has got to be on the basis of fresh negotiations and away from the old rules. I am not ashamed to say that we will not be part of any talks that involve Sinn Fein.

I was glad to hear Mr Weir saying that he would not be involved in any talks that Sinn Fein were part of. I hope that he reflects a view within his party, which is perhaps at odds with some other spokesmen who have said that they would be prepared —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sammy Wilson: I have already quoted —

The Chairman: Your time is up.

Mr Sammy Wilson: There are people in his party who have already said they could envisage it.

Mr Jim Rodgers: What about the DUP?

Mr Sammy Wilson: They will not be in the DUP if they are going to sit down and talk with Sinn Fein.

Those people who are not prepared to give in to the kind of bully tactics of the IRA must support the motion, which says that there must be a fresh start, with rules which do not allow those parties that threaten violence to be involved in any negotiations.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: I preface my remarks on the United Kingdom Unionist motion by rejecting Mr Close's flawed perception of the Unionist position. He appears to think that to take the political and philosophical position that the Union cannot be changed or diluted or negotiated is playing politics. That is the most ludicrous thing I have ever heard.

The motion in the name of the United Kingdom Unionist Party calls for fresh negotiations. The Ulster Unionist Party amendment circumvents that by calling for a resumption of the present process. What is the present process? It is known, of course, as a peace process — called by someone "a politically sophisticated combination of deceit and concession." The deceit is directed towards the pro-Unionist majority, but the concessions are directed towards Sinn Fein/IRA. Albert Reynolds made it clear in May 1994 that the purpose of this whole process was to bring about national reconciliation. Does the Ulster Unionist Party want a resumption of that process? If so, it cannot vote for its own amendment.

The whole peace process is built around a number of concepts. The first is the British Government's willingness to uphold the desire for a united Ireland. The second is the British Government's acceptance that there must be consent from the people of the island of Ireland, North and South. The third is the British Government's neutrality on Northern Ireland itself, which was made clear by Peter Brooke when he said that they have no selfish strategic interest in Northern Ireland. Where did he get such a phrase? It came straight from Gerry Adams's own book which he wrote in 1988 entitled 'Pathway to Peace', so the very policy of the British Government echoes that of Sinn Fein. That is what this process is about. Can the Ulster Unionist Party in all sincerity call for a resumption of such a process? The fourth concept is that the British Government will encourage and facilitate agreement between the two traditions in Ireland. So the Ulster Unionists cannot vote for their own amendment.

The United Kingdom Unionist Party motion refers to parties dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures. There is a widespread belief that all Nationalist politicians are

dedicated to democratic procedures — none more so than John Hume and Seamus Mallon. I believe that neither John Hume nor Seamus Mallon is dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures. The SDLP, Sinn Fein and the IRA share the same objective. The question is: how is that objective to be achieved? To achieve it they use the same ideas.

3.45 pm

Mr Hume advocated the use of force, if necessary. His most, but not his only, sectarian statement was recorded by 'The Observer' on 20 April 1986: he had

"always expected a furious reaction to the Agreement, but the Protestant boil had to be lanced. Mrs Thatcher is the right person, in the right place, in the right time, and they are recognizing she will not be broken."

On 23 July 1988, just after a bomb intended for Mr Justice Higgins had exploded, Mr Seamus Mallon, when asked whether he was calling on Sinn Fein leaders publicly to condemn acts of violence, said that he did not intend to place such strictures on Sinn Fein. Neither Mr Hume nor Mr Mallon is dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures.

Mr Hume has been called the statesman of the troubles by Barry White in his book. I apologize for the language that I will use, but these are the words of Mr Hume himself. At the time of the Ulster Workers' Council strike Mr Faulkner said that he was not in public life to see Northern Ireland destroyed and that, rather than let that happen, he would talk to the strikers or resign. Mr Hume, however, was unmoved, saying that he refused to talk:

"I'll sit here until there is shit flowing up Royal Avenue, and then the people will realize what these people are about, and then we will see who wins."

This motion says that those parties dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures should be included. Nationalists are not dedicated exclusively to democratic procedures. The shared understanding of the Nationalists is that there is one object — a united Ireland, by force if necessary. The only way that the SDLP can ever be accepted is for it to break its links with Sinn Fein/IRA.

In his speech, Mr McCartney said that consent, as understood by pan-Nationalists, is a dangerous idea. Both the British Government and Mr Albert Reynolds, in their clarifications to Sinn Fein, made it clear that consent has nothing to do with sovereignty. There is no Unionist veto over any or all of the changes made in the actual governance of Northern Ireland. They have set about to circumvent the democratic wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. On one hand they say "Well, we will accept this odd notion called consent, that the Unionists do not want a united Ireland at present, but until we achieve a united Ireland they cannot hinder anything that affects either the governing or the structure of Northern Ireland." The only answer we can give is yes so far as the Nationalists are concerned.

The longer I listen to what the Alliance Party has to say, the more I am appalled at its perception of the reality of Unionism. At the very heart of the Alliance Party's position is the fact that the Unionist position — the very core demand of Unionism — is illegitimate. Alliance is thus aligning itself with the very pan-Nationalist front which set out to destroy Northern Ireland.

I support the United Kingdom Unionist Party's motion, and I ask that the Ulster Unionist Party do so too.

Mr Nesbitt: The main difference between the motion and the Ulster Unionist amendment is the word "resume" in the amendment. There may be a little question over the actual word, but I wish to address the substance of why the United Kingdom Unionists oppose our use of it.

Mr Peter Robinson: You are objecting to his wording. He is not objecting to yours.

Mr Nesbitt: Substance over thought.

Mr McCartney and his party are implying that my party accepts the framework document. They are implying that we would renegotiate the Union. They are almost implying that we would accept an all-Ireland form of government. I wish to make it very clear that my party will not accept anything of the kind.

Someone said earlier that politics is the art of the possible. Actually it is the art of making choices between the disastrous and the unpalatable. My concern about fresh talks is that we could end up in a disastrous situation. We do not know what format those fresh talks would take; we have no guarantee that Sinn Fein would be included or excluded; we do not even know if we would be part of the consultative process. Who knows what might be imposed on us? Mr McCartney has said that the Prime Minister has assured him that nothing will be imposed. What is before us is somewhat unpalatable, but other options might result in a disastrous situation.

Why do we not want the framework document? Our position is unambiguous and exactly the same as that of the United Kingdom Unionists.

A Member: It is not.

Mr Nesbitt: Oh, yes, it is. We reject the framework document because it is not based on principles for governing countries which minorities — principles found everywhere else in the western world.

The Alliance Party says that we do not have a clear vision. We have an abundantly clear vision. We want nothing more and nothing less than the rights, principles and form of government that are enjoyed everywhere else in the democratic world. That includes structures to accommodate minorities. I am convinced that the Government want the framework document to be implemented. That is what they say. They commend it to us very strongly. But it says "We offer this for consideration."

A Member: Wise up, Dermot, for God's sake.

Mr Nesbitt: No — for the sake of other things.

We clearly say "You offered this for consideration. We have studied it, and we reject it." We want a change of emphasis and purpose, like the United Kingdom Unionists' Leader. That is why we wish to continue with this process.

We are not in favour of renegotiating. We are not in favour of accepting any all-Ireland administration. We are not in favour of accepting the framework document. But we are in favour of resuming the process. Fresh talks would mean the end of the Forum. My party is not in favour of that.

The debate stood adjourned until Friday 14 March 1997.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.56 pm.