

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 27 June 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.06 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FORUM: COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Rule 14(1) of the Rules of Procedure, the Forum appoints a Committee with the following designation, terms of reference, and composition and quorum —

Designation: Committee on Electoral Reform

Terms of reference: To recommend methods of countering electoral irregularities — in particular,

- (i) removing multiple entries from the electoral register;
- (ii) ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are registered;
- (iii) providing suitable and convenient polling stations;
- (iv) overcoming postal and proxy vote abuse;
- (v) preventing voting personation by introducing proper and effective identity checks;
- (vi) considering other relevant issues —

and report to the Forum with a view to submitting such evidence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for consideration within the Government's review procedure

Composition: 4 UUP, 4 DUP, 4 SDLP, 2 Alliance, 1 UKUP, 1 Labour, 1 NIWC, 1 PUP, 1 UDP

Quorum: 5;

and, in accordance with Rule 14(2), the following members will comprise the Electoral Reform Committee — Mr Ken Maginnis MP, Mr Robert Coulter, Mr Sam Gardiner, Mr Robert Stoker, Mr Peter Robinson MP, Rev William McCrea, Mr Ian Paisley Jnr, Mr Nigel Dodds, Mr Sean Neeson, Mr Seamus Close, Mr Cedric Wilson, Ms Pearl Sagar, Mr Hugh Casey, Mr Gary McMichael, Mr David Ervine. —
[The Chairman]

FORUM: SUMMER RECESS

The Chairman: The Business Committee has decided to recommend to the Forum that it adjourn on Friday 25 July and reconvene on Friday 5 September. The Business Committee will reconvene on 4 September. I hope this is agreeable to all Members.

It was so decided.

FORUM BUSINESS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I see that there is a motion down in the name of the United Kingdom Unionist Party, and I understand that time has been allocated for it.

Can the Business Committee fly in the face of the Rules, which say that the time allowed for the moving of a motion is 20 minutes and that there is a right of reply? Has the Business Committee the right to set the Rules aside completely with regard to any motion?

We will have special motions like this from time to time, and I would like you to consider how we should be guided if there is to be a curtailment of time. This motion is the most important motion before the Forum today. Everybody outside is talking about what is happening in the province, and we had another IRA atrocity last night. We need to know whether the Business Committee has the power to go against the Rules of the Forum and decide on a curtailment of the time allocated for a motion.

The Chairman: The Rule says "up to 20 minutes". The Business Committee decided yesterday — and all the parties were represented — that this matter was urgent, but that since we already had a pretty heavy programme, discussion should be limited as has been suggested. Mr Peter Robinson played a very considerable part in those discussions. It was thought that the proper thing to do was to have a time-limited debate — limited in a manner which I can accept under the Rules. That is what the Business Committee agreed yesterday.

I understand that the United Kingdom Unionist Party, which will be invited to speak first, wants longer than the eight minutes allocated to the smaller parties, 15 minutes being allocated to the two largest parties.

That is what the Business Community wanted, but it is all subject to unanimity. This is by no means the first time a matter of some urgency has arisen. I have always been as liberal as possible, but we must operate under the Rules that we adopted. What was decided yesterday requires the agreement of the Forum. The Forum's view may be that we should do something different. We spent a lot of time yesterday discussing this, and all the parties, including the United Kingdom Unionist Party, were represented.

Mr McCartney: We have not been given an opportunity to speak.

The Chairman: You have not have had an opportunity to speak because I am speaking. Kindly let me continue.

The United Kingdom Unionist Party was there and accepted what was agreed. Indeed, its representative made quite a strong appeal for us to discuss this matter. So I am a little disappointed at the suggestion that what was agreed after much discussion should now be overturned.

Now, Mr McCartney, let us hear from you.

Mr McCartney: I do not think, Mr Chairman, that you have reported accurately, according to what my Colleague, Mr Cedric Wilson, tells me. The time to be allotted to the mover of the motion was not discussed, but I understand that Mr Wilson subsequently had some informal discussions with you and that an understanding was reached, from which you resiled this morning. You had a change of heart and a change of attitude, which provoked this discussion.

I support entirely what Dr Paisley has said. The Rules provide for the Member moving a motion to have up to 20 minutes, and custom in the Forum supports firm application of that. It has become set in concrete that "up to 20 minutes" means 20 minutes, should the person moving the motion decide to exercise his right to the full time. That is what has happened in practice. To suggest that the Business Committee has the right to supersede such a clear Rule, which has been adopted both in writing and in practice, just does not make sense. It would, of course, have been open to the Business Committee to recommend that we proceed otherwise, but it is not within the remit of that Committee to change something that is established practice and a Rule of the Forum.

I fully appreciate that this emergency debate comes in the middle of an established programme and that there has to be an element of compromise, but it would be quite ludicrous for the person moving the motion to have approximately half the time of some of those speaking to it. In any assembly it would be ludicrous for someone who is opening a debate, presenting the case, to be limited to half the time given to other participants. I know of absolutely no precedent for such a crazy suggestion, and I think that there will have to be some amelioration of the recommendation.

Mr Neeson: It was a DUP member of the Business Committee who proposed the time-limit. The Committee was equally divided as to whether we should have the debate, and you, Mr Chairman, used your casting vote to allow it. We all realize that it is really an exercise in gutting the Ulster Unionist Party.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It seems that some people are trying to set me against my deputy. I know what happened because he reported to me. I asked you, Sir, for a ruling on whether the Business Committee can override the Rules, and you have made it perfectly clear that the Forum has the final say. At any rate, that is what I took to be your answer.

I appreciate your giving your casting vote to allow the motion to be taken, and I deprecate those who did not want this matter to be discussed at all. Mr Neeson was very selective in what he told us about the meeting. Maybe he will tell us the names of the people who did not want the matter to be discussed — something that our people and the whole

world outside want. There was almost a conspiracy to say "No, you will not mention this today", so we appreciate the decision.

However, surely the person moving a motion, even if his time is limited, should have an opportunity to reply. No allowance seems to have been made for that. But I was asking for a ruling for the future, and I got one.

Mr Chairman: You did.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

10.15 am

Mr Gibson: I beg to move the following motion:

That the Forum adopts the report on pre-school education in Northern Ireland prepared by Standing Committee B on 27 June 1997 and decides to forward it to the Minister for Education, with the request that he give serious consideration to its recommendations and agree to meet a deputation from Committee B to discuss the report.

I wish to emphasize that our report emerged from what was known as the voucher system. This was to be introduced to provide for pre-school or nursery education, but after we had started our investigations the Government of the day withdrew it. However, because of the interest expressed in pre-school education, we were determined that that should be the area for investigation. During the month of February we spent many hours listening to oral submissions and reading written submissions — 31 inches thick of A4 pages — and the 60-page report before the Forum today is a distillation of all the evidence that was presented to us.

We received submissions from right across the board — from the Department of Education to those who were involved in the struggle to make Belfast work. All the presentations showed a sincere interest in and a yearning for early-years provision. We did, of course, have opportunities to hear from the various professionals involved, the parents and, indeed, even the participants — the children. We also had an opportunity to visit the city of Londonderry, where we observed three different pre-school groups in action.

If the enthusiasm on the ground — together with the authoritative demands from, and advocacy of, people at various professional levels — is anything to go by, it is very evident that there is a serious omission in our education provision. The Committee's members also provided their own experiences as parents. Some — educators themselves — provided professional viewpoints. All of this contributed greatly.

However, in the preparation of any report there is always a nagging thought. The one which formed the philosophical baseline for our discussions was that all the evidence received advocated pre-school education. Adverts were placed in the local press seeking representations, so the public had every opportunity to give presentations and/or provide written submissions. However, I was very much confirmed in the belief that underlying the

demands there is the respect of every Ulster family for a sound, basic education. Education is a prized asset and really part of the Ulster ethic.

Many people provided evidence of social need and of deprivation, in terms of geographical location. I think we were all forcibly struck by the view that education, including pre-school education, is a right. Nobody should be excluded because of social position or social need. There is a universal demand for pre-school education, and my Committee feels that there should be universal provision. It should be provision of quality and excellence, yet it should be able to receive an input from the various interest groups.

There seemed to be a minor bureaucratic war taking place between the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Education. I am sure that, in time, this argument — about edu-care, as one group would call it, or care education, as another group might call it — will end. But we should force the two Departments to get their acts together and be more positive towards ensuring that there is proper, efficient provision. We recommend that the war of words end, that any demarcation cease and the two Departments come together. In their presentations in the middle of February both put on a very good show. There was an act of camaraderie to demonstrate how well they work together. But the committee that was supposed to co-ordinate their work was ineffective. We say that the need and the demand for pre-school education are more important than any interdepartmental demarcation, but any regrettable fault of that kind can be corrected easily.

The Committee was, of course, mindful of the cost of such provision. The Department indicated that it would be £40 million in capital terms, with an annual running cost of £7 million. The question on everyone's mind — predictably so since Ulster people tend to be prudent — was where the money could be found.

We are all very conscious that the money spent on almost 29 years' civil war could have replaced every school building in Northern Ireland. It could have removed all the Nissen and wooden huts, which at present account for 50% of our stock. But we are also conscious that if prescription-charge fraud were dealt with, the money saved would easily provide what is required.

However, the problem is not money. The problem is the political will and determination of the Administration not to make this provision. I hope that my Committee's report will help to stimulate the new Minister to complete the task that was started in 1978, when the then Minister for Education made a very good statement in which he said that he wished to provide one year of pre-school education. So this is a 20-year-old admission and an omission on our part. Bearing in mind that there is now a Labour Administration, Members may be interested to know that, in Opposition, the Labour Party indicated that it would support the stand that the Committee is taking. I am sure that some Members will acknowledge that, in spite of the controversy surrounding the SACHR report, a section of it contains the same proposals as those in the Committee's report today.

In moving the motion, I wish to record my thanks and those of the Committee to Ms Benson, the Committee Clerk. Many have been publicly awarded and publicly acknowledged for much less effort. We wish to acknowledge her ability and the professional acumen which she exhibited throughout the report's preparation. And she will be the first to

admit that she was extremely ably supported throughout by Stuart McDougall. Perhaps, as proof of his professional ability, we should congratulate him because he has left the minority and joined the majority by getting married. The whole Committee would like to give him its hearty congratulations. May I personally add that we hope that more than a Flymo will run over his lawn.

I would also like to thank the Committee's Vice-Chairman, Mr Alan McFarland, and all other members — in particular, the dedicated few who had a 100% attendance record and who remained for the duration of each meeting. They should be singled out for an award. Wednesday's 'Belfast Telegraph' contained an article showing that some people have a record of full attendance at the Forum. Those Members too should be congratulated on their dedication.

My last and by no means least point is to note the contribution that the Committee has made to achieving the aims and objectives of the Forum. All members, from all the political parties, were attenders. They all made a vigorous input. They certainly contributed with great effect, at the same time producing some very agreeable dialogue.

I am delighted to propose that the Forum accept the report of Standing Committee B and that the Chairman forward a copy of it to the new Minister, Mr Tony Worthington.

Mr McFarland: I want to thank the Chairman of Standing Committee B, Mr Gibson, for his kind words. He has continued to be firm but courteous, and it is a treat to be told off in that homely Tyrone way.

I also want to reiterate his comments about Liz Benson and Stuart McDougall, who once again have given outstanding service to both of us and to the other Committee members. The Committee has shown once again how parties can work together and co-operate when the will is there. Discussions were often spirited but mainly good-humoured.

Education is a subject close to all parents' hearts, and pre-school education is generally perceived to be a good thing. This view is backed up by the overwhelming body of evidence from those who came to talk to us.

10.30 am

Why pre-school education? I quote very briefly from the report:

"In the early childhood years, learning occurs at a pace never again to be repeated — largely due to the young child's curiosity to explore."

We heard of a very interesting experiment that was carried out in America with young kittens. I appreciate that there is not necessarily a direct correlation between kittens and children, but it is interesting. Some of the kittens were put in isolation, and all that they were given in that environment was food and water. The other kittens were allowed to roam as they wished. Later, all the kittens were given various tests, and it became clear that the ones which had been allowed to explore were much further advanced in co-ordination and ability to deal with life generally. That will obviously have a parallel in children.

I quote again from the Committee's report:

"Good quality pre-school education promotes children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development and pays dividends when they start formal education because the foundations of reasoning and communication have been laid early.

It is the quality of pre-school education experience that is important; good quality provision enhances development; poor quality provision does not."

So a child's environment and the type of education that he gets are very important. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds gain the most. The interaction between children and adults and other children is a key to fostering the development of social and linguistic skills. The report says

"Pre-school education is more than a preparation for primary school. It helps provide a foundation for responsible citizenship (the High/Scope long-term study, 'Significant Benefits'). Cost benefit analysis of the High/Scope study suggests that the long-term savings to the exchequer may significantly offset the costs of provision."

If you teach children properly from an early age to become responsible human beings, you avoid many of the delinquency problems that occur later in life. The requirement for pre-school education is backed up by social changes. Here I would like to reiterate that there has been a significant growth in lone parenthood. The most shocking thing I heard during this exercise was that 25% of families in Northern Ireland have lone parents. That is worth mulling over. Research in England has shown that lone-parent families tend to be more problematic than two-parent families, precisely because one of the parents and his or her example are missing from the children's lives.

There has also been a significant increase in the number of working mothers. It is no longer acceptable — although here we are slightly behind elsewhere in the United Kingdom — to put a wife in the kitchen and expect that to be her place. Many women wish to get out and work for their own benefit — to develop their careers and use their natural abilities — and they should be allowed to do so. Some of them obviously cannot because they have to look after their children. If there were pre-school provision, they could go to work more easily. Young families have tended to move from tight-knit communities into modern suburban housing estates. In these circumstances they have no back-up, no one to turn to. In areas where there is pre-school provision, it has been shown to be of great benefit to such families.

I endorse Mr Gibson's call for the two Departments to get themselves sorted out. This is another key point, and it became apparent that it is a major problem. For some reason the Departments have not found it easy to co-operate. They really should do so and provide what has become known as the seamless robe of health care, welfare care and education. Many people do not realize that the real impetus for pre-school education has come from Great Britain. We in Northern Ireland are fortunate in that we send our children to school in the year they are four, whereas in Great Britain they start in the term in which they are five. So the impetus has come from Great Britain to try to catch those children who it is felt are

being left behind. We are already better off. We have part of this earlier provision already, and it is now simply a matter of providing the other part for three-to-four year-olds.

You will see from the report that the Department of Education identified a need for pre-school education some time ago. The policy has been revived. Mr Gibson referred to the £40 million capital costs and £14 million running costs which were quoted. That is the worst-case scenario. So far as I can see, those costs are being given as the reason for not fulfilling the policy. The Department has produced figures — £14 million annually — that are bound to frighten anybody. Using what is currently available in terms of schools and spare classrooms, pre-school education could be provided for less than that. I urge the new Government, with the priority they attach to education, to put their policy into action.

I commend this report to the Forum.

Ms Bell: I too would like to express appreciation to Mr Gibson — Oliver's army has won again — Mr McFarland and other colleagues for their commitment and their considered consensus. I would also like to thank Ms Benson and Mr McDougall. Mr McDougall will find that he is a better man for the step he has just taken. As Members know — I am being openly sexist about this — behind every man there is a very good woman. That will be to his benefit.

I commend this report to the Forum as a definitive statement of the necessity to make pre-school provision a mandatory part of the education sector. As Members will see from the evidence from a wide variety of bodies and organizations, it is manifest that there is an ever-increasing demand for education facilities for pre-school children. Successive Governments and different people in the Department of Education have voiced support for and researched this concept, but there has been little financial or practical help to enable education and library boards and other bodies to establish pre-school centres. It is also generally acknowledged that those children who have the benefit of some form of pre-school learning develop better when they reach primary school and also prove less likely to be antisocial in later life. We could argue, therefore, that effective early-years provision can actually contribute to savings in other areas, such as young-offender facilities and social services. It is for that reason that this report is so important to the Forum and the community, and it may be relevant also to subsequent debates.

Until now nursery groups, crèches and primary school reception classes have mostly been obliged to operate under child-care legislation but without any educational curriculum standards. That is why we recommend that the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services should co-operate more to produce a pre-school core curriculum of suitable learning experiences. That is vital. It would allow a child to develop his potential in play and social skills and in basic literacy skills. It would also require other matters, such as accommodation standards, staff qualifications and training, to be addressed in a more comprehensive manner, to the benefit of all young children.

Parental involvement, in a role not unlike a parent representative on a board of governors, could be another feature of an establishment set up and maintained by the Government. Such co-operation would also enable the interdepartmental group on early-years provision to work more effectively in assessing the needs of and approving access

for those children who would benefit most. This group, by monitoring the implementation and delivery of early-years facilities, could ensure that resources were directed where they could be utilized most effectively.

Along with this support and advice on financial provision and grant-aid, the Government could monitor and direct the attainment of agreed quality standards for the care and education provided by early-years facilities. This will be achieved only when there is a commitment by the Government to a flexible, accessible and affordable system of pre-school education. I am heartened by the recent comments of Mr Tony Worthington, the Minister responsible for education and employment in Northern Ireland, about setting up a standing conference to discuss such matters. He underlined his personal support for nursery education and for something else that is dear to the heart of every Alliance member — integrated education.

The Alliance Party was to the forefront in pressing for legislation — introduced initially by Lord Dunleath — on integrated education, and this movement, like Topsy, “has growed and growed”, to the benefit of Northern Ireland generally. I am glad to say that the report underlines the importance of facilitating and funding the establishment of integrated nursery schools, which heretofore have not been funded. It also calls for the same conditions for the setting up of other voluntary pre-school centres, to make freedom of choice in respect of early-years provision possible for all sections of the community.

May I end by urging Members to read this report carefully. I am confident that both Mr Worthington and Mr David Blunkett will read and take note of it. In the foreword to the document to which Mr Gibson has referred (‘Early Excellence — a Head Start for Every Child’), Mr Blunkett himself refers to

“the development of policies aimed at sustaining the family, developing the potential of every child and emphasizing the role of education and care in citizenship.”

He says

“This emphasis on social cohesion, on learning in the home as well as at school, on strengthening the partnership between the family and the community, builds directly on Labour Party philosophy and practice.”

I hope that Ministers will take note of our recommendations and put their fine words into practice.

I support the motion.

The Chairman: Mr McCartney, your name is next on my list, but Mr Hugh Smyth has a very urgent appointment at 11.00 am. Will you give way to him? He assures the Forum Secretary — I have not spoken to him myself — that he is going to be his usual brief self.

Mr McCartney: I certainly do not wish to detain Mr Smyth a moment longer than is necessary.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Is it not wonderful that Mr McCartney is so kind? I am going to be brief because to do otherwise would be an insult to the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Gibson. He said it all, and I want simply to congratulate him personally. I have said many times — in particular, to those who criticize the Forum — that this was the first Committee to be set up. At that stage it was the only one of which I was a member, and it has been a great privilege and an honour to serve on it. I believe that Mr Gibson led by example, showing what can be achieved. We have seen what can be achieved when people are prepared to leave their political thoughts behind and work for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland. This report proves beyond a shadow of doubt the good work that the Forum can do.

I also want to congratulate the staff, and I join others in sending sympathy to Stuart — I mean congratulations!

I want to touch on one vital point. For many years it was assumed that four or five was the right age to start school. However, research shows that a child's mind starts to develop at two. That is why pre-school education is vital. We in the Shankill are very fortunate in having obtained European funds. We have really tackled this problem. There is evidence that people would be prepared to read the report from the pre-school scheme which is currently operating in the Shankill. I hope that other areas will be fortunate enough to get funds for pre-school provision. It is vital that the Government support this.

Thank you for calling me out of turn, Mr Chairman, and I thank Mr McCartney for allowing me to take his place.

I too strongly support the motion.

Mr McCartney: It is an extraordinary situation that I should be privileged not only to facilitate Mr Hugh Smyth but, at least partially, to agree with him — though I hardly think, even if he has taken my place, that anyone would mistake me for him.

I endorse what Mr Smyth has said, and I congratulate those involved in the preparation of this report, including the Committee's Chairman and Vice-Chairman and our own representative, Elizabeth Roche, who has vast experience in educational matters and has held a very high position in the education and training world. This is an example of what the Forum can do and an example of the contribution it can make to the entire community.

10.45 am

There are some general observations that I might make. The report highlights the fact that the compulsory school age varies widely across Europe. In places like Scandinavia children go to school at seven; in France, Germany and Italy at six; and in Great Britain and Northern Ireland at five. This, of course, predetermines the concentration on and the necessity for pre-school provision. In some countries in Europe that provision is as high as 90%. What is the position within the United Kingdom? In Northern Ireland the percentage is 15%; in England, 27%; in Scotland, 38%; and in Wales, 36%. So the total inadequacy of pre-school provision in Northern Ireland is highlighted not only when contrasted with that in Europe, with its 90%, but also when contrasted with that in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The pressures for the provision of pre-school education are increasing all the time. There have, of course, been fundamental changes in family structures in Northern Ireland since 1960. One in four families is headed by a single parent. There has been an increase in the number of working mothers — mothers in employment — and, indeed, in the economic circumstances that sometimes dictate the necessity for that. There has also been a loss of the traditional family support network — the mother or the granny who lived in the next street or perhaps next door. All these factors have contributed to pressure for increased school provision. But in spite of that, we have had literally nothing done since Lord Melchett put forward some ideas as far back as 1977.

There are two schools of thought on pre-school provision, and they may have highlighted some of the differences in attitude between members of the Committee. There are those who take the traditional view that the home is the best place, and there is no doubt — here I echo some of the remarks made by the Secretary of State for Education, Mr Blunkett, and mentioned by Ms Bell — that the emphasis on the family as the nuclear and most important unit is undoubtedly right. But, of course, the families that still operate as an entire unit, with a mother at home, while providing the best, gain the least benefit from pre-school education or provision. The single mother who, for all sorts of reasons, may be inadequately looking after the needs of her children — and, of course, that situation is by no means universal — is the one whose child gets the maximum advantage.

But, to be effective, pre-school education must also be of high quality. We require good and well-planned learning experiences. We require appropriately trained staff. The ratios must be suitable, and there must, of course, be good physical resources by way of accommodation and equipment. There is no point in making half-baked pre-school provision.

The main recommendation of the report is that the Department of Education should produce a programme to provide one year of nursery education for all those under compulsory school age whose parents wish them to receive it. Not all may wish to avail themselves of that opportunity. The problems, of course, are always the same — lack of resources and inadequate finance — but we must continue to explore the extension of reception classes at primary school. This is, perhaps, one way of dealing with the problem: having four to five-year-olds in pre-school classes within the primary-school system. I am not suggesting that that is the entire answer, but it is at least a partial answer.

Let me close by once again congratulating the Committee, its Chairman and the Forum staff who, as always, have provided excellent administrative resources to enable the Committee to do its work.

I support the motion that the report be adopted.

Mr Casey: May I too congratulate Mr Gibson and the Committee on another excellent report. They set a very high standard in their last report to the Forum, and they have maintained that standard.

We all agree that the provision of nursery education in Northern Ireland is both piecemeal and totally inadequate and that there needs to be a determined effort to rectify the situation. The Department of Health and Social Services is responsible for the social well-being of a child, and the Department of Education is responsible for his or her education. Some clarification and some sort of working together are necessary.

Very many types of child care are available. Private provision tends to be fairly costly, and many parents cannot afford it. We also have child-minding but it too can be costly, and it can deprive a child of much-needed interaction with other children and the benefits that accrue from attendance at a pre-school facility. If there is not enough pre-school or nursery education available, this is sometimes the only possibility left for parents — they do not have much choice. Schools seem to be unable to make provision through lack of funding. Many, particularly in my own area, are offering one and a half hours a day maybe two days a week as their contribution to nursery education. This poses very serious problems for the parents or grandparents in that an older child may be at primary school and two children have to be taken together. The pre-school child has to be collected after an hour and a half, and the parent or the grandparent has to go back to collect the other child. This places a great strain on the person responsible.

The voluntary sector has once again had to step into the breach and assume responsibility for what should be a statutory obligation. The pre-school groups which operate mostly in community centres or church halls and other such places, particularly in working-class areas, have had to provide pre-school play, as it is called. As someone who was responsible for setting up such a facility in my own area, I want to pay tribute to the people who operate pre-school play schemes. Their dedication and the very high standard that they set — sometimes in totally inadequate facilities — are deserving of the highest credit. Responsibility for these groups rests not with the Department of Education but with social-services departments. They are responsible for standards and for the vetting of staff. All staff in pre-school play groups have to be vetted, as have all others who work with children. Unfortunately, the high standards that are set are not matched by a high level of funding. The funding from social services for a 24-place pre-school play group in my area is £6 per day, or 20 pence per child. This is totally inadequate.

One thing which has had a great effect on the pre-school play groups is the recent cut-backs in the ACE scheme. Many of these facilities were set up through ACE. This not only allowed people to pay an adequate wage to those taking care of the children but was the main source of funding. It led to very high staff-children ratios, like one to four or one to six. Sometimes a school nursery class has one teacher to 20, 30 or 40 children. So the care and attention that the children in a pre-school play group were getting was probably much better than would have been possible in a nursery school.

Mr Carrick: Does the Member agree that the attitude of the Department of Education militates against nursery provision? We have the example of Millington School in Portadown, which has two units. It has been successful in getting funding through the childhood fund of the European Union's special support programme for peace and reconciliation, but because of Department of Education policy a third unit cannot be provided. The Department has set its face against the provision of a third unit, in spite of the fact that each nursery-unit intake is over-subscribed by 100%.

Mr Casey: I heartily agree. The same thing applies in pre-school facilities because health and social services has set a norm of 24 children. You may be using the whole school, or you may have a very large community centre, but you are allowed only one pre-school play group. In our case there is a waiting-list of some 70 children.

Like Mr Hugh Smyth, I take great pride in what my organization, which is from another Shankill, is doing. It provides for 20 crèche and 24 pre-school places in the Lurgan area. Again, it is the voluntary sector that is trying to move with the times and make adequate provision. It is all very well getting money from the childhood fund, but, as with other European funding, you get a post, or posts, for two years, and then the money stops. When you go to the statutory authorities to look for the funds that would enable you to continue this employment, you are told "Sorry, but due to cut-backs we do not have the money." European funding is a great panacea at the minute. Very many voluntary organizations are taking advantage of it and using it to good effect, but in years to come we will be back to the situation where neither the Department of Education nor the Department of Health and Social Services is ready to make up the shortfall and fund posts on a regular basis. I think too that quite a number of Government Departments are ripping the fund off for their own benefit rather than using it to help those for whom it was intended.

I congratulate the Committee on its report.

Mr Bolton: I want to start by thanking the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Committee and also the staff for their courtesy and assistance. This report is a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, view of the issue of pre-school education. It sets out and recognizes the role played by many agencies in the current provision for young children, and it recommends rationalization. This theme runs throughout the report.

We think that in this rationalization or standardization it should be emphasized that the education service ought to have a leading role and that the Department of Education should pursue this goal vigorously. Of course, this is all useless unless resources are provided — resources in the form of finance, accommodation and staff. To my mind, the really important elements are the quality of staff and the quality of the curriculum.

11.00 am

I was very pleased to hear the Committee Chairman say that he wants to see universal provision. No section of the community should be left out. In this regard, I want to refer to something which is a special interest of mine. Steps should be taken to ensure that adequate provision is made in rural areas. Small rural schools are currently taking a bit of a beating. Such provision could be made efficiently through the development of nursery annexes, the use of nursery teachers in other settings and the provision of mobile classrooms for nursery units.

In commending this report, I urge the Forum to encourage the Government to pursue the recommendations I have outlined and to ensure a meaningful extension of education provision to all in their early years.

I support the motion.

Mr Benson: I too support the motion.

I am a member of the Education Committee and chairman of an education board. It was I who suggested that the Committee should look at nursery education, and I am very grateful that my suggestion was taken on board. I would like to congratulate all those that gave evidence, and I pay tribute to the Committee's Chairman and Vice-Chairman, who did an excellent job. Indeed, all members contributed very well. I would be remiss if I did not also thank Liz Benson and Stuart McDougall — of course, with the name Benson, one expects the best.

For the benefit of those who may not fully understand, I want to focus very briefly on nursery education and explain how it has been managed up to now. Nursery education is not a statutory requirement and, therefore, has not really received funding as such. In the past it was mainly the boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) that provided funds, and they would tell you that, generally, these came from budget surpluses. Well, I am afraid that surpluses no longer exist.

As Mr McCartney said, things were done in a very piecemeal way. In fact, they could not have been done in any other way as the system was not properly funded. One of the things that, I suppose, the boards and the CCMS could be criticized for — there may well be a reason for it, but I criticize it anyway — is that, generally, the nursery education that was available was provided in separate schools. That was very expensive, for it required a separate building, a separate teaching staff, separate heating, and so on. It was not efficient. Perhaps the explanation is that where there were two or three primary schools in a town and there could be only one nursery school, a separate unit was provided so as not to show any favouritism.

I recommend that nursery education be made a statutory requirement. But it must be properly funded, and it should be provided through existing primary schools so that the children can be prepared, in the latter part of the year and in accordance with the curriculum, to fit neatly into P1 when the time comes.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I totally agree with the point that the Member is making. The anomaly in the present situation means that successful primary schools, unintentionally, have almost contempt for day-nursery places. A school in my constituency — Broughshane Primary — which is very highly regarded, has a pre-school reception class, but because of its success and the demand for more places it will have to do away with the nursery provision from next year and use the money elsewhere.

Nursery education should indeed be a statutory requirement. Once a school has provided such facilities it should not be allowed to cut them because of lack of finance.

Mr Benson: I am grateful for the Member's support. I hope that when we vote, everybody will be able to support the suggestion. There should be a statutory requirement for pre-school education, which should be provided through the primary schools.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: This is a very timely report. Members will have noted that it makes no wild or extravagant claims. As the Committee Chairman said, there are many vested interests in this field — vested interests from the world of finance, in terms of grants and investments, and vested interests in the world of academe. There are some who want to justify their existence. This is an avenue that they can explore. Here is a contribution that they can make to maintain a particular scheme. Then there are the vested interests of some providers. They have a particular ideology or agenda to follow, and they can dress it up with educational terminology. And there are vested interests in the world of research.

During the recess I took the opportunity to ferret out a number of reports that the world of research tends to ignore. In its conclusion, the Committee's report draws attention to this. It says that there is a need for a coherent programme of research to establish the facts about early-years education in Northern Ireland and to inform future policy and provision. That is one of the report's recommendations. Committee members tried to weave a way through the various vested interests, and their conclusion is that in this very important area there is a definite and genuine need for careful evaluation based on careful research and good studies.

The second fact that I want to highlight is that almost all the written submissions — and I read every one of them — and some of the oral ones began by telling us how important the parents' role is. Having tipped their hat to that — in a rather patronizing and condescending manner in some cases — they promptly ignored it. The report attempts to explore the issue and what it means in practice. It is unique in that regard.

It is a very practical report. In the conclusions it says that there should be definable parental involvement in all aspects of early-years provision, and it sets out some recommendations. This is the very thing that all providers, including the Department of Education, tell us is important. All these people tell us about it, but nowhere in any document do they actually define it. The Committee has attempted to do so.

One piece of evidence that came to us is a Policy Planning and Research Unit report which says that 80% of parents want their children at home. Indeed, in her oral evidence Mrs Hughes pointed out that if children have good-quality experiences in the home, the outcome will be the same. The Committee attempted to define that role.

I want to pay tribute to the Committee's Chairman, Vice-Chairman and other members, as well as to the staff, Ms Benson and Mr McDougall.

I commend this report to the Forum and urge that every Member read it — not just glance through it today and then put it on a shelf or in a file, but actually study it very carefully.

For those who like statistics, I trust there are enough at the end to whet the appetite for more.

I support the motion.

Mr Weir: I would like to start, as others have, by thanking the Committee's Chairman, Vice-Chairman, members and staff for all the hard work that they have put into this report.

It is good to see a report which has unanimous support in the Forum and in the Committee. I am only sorry that some parties that contributed to it are not present for today's debate on this vital subject. An accusation often levelled at parties and politicians in Northern Ireland is that their answer to every problem is to throw more money at it — that no thought is applied. That is obviously a symptom of the fact that Northern Ireland politicians are deprived of power.

However, this is not an irresponsible report — it is reasoned and reasonable. A lot of thought has gone into it. We are not asking for pie-in-the-sky solutions; we are asking for something practical. We are asking the Government to fulfil their commitments. Twenty years ago they gave the commitment — very much at the core of this report — to provide one year of nursery education for all children under compulsory school age whose parents wished them to receive it. That has been repeated on a number of occasions, so we are not asking the Government to make any new commitment or to do anything involving massive amounts of new spending. That is reasonable enough.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I agree that this is a reasoned and reasonable report. The statistics show that there are about 24,000 primary schools throughout the United Kingdom but that only about 6,000 provide pre-school education. Does the Member agree that it would take a vast commitment on the part of the Government to carry out the recommendations in this report?

Mr Weir: I agree. This Government has to live up to its commitments. When Mr Blair was asked during the election campaign what the three priorities for his Government would be, he said "Education, education, education." All we are asking Mr Blair and the Labour Government to do is to live up to their commitments.

It has been mentioned that Northern Ireland has a much lower percentage of children in nursery education than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Even taking into account the fact that we have a lower school age, only 45% of children under five in the province are in education, compared to the United Kingdom average of 54%, as the statistics show. Discrimination against children from Northern Ireland must end.

The problem — this has been raised already — is that nursery education and pre-school education are not statutory requirements. This part of the system has therefore become something of a Cinderella. After years of budget cuts, the easy option is to cut nursery education because there is no statutory requirement to provide it. The clear evidence that emerges from this report is that constantly attacking nursery education is a false economy. It does not lead to savings in the long term.

11.15 am

We need a secure future for pre-school education, and we have taken a reasonable attitude to its provision. There is a wide range of options: there are nursery schools, nursery

classes, reception classes, day nurseries, play groups, child-minders and — for many parents, the best option — educating children at home.

We do not seek to enforce some form of uniform standard or system; that would be very much a left-wing, Socialist solution. Our aim is not to produce some form of command economy — we have to respect the diversity of pre-school education. It is about providing opportunity for people, not forcing them into a particular line of action.

I was very glad to hear Rev Trevor Kirkland make reference to the parental role — something that has been ignored by educationalists, who are, at best, paying it lip-service. I am very glad that the report has a section dealing with and defining the parental role. For example, parents should have an input in formulating the curriculum, appointing staff and determining hours of operation.

The Committee and the Forum should cherish diversity in this area. There is now a challenge to the Department of Education to provide the opportunity and the resources to make the recommendations of this report happen. The Department faces a choice: it can either carry on with the current system or invest in the future. I hope, for the sake of all our children, that it will take the latter course.

I support the motion.

Ms McWilliams: Before supporting the adoption of Committee B's report, the Women's Coalition would like to welcome the appointment of the new Minister, Tony Worthington. We share the Labour Party's expressed commitment to excellence and equity in education, particularly in the early years, but we would like that policy to be implemented.

It has been said here before that it is good to stand at the top. In terms of provision, we have always been at the bottom of the European ladder. High rates of unemployment, poverty and deprivation — these are indicators for which Northern Ireland is well known throughout Europe. Another indicator for which we are known throughout Europe — here it would be nice to be at the top, but we sit at the bottom — is the provision of pre-school education. We welcome this really useful report because it shows a new political awareness of the importance of the early years of a child to future growth and development. I know that from my own children. They went through nursery school, and it stood them in good stead when they went into primary one. The difference between the children who had not been through nursery school and those who had was very clear to me and the teachers.

Early-years education should not be left to chance, as is increasingly recognized in international agreements, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as in national legislation. We are very pleased that the Committee has selected pre-school education for its work. We see the report as an important step — we emphasize "step" — towards creating a coherent pre-school policy. We particularly endorse the recommendation that both the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services get on with keeping the promise they made back in 1978. I remember as far back as Lord Melchett's time. He said that he was going to make pre-school education a priority as part of the Belfast area-needs project. Some 20 years later we are still waiting for

that to happen. It was good to hear it repeated in 1994 that the priority was to provide a nursery place for all the children whose parents want one, but this is still not happening.

All the evidence suggests that investment in pre-school provision pays dividends, with important long-term social and economic benefits, and helps those — and this is really important in Northern Ireland — from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why we support the concept of a universal statutory right to nursery provision. And I have to record our regret that the report does not consider the case. Unless nursery provision becomes a statutory right, it will remain a privileged luxury.

The report fulfils a very useful function in that the evidence defines the characteristics of good-quality pre-school education, and its recommendations identify the need for parental involvement and the need to value voluntary as well as statutory services in both the care and education sectors.

A crucial aspect of early-years provision is the issue of equity. The figures speak for themselves. Three quarters of our children do not have access to nursery education. Provision in Northern Ireland is behind that in the rest of the United Kingdom, which is behind that in the rest of Europe. There is practically no publicly funded child-care provision, and there are vast inequalities in funding and access, which bear little relationship to social need. I was fortunate enough to have my children attend Knockbreda Nursery School, which is a cross-community, but predominantly state-sector, nursery school. Many Catholic residents in the area chose to send their children there and will continue to do so. What is good about nursery education is that where it is available, people will make choices, and children will begin to be integrated at an early age. It is unfortunate that there is not such provision right across the board.

We need to recognize, as the report points out clearly, that 25% of families in Northern Ireland are headed by a single parent. Many people live well away from the traditional, tight-knit communities where they might, in the past, have turned to their families for child care. Our extended-kinship network often meant that grandmothers looked after children. The report also makes the point that many mothers are working, for a variety of reasons. I have done some research on the labour force in Northern Ireland, and I can tell Members that 45% of married women are now economically active. The figures have increased enormously since the early 1970s. If these people were not economically active, poverty rates in Northern Ireland would be much higher. Only a privileged minority have access to the deluxe, Rolls-Royce model of nursery education.

A friend of mine in the Women's Coalition has a child in a nursery school, for whom she is paying £120 a week. That gives some indication of what the private sector is currently charging. The rest juggle with a range of care-in-the-community alternatives. To help to fund play groups they hold jumble sales and have annual battles for hand-outs from the local health and social services trusts. We recognize that child-minders, either official or unofficial, playgroups and community facilities provide alternative choices with which many are happy. Voluntary groups — I pay tribute in particular to the Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroup Association — and parent and community groups also provide care and education.

One difficulty, however, is that the Department and school authorities do not necessarily recognize what is provided as being education, so they do not fund it, or only help with accommodation, staffing or other costs. This cannot guarantee much better standards. We particularly commend, therefore, the second and third conclusions and recommendations. There should be effective monitoring and evaluation of early-years provision to ensure equity of access to it. There is also a need to establish core standards. We have heard of the frightening nature of some of the standards that existed when private nursery education was first provided. It was neither monitored nor regulated. It is not enough to have a policy; we need to have standards monitored and core standards evaluated.

A significant strategic development has been the creation of the early-years interdepartmental forum and the regional early-years committees, which encourage co-operation and the exchange of information and promote co-ordinated development. But there is confusion about their long-term purpose and their dual co-ordinating and funding role. We therefore also support the sixth recommendation, which refers to the need for clear terms of reference. However, we must emphasize that all the co-ordination in the world will not resolve the funding issue; what is needed is a major expansion of flexible full-time provision of care and education. No amount of short-term or part-time juggling will do for Northern Ireland any longer; there must be long-term commitment to funding. Piecemeal measures are just not sufficient. For instance, it will not be adequate simply to increase the number of part-time places.

In areas of high social need quality provision is vital, and the families need extra support, as the Greater Shankill early-years project is currently demonstrating. Using stopgap measures, such as spare capacity in existing primary schools, presents a problem as need is often greatest where the school-age population is growing fastest and spare capacity is already used up. Simply targeting socially or educationally disadvantaged children, or those with disabilities, is an approach which evidence suggests will stigmatize them and ultimately lead to a further decrease in their education and a heightening of the chance of their exclusion. It will lead to isolation and dependence — a cycle already well-known in Northern Ireland.

The Forum should fulfil its special role in contributing to greater understanding and consensus across the community by pointing out the overriding importance of appraising all policies, including pre-school educational provision, against the possibility of unfairness or indirect discrimination. We would like to be reassured that the discretionary powers of the two Departments — particularly the Department of Education under the 1997 Order — will not be exercised in a way that is unfair to any section or sector of the community, including the integrated-school sector.

Up to now pre-school provision within the integrated sector or when made by parents or through community initiatives has had to be registered as play-group provision — a requirement which is not imposed on the controlled and maintained sectors. We therefore support the eighth recommendation and add that the implementation of the legislation should, as a matter of course, be subject to a policy of appraisal for fair treatment.

We also urge the Departments of Education and Health and Social Services to consider the importance of giving special encouragement to existing and new forms of mixed,

or preferably integrated, pre-school education provision. It is simply not good enough to claim that existing nursery schools in the controlled and maintained sectors are well mixed in terms of religion when there is no guarantee of any kind of communal balance or protection for whichever community is in the minority. Encouraging young people to live together at an early age must be one of the most powerful ways of building a peaceful future. I have discovered that through my experience of nursery provision, and I maintain that there is no better way for children to grow up than by starting to go to school at an early age. Fortunately, much of the province's nursery provision is mixed.

Finally, we want to offer very special thanks to Ms Benson for her professional support and to all those who presented information to the Committee. We congratulate them and the Committee on this fine report — fine both in its approach and in its clarity. We believe that it is an important and much-needed step towards universal statutory nursery provision in Northern Ireland.

The Chairman: Mr Gibson, you said a couple of things to which you might want me to give some attention. First, you suggested that we get in touch with Mr Worthington. I would like you to suggest how you see that best being done. Secondly, there is the issue of the provision of finance. As Mr Weir pointed out, there is always this cry, but can we do anything about it? Can we think, for example, about the present Government's modification or evolution of the private finance initiative?

Mr Gibson: First, I thank all the Members who have spoken this morning for their congratulations. I also thank each member of the Committee. I am delighted that Members all recorded their thanks to the Committee Clerk and to Mr McDougall.

I appreciate that most people made a serious effort in raising the different points that were heavily discussed in the Committee. The fact that this report is about the fourteenth or fifteenth draft proves that it was not arrived at easily.

11.30 am

With regard to your point about the financial requirements, Mr Chairman, I see there being a phased introduction, as £40 million cannot be made readily available. But if there is political will and determination — and the Labour Government say that education is the priority — that will be the means by which this whole idea can be taken forward.

You mentioned the input of private finance and the role of what has been known as the private finance initiative — what the Labour Government now call the private and public sector partnership. This is going to be introduced into education in a fairly major way, and as a Committee we would like to examine it over the next few months.

The major point that I wish to make is that the report provides an opportunity for the Forum and the Committee to get recognition for their efforts. We would like an opportunity to discuss it with both you, Mr Chairman, and the Minister. It seems a demarcation line was drawn by the former Administration, that they did not wish to come near this elected body. An opportunity is now provided by this the first report to be produced during the new Administration. It is also an opportunity for you, Mr Chairman, to have your rightful position

acknowledged. Furthermore, since the Minister is responsible not only for education but also for the economy, there is at least one other Committee which has a vested interest in meeting with him. Should the Forum adopt this report today, we would also have an opportunity for a thorough discussion about how the Minister intends to see his own party's policy implemented.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Forum adopts the report on pre-school education in Northern Ireland prepared by Standing Committee B on 27 June 1997 and decides to forward it to the Minister for Education, with the request that he give serious consideration to its recommendations and agree to meet a deputation from Committee B to discuss the report.

FORUM BUSINESS

The Chairman: It would be a good idea to have a break of, say, 15 minutes so that I can get the names of those who wish to speak to the special motion.

Mr McCartney: As we have got through the first item of business with greater dispatch than was originally anticipated, some of the time-frames which seemed of such significance at 10 o'clock have diminished somewhat. Perhaps we can now resolve that issue.

The Chairman: I made my ruling pretty clear. We had an agreement yesterday, and I am sticking to it.

Mr McCartney: Well, when we return I will be moving a motion in the Forum, which, as you pointed out this morning, has control over these matters at all stages. It can decide at any stage whether any address or speech from any Member that goes beyond a time-limit may be heard. It seems to me that in taking what appears to be an intransigent attitude, in the face of very changed circumstances, you are displaying a side of your character that we have not seen before.

The Chairman: Character is a many-faceted thing. I suggest that we can do this only by unanimity. Now, if I can get unanimity for you to have more time —

Mr McCartney: For everybody.

The Chairman: Or for everybody. If there is unanimous consent I will be prepared to consider that.

Mr McCartney: I would like to propose that since the amount of time available has changed, we revert, insofar as it is possible — *[Interruption]*

Mr Peter Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I take the point that someone may introduce a motion by leave. But that is not what is being done. A request has been made for the Business Committee's recommendation to be amended to allow the person moving the motion a slightly longer period to make his contribution. That does not require the leave of the Forum. This is a simple case of voting to determine whether the recommendation of the Business Committee should be upheld or whether it should be amended.

Mr McCartney: I accept Mr Robinson's exposition.

The Chairman: Should we see whether there is unanimity about this?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: There does not need to be unanimity. The Member will be speaking not by leave of the Forum but, as my Friend has pointed out, because the Forum has been asked that the time allocated to the person moving the motion be amended. That needs only a simple majority.

The Chairman: I am reminded that a business motion requires only a simple majority. Let me have some suggestions. It is perfectly correct that Mr Wilson told me yesterday that he would like to have a little more time, and I suggested to him that it would be quite reasonable for the eight minutes in the case of the person moving the motion to be extended to 10 minutes. That is what we agreed, and if Mr Wilson nods his head I will know where we are. It seems to be perfectly reasonable to agree that the mover of the motion be given an extra two minutes — in other words, 10 minutes.

Mr McCartney: May I protest on exactly the same basis as earlier. I know of no institution that has debates of this kind where the person moving a motion has less time than someone speaking from the Floor. It is just preposterous.

The Chairman: This is what the Business Committee decided. Would somebody like to suggest that we give additional time to the United Kingdom Unionist Party?

Mr McCartney: I propose that the United Kingdom Unionists have 15 minutes, which is not the 20 minutes that is normally the case, but would at least put the person moving the motion on a par with Members speaking for other parties.

The Chairman: So you want 15 minutes to begin with. How much time do you want to sum up?

Mr McCartney: Ten minutes.

The Chairman: Twenty-five minutes, therefore. So everybody else will be confined to 15 minutes in the case of the larger parties and — *[Interruption]*

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: So long as time is available. We have to get the other Members in.

The Chairman: Are there any other views about this?

Mr Peter Robinson: Those who were at the Business Committee meeting will recall what was agreed. I was surprised, when I looked at the Order Paper, to see this matter down as a motion. I had assumed that we would deal with it by way of general comments round the Chamber and that there was an allocated time. Now that it has been made a motion, we have no choice but to do what is being proposed. However, it should not have been put down as a motion. We agreed a limited period for comments by each group. This should have been done on a simple take-note basis.

The Chairman: That is what we decided.

Mr Peter Robinson: Well, it is not what is on the Order Paper. It is down as a motion from the United Kingdom Unionists, and on that basis they are entitled to wind up.

The Chairman: Does anyone else want to speak on this matter?

Ms McWilliams: We had a representative at the Business Committee, and having been briefed on its proceedings, we are much happier that this is down as a motion. We would have a major concern if it were being dealt with in any other way. The Member who introduces any motion should have the time specified in the Rules. It looks as if we are beginning to make things up as we go along. We have Rules, and we should stick to them.

The Chairman: Are we agreed that the United Kingdom Unionists should get 15 minutes — or perhaps they want 20 — to propose the motion and 15 minutes to wind up?

It was so decided.

Mr Trimble: Does that mean that everyone else will be allowed up to 10 minutes?

The Chairman: It does. I so rule.

The meeting was suspended at 11.43 am and resumed at 12.02 pm.

TALKS ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER

Mr McCartney: I beg to move the following motion:

The Forum notes the statement about political development talks made by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons on 25 June 1997.

When the Prime Minister made his speech at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society earlier this month, many people were alarmed at the suggestion that officials of the Government would meet Sinn Fein, allegedly for clarification. Their anxiety was greatly heightened when Mr Bruton, the then Taoiseach, and Mr Spring, the Tanaiste, both stated in public that Sinn Fein had been told *ad nauseam* what exactly was required of them before they could enter the talks. At that time our fear was that these discussions or negotiations were, in fact, not explanatory but exploratory, and subsequent events have proved that suspicion correct.

We now know that the talks were not explanatory. They were exploratory. They were held for the purpose of assessing exactly what Sinn Fein/IRA would accept in return for declaring some form of cease-fire and being included in the talks. We now know that on the Friday before the brutal murders in Lurgan Mr Blair made an offer to Sinn Fein. It was an offer made in private, but the murders caused the Prime Minister to make it public. We should all note that those callous murders did not warrant withdrawal of the offer made in the secret talks; rather, they produced a public affirmation of it. One last chance — that is, allegedly, what they are receiving. It is a last chance that will be succeeded by another last chance and another until, eventually, the offer is one which Sinn Fein cannot refuse.

One is simply astounded that in the present circumstances a British Prime Minister could be so naïve as to state, as Mr Blair did in the House of Commons on Wednesday, that he felt he had dealt fairly with Sinn Fein/IRA and hoped that they would deal fairly with him. One is prompted to ask the question “Where has the Prime Minister been?”

The talks process at Stormont and those participating in it have been both devalued and dismissed because the real negotiations were going on between the British Government and Sinn Fein/IRA. Subsequently, when some ascertainment of what Sinn Fein might or might not accept had been made between the British Government and the SDLP, an attempt — and I use that word advisedly — was made to involve the Ulster Unionist Party in that scenario in an effort to gain consensus for a deal which was essentially being done outside the talks but which would subsequently be brought inside, in the hope that it could be sealed — or rubber-stamped? — within the official talks.

I now turn to Mr Blair’s *aide-mémoire* because it, essentially, contains the substance of what went on between his officials and the IRA. Paragraph 3 states that the Government want to see Sinn Fein participating in these talks, and it then proceeds to tell us the basis upon which they can participate:

“The Secretary of State is legally obliged to issue an invitation to Sinn Fein when she considers those requirements are met, having made a political judgement of all the circumstances in the round.”

What are the requirements? Under the first one, Sinn Fein has only to declare an unequivocal restoration of the cease-fire of August 1994 — a cease-fire that was proved to be fraudulent, tactical and failed. Moreover, the judgement that is to be made by the Secretary of State is a political judgement of all the circumstances in the round. Now, there is a statement for you — almost as full of fudge as a Thornton's shop. Anything that she thinks is in the round will be sufficient. I am not entirely sure if the Secretary of State, in present form, would be capable of distinguishing between a square and a round, but that is a matter for outside observation.

The second point is that Sinn Fein can enter the talks upon declaring a cease-fire that lasts for a six-week period. Let us remember that under the Downing Street declaration there was to be a permanent cessation of violence before Sinn Fein and others like them would be thought fit for the company of democrats. Then, after the Downing Street declaration and the calling of the August 1994 cease-fire, John and Albert both decided that complete meant permanent. Gerry said nothing. The British Government, rather more cynically, said

"Well, after three months we will assume that it is permanent."

Both were wrong in their assumption that complete was the same as permanent. But now what do we have? We have a statement which means this: after a failed and fraudulent cease-fire we are to be required to accept the same sort of cease-fire again, only this time with weaker, rather than stronger, evidence of good faith. After six weeks it will be, presumably, assumed to be permanent.

Sinn Fein want a time-frame. Why? Because they want to be able to go through the negotiations within it. They want a period that is short enough to prevent anything but discussion on how decommissioning will take place. They want to ensure that, in actuality, decommissioning will never take place. Secondly, they want a specified time so short that their active-service units will not become ring-rusty — will not get out of practice — and if a result that suits their objectives and that they can endorse has not been obtained, they will have the weapons of war intact and their active-service units in a state of readiness.

Lest it be thought that here is Robert McCartney, for the United Kingdom Unionists, taking a rather baleful view of all of this, let me point out that in today's 'Independent' David McKittrick — a journalist said to have special skills and a special interest in Northern Ireland affairs, a person who hails from this part of the world — says this:

"Mr Blair's approach has been to examine the stated Republican requirements for talks and, in effect, to agree to each one of them. They wanted guaranteed entry, a brisk timetable and the removal of the decommissioning proviso: they got them. Some fine-tuning of detail may be necessary, but in its essentials the full Republican shopping-list has been granted."

Granted, that is, subject to what the pro-Union representatives do next Tuesday when this proposal to agree to everything on Sinn Fein's shopping-list is brought before the assembled participants in the talks process, because at that stage the decision will have to be made as to whether these proposals are something that the entire pro-Union family can live with.

I was heartened to a great extent by the reaction not only of the DUP and my party but also of the Ulster Unionist Party during the questions after the Prime Minister's statement on Wednesday. One gained the impression from the atmosphere, if not from the specific words, that these proposals would not be acceptable to any of the parties there representing the pro-Union interest.

The position would clearly be this: declaration of a failed cease-fire, a judgement by the Secretary of State in the round, and they are in. Once that cease-fire is called, the talks will be wound up to give Sinn Fein six weeks for the bogus cease-fire. At the end of that six weeks, the Secretary of State will make a judgement that in the round the cease-fire was sufficient, under the terms of the Act, to bring them in, and they will be brought in.

We now come to the issue of decommissioning. It is said that under the Mitchell report — something quite distinct from the Mitchell principles — there will be parallel decommissioning and that, as the talks on the substantive issues proceed, decommissioning will proceed. But, of course, there is a time-scale within that. Are the trains to leave at the same time — the decommissioning train and the talks train? Are they to travel not only in parallel in terms of the distance between the tracks but also in parallel in terms of duration and time? The moment the talks on the substantive issues start, is the decommissioning process going to be started with the handing over of even one weapon? The answer to that is no.

There will be talks about talks. There will be endless discussion on the modalities and mechanisms for decommissioning, but there will be no actual decommissioning. Of course, the shortened time-frame of eight months is designed to permit them to see to that. There is absolutely no question of Sinn Fein's decommissioning anything, and the world knows it, but that appears not to be a consideration that the Prime Minister has got to grips with.

Mr Trimble, the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, posed this question to the Prime Minister:

"When will the first weapon be handed over?"

In effect, it was not answered. There was no answer for Mr Trimble, and there has certainly been no answer to any questions that I or anyone else posed on the matter.

The truth is that what we are now being offered in these two committees is, with a bit of fine-tuning, exactly what was offered in the scenario document of 6 June, which, after widespread protest, was taken off the table by the British and Irish Governments as being unsupportable. It is, in fact, Dick Spring's fourth strand. You shunt decommissioning off into a siding and leave it there. The lads get to examine the whole process, and if, at the end, they do not like it, they are equipped and at a level of training and activity to go right back into action.

If Sinn Fein comes into these talks it will be at the invitation of the Secretary of State, but if it is to be put out for failing to decommission, it will have to be put out by the parties, or at least on the application of the parties. We have had experience of this. It is already on the record that the terms for keeping the Loyalist parties in are such that it would be

impossible to put Sinn Fein out if there were, in fact, a breach of the cease-fire. They would say "We are a political party; we have a mandate. Sinn Fein has no guns, no Semtex, no weapons. We are not responsible for the IRA." Exactly the same arguments were advanced in the talks in relation to certain activities of parties said to be fronting or associating with the terrorist organizations. At the time, I told Sir Patrick Mayhew that the terms upon which those parties were permitted to remain were such that if Sinn Fein were in the talks and a large bomb went off in the lower Shankill, they could not be put out were the same questions posed to it as had been put to the Loyalist parties and the same answers received.

12.15 pm

Sinn Fein have no problem, as Mr Adams has told us, signing up to the Mitchell principles. They have no problem, as Mr Adams has told us, in discussing from now to doomsday the modalities and mechanisms of decommissioning. They are unable to decommission because they have no weapons. If they get into the talks, there is no way they will be put out; and if they do not decommission, it will be left to the Unionist parties to leave, with all the odium and international condemnation which will accompany that. These proposals of the Prime Minister are no different from the proposals that were opposed by all the pro-Union parties at the start of the talks; they are no different from the proposals contained in the scenario document of 6 June 1996; and they are no different from Dick Spring's proposed fourth strand. They were unacceptable then, and the position has now deteriorated.

The murder of L/Bdr Restorick, the shooting in the back of the policewoman in Derry, the callous murder of Constables Graham and Johnston, the various attempts at massive explosions aimed at the military, and the up-to-the-minute attacks on RUC personnel make it important that we have more stringent terms and tougher hurdles for Sinn Fein/IRA. After Sir Patrick Mayhew opened his negotiations with Sinn Fein in 1993, it was denied that these talks were going on, but eventually it emerged that the talks had taken place. The only difference between those talks and the recent talks that the Labour Government engineered is that the Labour Government declared that they were having the talks. However, in nature and content they were just as secret as Sir Patrick Mayhew's. They became public and were affirmed only because of the brutal and barbarous murders in Lurgan on Monday week.

Are we to be left to guess that if those murders had not taken place, these proposals would have been made in a rather less patent way? I am disappointed at such a high-risk policy being engaged in by the Government. There is only one explanation — that the Government believe that Sinn Fein will not come on board in any circumstances. But let us remember this: Sinn Fein have been inflexible in their demands for an end to partition and for self-determination on an all-Ireland basis. They have never, ever departed from those demands. Secondly, they have been inflexible in their declarations that they will not decommission before, during or after negotiations unless those demands are met. But, thirdly, they have been extremely flexible in adapting themselves instantly to the tactics of any given occasion. If they can get into the talks without decommissioning, without declaring a cease-fire to be complete and permanent — without giving any undertakings of any kind — they will utilize such an opportunity.

Let me make a declaration on behalf of the United Kingdom Unionist Party. I cannot see how, if Sinn Fein were admitted on the terms currently proposed, I could, consistent with principle or in honour of the obligations that I owe to those who elected me, remain in the talks. I hope that, given the present terms, that will be the position of every other pro-Union party, and I feel in my heart that it truly is the case.

Mr Trimble: I think it appropriate that we have this opportunity to take note of the Prime Minister's statement. There is no doubt that what he said this week will turn out to be one of the key turning-points in terms of how the process — whatever adjective you attach to that word — develops. However, its exact significance will not become clear for quite some time. It is important that we should analyse it very carefully and tease out its implications, obtaining whatever clarification or changes may be necessary. But also it is very important that we do not rush to judgement on this matter, either today or next week. We will have to see how the situation develops. People may make assumptions about the meaning and significance of various parts, but we should examine this matter very carefully.

I agree with a number of the points made by Mr McCartney, particularly the point about contacts with Sinn Fein that were authorized by the Prime Minister. It is now clear, as the Member has said, that those contacts, rather than being used simply to explain to Sinn Fein the Government's position on the process, evolved into an exchange which came very close to negotiation. That is revealed by the *aide-mémoire* — not just its existence but its actual terms. At the end of the first paragraph on the third page it says

"in response to a further point of apparent concern, the Government has always".

It goes on to state the Government's position, clearly in response to points made to the civil servants in exchanges which, I suspect, went further than being exploratory.

I hope that there will be no more of these contacts. In the statement made in the House of Lords on behalf of the Government, Lord Richard said

"I was asked by the noble Lord, Lord Holme, whether any further meetings would take place with Sinn Fein. The answer is no."

That is a clear and unequivocal statement, but it is not matched by a similarly clear and unequivocal statement from the Northern Ireland Office, whose response to journalists on Wednesday was distinctly ambiguous. That is something which has to be cleared up.

I agree also with Mr McCartney's criticism of the six-week period that is mentioned in the *aide-mémoire*. That is a significant mistake by the Government. It is a mistake which, interestingly, John Major did not make when similar propositions were put to him by Sinn Fein in October and November last year. It is a mistake for this reason: if you specify a period, whatever it happens to be — whether one week, one month, six months, or whatever — in a situation where the important thing is not the passage of time but the quality of the cease-fire, then attention will focus on the time. The notion will be put about that all that has to happen is that the guns remain silent for one week, one month, six months, or whatever. That is what is likely to happen in this context, and it is a mistake.

The Prime Minister tried to recover some of the ground on Wednesday when, in response to a number of questions, he emphasized the correct point — that the crucial thing is the quality of the cease-fire: is it a genuine, permanent ending of violence, or merely another squalid tactical manoeuvre? In response to several questions, the Prime Minister emphasized that the important thing was the quality of the cease-fire, but he undermined that by stating a period. This is a point on which we have to focus attention because it is important. It is crucial that there be a genuine, permanent ending of violence in order to satisfy the requirements set out in the legislation. We must never forget that the legislation under which the talks are held does not just refer to a restoration of the cease-fire of August 1994 but also, in the criteria for issuing invitations to parties, repeats paragraph 10 of the Downing Street declaration. Paragraph 10 states that there must be a commitment to exclusively peaceful means and to the democratic process. I have always thought that that should be an overriding consideration in deciding whether or not a cease-fire is of the necessary quality. It is important that we hammer that point.

It is also important that — to use the phrase that Mr McCartney borrowed from the *aide-mémoire* — we look at the overall political situation “in the round”. There are basically two ways of looking at this statement. First, there is the way in which I think the Prime Minister looks at it: that a last chance is being given to Sinn Féin, and if they fail to take it, the talks will move on rapidly with the democratic parties.

My view, which I expressed on Wednesday and to which I hold, is that it is ridiculous to talk about giving a last chance, particularly in view of what happened after 13 June when the *aide-mémoire* was given to Sinn Féin. They got that document on 13 June, and on 16 June we had a couple of brutal murders. As if that was not enough, we have since had further attacks, including, crucially, one last Wednesday morning, which, fortunately, was foiled by the police. Had it gone ahead, it would have meant the murder of more police officers in west Belfast, on the very morning of the day on which the Prime Minister was to make this statement. Could anything demonstrate more clearly the character of the organization and its intention? It is against that background that the idea of even this one last chance is inappropriate.

But, as I understand it, the reason it has been given is that it has proved impossible otherwise to persuade Mr Hume to commit himself to talks with democratic parties. That is a reflection on Mr Hume, and I hope that there will be no attempt on his part to repeat this. If, as I expect, the process goes through without an appropriate response from Sinn Féin, Mr Hume should commit himself clearly and unequivocally to the democratic process and to talks with the democratic politicians. That, as I judge it, is the object of this exercise.

I said that there were two ways of looking at this statement. The other — and it is obviously the one favoured by some here today — is the way in which some elements in the Irish Government and, indeed, in the Northern Ireland Office look at it. They regard this as an exercise in which the entry requirements are progressively watered down so that Sinn Féin can come into the process without a commitment to peaceful means or to the democratic process and without having actually to decommission any weapons.

That is in the minds of some people concerned, which is why, in my response in the House last Wednesday, I referred to the suspicion that there are elements within both the

British and the Irish Governments that are intent on subverting — this is the essence of what I was saying, although I am using slightly different language now — the whole basis on which the talks process is supposed to stand. The formation of a new Government in the Irish Republic has occurred partly through the support of Sinn Fein in the shape of Mr Kevin Keelan. I offer that piece of information to colleagues who have not yet been able to master the rather curious spelling of that man's name. His real name and the way to pronounce it is Kevin Keelan. That piece of information came to me late last night in 'The Spectator' — and I do not mean the 'County Down Spectator'. I share it so that we may converse intelligibly on the issue.

12.30 pm

The fact that the Irish Republic has a Government which, in order to be elected, obtained the support of Mr Kevin Keelan underlines the concern there must be about how this will work out in practice. As I have said, those two hypotheses underline the situation, and we need to test the circumstances carefully to see how things are going to develop. What is important is that we be clear about the basis on which the process is founded: peaceful means and a democratic process. That inevitably means that the outcome of the process will not be the position which, as Mr McCartney says, Sinn Fein has inflexibly adhered to: the ending of partition. That is very important, and it is for that reason that the Prime Minister, in his statement, emphasized that the outcome will be a United Kingdom outcome, with a devolved institution and some arrangements for North-South dialogue. That is what the outcome will be and what the direction is. We have to be clear about that.

It is also important to emphasize — and here I may part company with some — that the proposals include a commitment to actual decommissioning occurring during talks. The opening sentence reads

"The two Governments are resolutely committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations."

The fact is that there has to be a commitment by all participants, including any who come in at a later stage, actually to implement what is described in the Mitchell report as

"the compromise approach to decommissioning".

This was emphasized three times by the Prime Minister on Wednesday — in reply to me, in reply to Mr Andrew Hunter and in reply to Mr Ken Maginnis. He said on each of those occasions that decommissioning must take place during the negotiations, and there is a mechanism to ensure that all parties will be able to guarantee that the talks will stop if decommissioning does not take place. That is the provision for the review, which is significant.

Now the problem is, as Mr McCartney has said, that the timetable is missing. The objective is stated, but we are not certain that the mechanisms are going to be effective, and there is not a timetable for decommissioning to match the timetable for the talks. It is on these points that we must challenge the British and Irish Governments to satisfy us that the resolute commitment they spell out in their first sentence will be carried into effect during the negotiations. That is the challenge that I issue to them, and I wait for their response.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The hour is grave. We have to judge this document immediately. We have heard before from Ulster Unionist Party leaders that we should look calmly at documents that have been issued in this Anglo-Irish process, such as the Downing Street declaration. The Downing Street declaration set the scene for what is taking place today. All these documents — the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street declaration, the framework document — were setting the scene for what has now come about.

The Prime Minister was unable to answer the two questions that I put to him in the House. I am not alone in saying that. The press, who are no friends of mine, said the same thing, and the television viewers heard my question. They are simple questions. You do not need to rush into judgement. Any self-respecting Unionist can make a decision on these matters. Do we want the IRA/Sinn Féin in the talks on the basis of a cease-fire which proved to be unreal in the past? Will we be content today if Gerry Adams and McGuinness say they will restore the cease-fire? Is that what Unionists want? When Unionists engaged in knocking down the cease-fire, Mr Maginnis said that the IRA were irredeemable. The cease-fire cannot be redeemed. That is not what the people of Northern Ireland want. If there is to be a cease-fire, it must be a cease-fire.

The points that I put to the Prime Minister were simple. First, I asked him why, when he told us he was not negotiating with the IRA, he did negotiate and then gave the IRA exactly what they wanted? What did they want? They wanted the time-frame to be set so that when they brought in their bogus cease-fire for a second time they would be guaranteed entry to the talks very quickly indeed. This *aide-mémoire* is in our hands not because the Prime Minister wanted to put it there or because two men were murdered in Lurgan, but because the IRA demanded that it be published. We have it today because the Prime Minister consented to its publication.

And what does the document say? It makes perfectly clear that the Government have yielded completely to the IRA's demand that the time be very limited indeed. In fact, it does not even guarantee the whole six weeks. If you look carefully at the document, you will see that one thing has to happen: the declaration of another bogus cease-fire. Then the Secretary of State will call a plenary session. Sinn Féin will go through the farce of perjury in signing up to the six Mitchell principles, and after that they will be in the talks. According to our rules the Chairman will then decide whether it is a proper signing-up ceremony. If he decides that it is, they will be in immediately. There may be an adjournment until the end of August, but they will have their office, they will have all the facilities, they will have direct contact with all the Ministers of the two Governments, and they will be in the talks. And in September, when others return, they will be there. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness will be there. And what will they be doing?

I am disgusted with what Mr Ken Maginnis said on radio: "Sure the DUP sits with Sinn Féiners in councils." Of course it does. And if they came to the Forum, I would be here to attack them and debate with them. But I will not sit down to negotiate the future of my province with them. That is the difference. And that is not a rash judgement; it is the judgement of every right-thinking Unionist. We will not negotiate with these men.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister says that he is opening the door for them to keep all their weaponry. I put this point to him:

"If Sinn Fein is to get into the talks under these proposals, it will do so without giving up one weapon or one ounce of Semtex."

Let me wipe the smile off Mr Neeson's face. He may want to negotiate with people who can put a gun to his head and say "If you do not go our way, we will go back to the old paths." No one who is a true democrat would dare to think of ever sitting at a table with armed gangsters — people holding on to all their weaponry — saying "We are going to negotiate your future." Today we are told by Mr Trimble not to be rash in our judgement. Does he really think that the ordinary people of Northern Ireland need him or anyone else to tell them that? The BBC ran around this city trying to get one Unionist in the street to make any comment that would be out of keeping with what I have said here today, and they could not get one. Now, when the BBC cannot get one, there must be a mighty lot of people out there saying no to this document. The only way to defeat it is for all Unionists to say no to it now and to stand together. Otherwise Sinn Fein will be at the table.

Mr McGuinness has said "When we talk to the British Government, we will talk not about decommissioning of IRA arms but about the dismantling of partition." So they are not going to get the IRA arms. It is as simple as that. These are the men at the table, but you must not be rash, of course, in making any judgement. These are the men who are coming into the talks. Mr Adams says "Sinn Fein will not decommission arms as a talks pre-condition." Well, they do not need to do that now. They have won. The British Government have bowed the knee to them, and they have won the battle.

It will take more than parading one little girl from the Shankill Road to bluff the people of Northern Ireland that it was for her and her alone that the Prime Minister was bringing this to Parliament. I am not speaking for one little girl; I am speaking for the tens of thousands of people who have voted for me in election after election and have put me at the top of the poll every time. I say to the Forum today that people out there are not going to wear this. It is time that the Unionists, with one voice, said that it is not acceptable to have another bogus cease-fire. It is not acceptable to say you are going to get these people in to sign up to the Mitchell principles when they have already repudiated the Mitchell principles. It is not acceptable to have them in with their arms outside the door, under the table or on the table. It is not acceptable. Is that a rash judgement? Anyone who makes any other judgement is out of his senses.

Mr McBride: There is no doubt that this is a crucial time in the history of Northern Ireland. In July we will be faced with many challenges and some profound questions. We are all concerned about whether the marches situation can be resolved without confrontation and violence. We ask whether Sinn Fein and the Republican movement are finally ready to cross the Rubicon, enter the democratic process and reject the failed strategy of violence. And we look for an answer to the question of whether we are prepared to resolve our problems by talking or whether we are going to withdraw from that process and leave our future to administration by the British Government.

I want to start by addressing the issue of decommissioning, which is at the heart of this debate. It is, of course, a vital issue. There is one point that we should all be able to agree on — it is helpful to turn to first principles — and that is that we do want to see all illegal arms taken out of society and the gun put away for ever. There are broadly two ways in which that can be done. One is by the actions of the police and the security forces in capturing such weapons and in pursuing those who make use of them. That is the proper approach, and it is continuing — I believe that the Garda Síochána has had some success even today in overturning an IRA training camp. That is right. One wants to see that work going on. But the reality is that in 25 years the security forces have not prevented these organizations from operating and have not succeeded in taking their arms away from them. So, while such operations must go on, we should not fool ourselves that they are likely to solve the problem of illegal arms in the short term.

The alternative is voluntary surrender or destruction of weapons by those who hold them. That would be a difficult process, but it deserves to be tried. It might be difficult for some people to take, but the reality is that to say no to such a process is to say that there is no way of decommissioning at all.

12.45 pm

For the last couple of years we have been engaged in a process intended to bring about a situation in which those organizations can be persuaded to renounce violence and to dispose satisfactorily of the weapons that they hold. After much debate, an international team of experts was brought in to look at the situation and to come up with proposals. That was the Mitchell Commission, whose report outlined a couple of key elements: all organizations should sign up to principles renouncing violence; and they should proceed to work out a mechanism whereby weapons could be decommissioned in parallel with the talks process.

The talks process has begun without Sinn Féin, who have refused to call a cease-fire and adopt the principles. We have debated endlessly the whole issue of how such mechanisms can be created and have examined every realistic option.

In October the Alliance Party made a substantial submission dealing less with the question of entry to talks — which is what most other people seem to be talking about — than with the practicalities of how to decommission weapons. We identified, in particular, the importance of an independent commission which would oversee the process. That job cannot be done by politicians; it has to be handed over to people who will meet with these organizations in the right circumstances and seek to devise satisfactory mechanisms. We considered the independent commission to be extremely important, and we identified some of the steps that are worth talking about. It is not just a matter of people going to a police station and handing in armalites, or whatever. If we are to go down this road — if it is possible to go down this road — there will inevitably be a complex process of establishing communication with such organizations. You must establish the credibility of those with whom you are discussing by verifying the information that they disclose. Agreement must be reached about mechanisms by which weapons can be handed over, disposed of or destroyed.

Those are complex and important mechanisms, and we need responsible people to be involved. We also need recognition that engagement in that process by terrorist organizations

is an important test of their seriousness. We have debated the mechanisms at great length in the talks process — to the extent that they have become a block to everything else and prevented discussion of substantive issues.

The two Governments have now taken the matter forward and have laid down how they see things happening. We should acknowledge that they have a very important role with regard to decommissioning. Illegal weaponry is a law-and-order matter, a matter for which Governments have responsibility. They have to deal with these issues regardless of the talks and regardless of political viewpoints. After nine months of debate they have suggested a way forward for the talks process and decommissioning mechanisms. It is right that we should accept that this is the way forward. Crucially, the Governments have laid down some important timetables. We must move beyond the decommissioning issue and try to set a date for the end of the talks.

The process which created this body will end next May, and the Government are right in saying that we must accomplish something by that stage. It would be tragic if this body and the legal process which brought it about were to come to an end with no conclusions. The Government are quite right to stress that process, but we have come to a crucial turning-point. A last opportunity has been given to Sinn Féin and the Republican movement to cross the Rubicon and come on board. It is an opportunity that they may very well spurn. All the evidence suggests that they do not want to take it. The terrible murders in Lurgan and the bomb in Poleglass, when many of us were in South Africa trying to move things forward, the attack on Wednesday and the attack last night all point to their not being prepared to come on board. However, it is right that the opportunity should be given to them, and a chance created — but it is a last chance.

For many years there was broad political consensus that the only way forward was for agreement to be reached among the democratic parties, that we could not really do anything with the extreme parties. In the last five years the notion that we need a broader process has gained ground. We must have a fully inclusive process, bringing in the likes of Sinn Féin and the IRA. Obviously there would be tremendous merit if that could be done without compromising fundamental principles. We have gone down — *[Interruption]*

Do people want the war to go on? Do they want the killing to go on? Do they want these organizations to continue their campaign? I do not, but I am realistic.

It is right that the effort was made to bring Sinn Féin in, but there will come a point at which one has to say that they have rejected the opportunity they have been given. It is a generous opportunity, and they have been given many last chances. But this is the end of the road, and we need to be very clear about that. However, we want them to come in.

Mr McAllister: Will Mr McBride give way?

Mr McBride: No.

We want the violence to stop. We will bring them in if they are prepared to act as democrats. But if they are not, we must acknowledge that they have rejected the opportunity and are not interested. All the evidence at this point suggests that they are not interested. But

whether or not they come in, the burden on the rest of us to prove that there is a political way forward is great. If these talks crash — and they could in the next few weeks, over Sinn Fein's entry and related issues — the only beneficiaries will be those who reject democratic policies.

We are at a turning-point where we have a chance to show that democratic politicians can move forward, solve problems and start to work out something that is acceptable to the great majority of the people of Northern Ireland. It is absolutely vital that we take that chance. Failure to do so will be a disaster for this province. If Sinn Fein and the Republican movement are not prepared to reject violence, if they reject the will for peace in this entire community, that will be a monstrous crime against all the people of Ireland. However, it will be an act of unforgivable folly and political stupidity if the Unionist parties are not prepared to move forward and work at this initiative.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Will Mr McBride give way?

Mr McBride: No. The Member has nothing to tell me.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: But Sinn Fein have.

Mr McBride: I have been listening to Mr Paisley here for months, and no doubt we will have the benefit of his comments later.

It will be an act of unforgivable folly if we — *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: Please let the Member finish quietly.

Mr McBride: It will be an act of unforgivable folly if we do not take the opportunity that the Prime Minister has created, if we do not move forward and show that there is a way of solving this problem politically.

The meeting was suspended at 12.56 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.

Ms McWilliams: There are a couple of issues that I would like to raise before coming to the crux of the motion. It is our understanding that various motions can come up at the Forum from time to time, and we have no wish to stifle debate. It is, however, of some concern to us that when certain discussions are scheduled for the multi-party talks in plenary session, they should be pre-empted by motions tabled here.

The Chairman: Yes, I accept that, and was concerned about it yesterday. Thank you for mentioning it again.

Ms McWilliams: We are glad that you were concerned about it yesterday, and we would like it noted for the record that we have some concerns.

Secondly, given your stated concern, we wonder why you used your casting vote yesterday as you did, as four parties were obviously opposed to having this discussion today.

Finally, there was obviously a lack of clarification about whether this matter was to be handled as a motion or as a take-note discussion. I certainly do not want to see a precedent set that is not covered by the guidance in the Rules. If the Rules are being interpreted in different ways, they ought to be amended. If not, and if you, Mr Chairman, and the Secretariat are very clear about it, we ought to have some guidance on them. It was in that context that we supported the decision to take this as a motion. I did not want it to be thought that we were happy that such a motion should come before the Forum today, but it is important to get it right, according to the Rules, and that is why we agreed.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I would be perplexed if the Forum representatives of the people of Northern Ireland could not discuss a matter that had been discussed in the United Kingdom Parliament. Surely if something has been discussed in Parliament it is in the open. Everybody has a copy of this *aide-mémoire*. In fact, it was published in the Nationalist press the day before it was even presented to Members of Parliament. It would be very serious if just because the talks people have not decided to have a debate on this matter, we were not allowed to debate it. There are people here who are not at the talks. This is the only place where they can say anything. They are entitled, therefore, to have their say in the Forum.

The Chairman: I am absolutely in agreement. I, more than anybody, have perhaps allowed a bit of an excursion into the murkier parts of the Rules — not that we were going against the Rules, but some of them are open to interpretation. I learned today that this is not such a good idea. We will have to consider how to operate in future. Indeed I will do so.

Ms McWilliams: I repeat that we are not interested in stifling debate. However, the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 clearly states

“the Forum shall not have any ... power to determine the conduct, course or outcome of the negotiations”.

We feel that if such motions are taken here before there has been a thorough discussion at the multi-party talks, they could indeed undermine the potential for dialogue between Nationalists and Unionists. We do not want to stifle debate. A discussion in the House of Commons is one thing, but it concerns me that this is setting a precedent.

I will now turn my attention to the motion. We welcome the initiatives taken by the British and Irish Governments to move the peace process forward. It is our belief that that is exactly what they are trying to do. We have now been stuck on item 2 of the agenda for the better part of nine months. That cannot go on. The Coalition particularly welcomes the statement made by Mr Blair in the House of Commons this week. We welcome his clear commitment to the people of Northern Ireland and his recognition of the need to achieve an acceptable settlement of our political turmoil. Who can have failed to be moved — though some seem to have failed — by the words of young Margaret Gibney, who said that she has had only one year of peace in her life? She meant it in all sincerity, and Mr Blair, the Prime Minister, took it in all sincerity. He is concerned about more than just the words of that young woman — he is concerned about all the young people in this troubled province.

There is a pressing need for all of us to take some risks — and risks are hard. This goes not only for the parties that are represented in the Forum but also for those that have chosen not to attend, and even for those that are not elected. Peace-building must encompass as many interests and groups and individuals as possible. And we are beginning to see a move among many people outside the Forum, including business leaders, church leaders and others, who are begging us to take that step.

The Women's Coalition also accepts that the international body which was established in 1995 and chaired by Senator Mitchell was a genuine innovation — an innovation because we had got stuck so many times before on the issue of decommissioning. That body had the task of addressing the decommissioning issue, and its report concluded (paragraph 26) that the paramilitary organizations should not have to decommission any arms prior to all-party negotiations and that the decommissioning issue is a symptom of a larger problem — the absence of trust (paragraph 14). The body felt that we would not have this problem if we had trust, so, in the absence of trust, it suggested parallel decommissioning. Significantly, Senator Mitchell's report devoted a section to confidence-building measures. It recommended (paragraph 38) that the decommissioning process be supported by such measures. We therefore welcome the two sub-committees on these issues.

The Coalition believes that the international body adopted a realistic stance with the objective of working to achieve peace in Northern Ireland. The reality is that we are not dealing with defeated forces. How are politicians ever going to defeat them? That is a military matter. We are not dealing with defeated forces on any side of the equation of violence in Northern Ireland; we are dealing with effective guerrilla movements that have the capacity either to continue violence or to resort to violence. The two Governments, reflecting the opinion of the international body, have recognized that voluntary and mutual decommissioning can be achieved only in the context of progress in comprehensive and inclusive political negotiations. We believe that we all have a responsibility to work in a positive manner to try to achieve this.

Over the last year we have listened with attention to those parties which have said — and we believe them — that they are working in all sincerity and with good grounds and that it is thorny and difficult, if not impossible, to do business with those who have a gun in one hand and a ballot-box in the other. We accept this apprehension and the fears of those who say that if weapons are not put away, any agreement emerging from the multi-party talks could be blasted away by a renewed outbreak of hostilities. But, equally, even in the hypothetical situation of decommissioning being achieved in the morning — and I more than anyone would love that to be the case — we know that more weapons could be acquired in the event of substantial political discontent. That is the reality of the situation. What we need to do is concentrate on moulding and putting in place the building blocks of political accommodation — and I suggest that they are building blocks. We cannot allow any one enormous block to stop us. All these things are building blocks, and we hope that they will all fall into place together.

We share the two Governments' view that decommissioning, if it is to be genuine, must be a voluntary initiative carried out because there is a new sense of trust in the political system governing this divided society. In essence, it is a priority — a priority — to place the need for decommissioning in our mind-sets (mind-sets that give rise to violence) rather than

indulge in the politics of blame or wishful thinking. All of us see change as a threat. But it does not have to be that way. Our fear of change has gone on and on and on — the threat of change rather than the hope of change.

The reality remains that without political progress, decommissioning, from whatever quarter, will remain wishful thinking. The antipathy to decommissioning is reflected not only in Republican and Loyalist history in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but also in international situations where there is consistent evidence of political negotiations with armed groups prior to the achievement of decommissioning.

There are examples in South Africa, the Middle East, Spain, Algeria and Corsica. As Ralph Meyers and Cyril Ramaphosa told us in Belfast, and again in South Africa a number of weekends ago, had decommissioning become an enormous block, they would never have got to where they are today. They did not let it become a stumbling block; they moved on, and decommissioning eventually happened. We heard from General Masondo, formerly MK and now in the South African defence force, and from the general who represented the South African defence force when they were having these discussions that they had been set the task of resolving the military problem. Politicians were set the task of solving the political problem, and when the political negotiations came, decommissioning fell into place.

The Women's Coalition feels that if peace and political compromise are ever to become a reality in Northern Ireland, we have to leave the realm of unilateral demands behind and engage in *realpolitik* that puts the emphasis on commitment to dialogue with each other and, most importantly, dialogue on an inclusive basis. If, however, it is not to be on an inclusive basis, that will not mean that we cannot go on. We want to move this thing forward. If people decide not to come in, they may stay out, but we must move.

We demand an IRA cease-fire and maintenance of the Loyalist cease-fire on the grounds of basic human rights; we call for a weapon-free Northern Ireland as far as is politically and humanely possible; but most of all, we call for a genuine political process, with substantive negotiations and confidence-building measures, in order to win the peaceful and equitable future that we hope for and aspire to.

We continue to support the recommendations of the international body's report, and we welcome the paper produced by the British and Irish Governments to take these recommendations forward. Like the Prime Minister, we call for an unequivocal IRA cease-fire to enable Sinn Féin to enter the peace talks on the same basis as all the other parties around that table. They have a 17% mandate. We cannot wipe that away.

This is the path to genuine, voluntary decommissioning. If we are ever to have the chance of devising a peaceful and stable society for our children, we must take risks for peace. We should acknowledge that there are few people in this society who have not contributed to the politics of hatred, mistrust and division, by word, by deliberate misrepresentation, by encouragement or by actions. All of this has resulted in the culture of violence which we are attempting to redress in the current political talks at Castle Buildings.

2.15 pm

The Chairman: Your conclusion was a little longer than I had expected, but it was all very eloquent.

Mr Hugh Smyth: As usual, I will be very brief.

The Chairman: I have experienced this very often.

Mr Hugh Smyth: According to your time, Mr Chairman, I am going to have to be very brief.

I agree with Mr Trimble: there are people who, as usual, have dived in with two feet. There was nothing very different in what Mr Blair said from what was on offer 18 months ago. Had the IRA cease-fire not broken down, Sinn Féin would have been quite entitled to be invited to the talks table and to accept the invitation. Of course, they would have had to sign up to the Mitchell principles. But there is no real difference between that situation and what Mr Blair has put on offer today.

Unlike a few people, I believe that Mr Blair had to make the offer. While I agree that Dr Ian Paisley speaks for quite a lot of people in Northern Ireland — and proves that at every European election — I remind him that the 12-year-old child whom he referred to, and who comes from my area of the Shankill, also speaks for many people in Northern Ireland when she points out that she has known peace for only one year of her life. I repeatedly hear the same thing in the area that I represent, which has a 75% unemployment rate. Young lads come in crying, looking for employment — lads who have never had a job. Some kids actually leave school, get married and have kids, without knowing what it is like to be employed. Those kids ask me the same question: “Hughie, what was it like before the troubles?”

I do not want to live in that kind of society. That is why Mr Blair was absolutely right to make the offer. He has just become Prime Minister, and he has done nothing more than Mr Major did. He had to make the offer because he is now Prime Minister. Equally, I am convinced by a lot of other things in his speech, which have not been mentioned here. What impressed me — I will mention a few things — was that he made it quite clear that this was the last chance. It was the first chance that he had given — *[Interruption]*

I sat very patiently and listened to every other Member who spoke. Perhaps these people will allow me the same courtesy.

Let us remind ourselves what Mr Blair said: this is the last chance. I believe him. There are people here who I wish would get up and be honest. I wish they would stand up and say “No matter what Sinn Féin does, it will not get to the talks.” That is what they mean.

Several Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hugh Smyth: There is the proof.

If the Provisional IRA were to come here today and fill this building with all the guns and bombs that they have, there would be people saying "Aye, but they have more." That is the reality, but they will not face up to it. They are scared of Sinn Fein. They are scared to sit down and negotiate with them. I can say that if Sinn Fein come to those talks, I will sit down and negotiate with them. I will sit down and negotiate as a Unionist, and I will finish a Unionist. I have said that before. Some of these people do not have confidence in themselves. Well, I have confidence to fight my case — my Unionist case — with anyone. I do not care what part of Ireland he is from. My Unionist case is one that cannot be defeated.

Another thing that Mr Blair said — not once, but about seven times — is that any settlement must have the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. I have said in the Forum many times that people are continually using the decommissioning angle to keep the Provisional IRA out. There is no way I want them at the talks, so the first thing I want Mr Mitchell to do is put a motion to the talks team about the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. I am convinced that once that happens, Sinn Fein will not be at the talks, that it will do what it did in Dublin. It was quite happy to sit with the talks team in Dublin for approximately 18 months, but when the final question was posed — when the question of consent was introduced — it left.

Mr Gregory Campbell: With regard to his argument about the consent principle and Sinn Fein's running away from it, does the Member agree that when Sinn Fein was brought to that point at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin it refused to accept the consent principle and that seven days later Canary Wharf was bombed?

Mr Hugh Smyth: Of course I accept that. Unfortunately, the same thing could happen again. But I am saying that Mr Blair had to make the overture. He had to give this opportunity. People say that Mr Major gave Sinn Fein the opportunity — indeed, that the opportunity has always been there. That is a good argument. Mr Blair was never before able, as Prime Minister, to give the opportunity, but he has done so now.

During his speech — the part that I was listening to — Mr McCartney said that Mr Blair may well have made the offer confident that IRA/Sinn Fein will not accept the invitation. But the other important point that Mr Blair made was that if they fail to take up the invitation, we will not wait for them but will move on. That is what we should be doing.

I hope that Mr Trimble's proposal — that we somehow pigeon-hole decommissioning until it becomes important again — will be accepted and that come September, if they have refused the invitation, we will get on with the job of trying to find a way forward, a political accommodation for those people who are left — the SDLP and the various other parties. Surely it is not beyond our capabilities to find a political settlement that would satisfy the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic. Surely there is already evidence, from 1973, that many people — though not all — would accept a devolved administration. There are people on these Benches who do not want a devolved administration for Northern Ireland. They do not want Assembly Members clicking at the heels of Westminster MPs, and the MPs looking over their shoulders. They do not want that. But they will have to be honest with their party Leaders.

There may well come a time when all of us who believe in a devolved administration for Northern Ireland will have to stand together and fight for it. I believe that it is on offer. Mr Blair has made it quite clear that he intends to have devolved administrations in both Scotland and Wales. That is on offer here — he has made the overtures — and it could happen quite quickly.

Mr King: Does the Member agree that devolution is not being offered to Northern Ireland on the same terms as to Scotland and Wales, or for the same reason? Scottish and Welsh people in the United Kingdom are being offered devolution to bring democracy closer to them; we are being offered devolution to remove us from the United Kingdom.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I do not mind the interruptions now and again, but I do not like these clever questions. However, the Member is absolutely right: devolution is not being offered for the right reason. But it is being offered. We who believe in a devolved administration — and I know that many who hold high positions in the DUP firmly believe in it, and have done since 1978, 1979 and 1980, when we sat down and my party introduced the notion of sharing responsibility — must surely be able to come up with such an arrangement. With or without Sinn Féin, we must find a way forward — one which will end the violence.

I do not want you, Mr Chairman, to be showing the photograph of another nine-year-old or seven-year-old boy walking behind his father's coffin next week. I come from an area that has experienced more deaths at the hands of the IRA than any other area I know. I have walked behind more coffins and have visited more prisons than anybody else in this Forum. I do not want to walk behind coffins. I do not want to be visiting young boys in prison who got involved when they were 17 years old, maybe having listened to speeches made by some of us. Those boys are in prison, and nobody gives a damn about them. But we should care about them. I want to see an end to kids going to prison. I want to see an end to broken families, families who have been left without a father or a mother. We have an opportunity to end the sadness, and those who fail to take it will not be judged very kindly by history.

Mr Nesbitt: Dr Paisley's first comment was that the hour is grave. Every Unionist in the Forum today will concur with that. Unionism is under pressure more than ever. I rarely use the word, but I have to say that over the past few days Protestantism, as well as Unionism, has been under pressure. We feel beleaguered for various reasons. So it is a grave hour.

Dr Paisley's second comment was that a decision about this document must be reached immediately.

I see that Ms McWilliams is about to leave. I was going to refer to her thoughts on decommissioning.

We as Unionists all know, of course, that people could hand in some arms and then buy more the next day — they are not short of money. But the handing over of arms is not an irrelevancy. It would be an outward sign of commitment to pursuing a settlement by exclusively peaceful means. But it would demonstrate more than that: it would demonstrate

that the IRA were, in a way, saying that the game was up because they were actually handing in arms. So decommissioning is significant.

But then I look at some of the Prime Minister's words. He said that the Mitchell principles include

"the total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations."

That is different from what we heard on 'Counterpoint' last night. A gentleman in the back row said "There are several military operations here — the Army, the police and the IRA", disgracefully putting them all on an equal footing. The Prime Minister used the word "paramilitary". He also said that there would be no question of trading guns for political development and that decommissioning must take place during the negotiations. I look at those statements, and then I remember what Mr McCartney said after seeing Mr Major for the first time as Prime Minister. He said that he had always found Labour and those in a Labour Government to have more integrity than those in a Conservative Government, and that history would show this.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes.

Mr McCartney: When you give way, you sit down.

Mr Nesbitt: I thought that the Member was going to be brief.

2.30 pm

Mr McCartney: There is a difference between a person of integrity being wrong and a breach of integrity. I have never suggested that Mr Blair is lacking in integrity, but I am suggesting that his political judgement on this issue is wrong — two very different concepts.

Mr Nesbitt: I note that point. But we are dealing with a man who states that he has integrity. I agree with Mr McCartney with regard to his being a man of integrity. Mr Blair, I believe, needs to be tested as to his integrity with respect to Northern Ireland. He has not been tested. I was referring to some of the wording in this document. A little time is needed for the words to be tested. That is why I think that there should be no immediate judgement on the document.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mr Blair gave a public commitment that his civil servants would not discuss a cease-fire. Let the Member read it. When he produced the results of the discussions, it was clear that they had not only discussed the cease-fire but also discussed how it could be ended and the time that would test the ending of it. They also discussed decommissioning and said "You can get in with your guns." Mr Blair's integrity has been tested. I said in the House of Commons that I believed him when he said that they would not discuss a cease-fire, but I cannot believe him now. I challenged him on that question, and he had no answer.

Mr Nesbitt: I accept what the Member says, but it might be said that by allowing his officials to speak to Sinn Fein, Mr Blair was clarifying the position and indicating to them how the situation might go. So at this stage I am not prepared to judge him and say that he completely lacks integrity. A little more time is needed.

The present situation does put pressure on Sinn Fein. A time has been set for completion of the talks, as for the start of the talks and for the declaration of a cease-fire. Let us see how Sinn Fein respond to that pressure.

Of course, as the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party said this morning there are also deficiencies which need to be teased out a little. Yes, the hour is grave, but it is not yet time to make a decision. With regard to what Mr Hugh Smyth said, the Ulster Unionist Party's commitment to and belief in the Union and in the restoration of a true democratic system in Northern Ireland also remain to be tested. But we have the arguments and the game plan. In a sense, we have the proper position, and that too will need to be tested in due course. Although the hour is grave, this is not the time to make a move.

Mr Peter Robinson: First, I want to deal more with the concept than with the detail. Many Members have already dealt with the detail.

But let me take up the issue that Mr Nesbitt has touched upon — the integrity of the Prime Minister. When we look back on this particular initiative, the most worrying aspect will be the damage that it has done to the integrity of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister gave a very clear and public indication of what his officials would be doing when they met with representatives of Sinn Fein. He said — and we were to believe him — that the purpose of the meetings was simply to clarify the Government's position so that there would be no misunderstanding. That was the purpose. But it is not clarification if you develop your proposals and bring forward new proposals — proposals which were never in the public domain, nor indeed in the private domain of the talks process, before this *aide-mémoire* was published.

Here is a proposal that the Prime Minister support the entry of Sinn Fein into the process immediately they call a further phoney cease-fire, and in six weeks' time they will be allowed into plenary sessions. That is the proposal which was developed for their entry. Further proposals were developed for decommissioning and for the time-scale for the process as a whole. Those were all developments of the Government's position. The proposals were expanded, and there were new initiatives. What was happening was not clarification, nor was it ever intended to be clarification. So the integrity of the Prime Minister is damaged. He has damaged it himself by the action that has been taken.

The sad fact is that here we have a Prime Minister who made this offer to the IRA three days before they shot dead two police constables in Lurgan. He is prepared, even now, to give them a further chance. We talk about last chances. How many statements do we have to have from one Prime Minister after the other, from one Secretary of State after the other, that this is their last chance? We have heard it over and over again. They had a last chance after Canary Wharf; they had a last chance after Manchester; they had a last chance after Thiepval Barracks; they had a last chance when a sniper shot down a young soldier standing at a check-point; they had a last chance after they shot a policewoman in the back. Now they

are getting another last chance. How many last chances are they supposed to have? I do not believe that this is the last chance. The Prime Minister says that the train is moving off. I guarantee that the train will be put in reverse to pick them up if they want to get on at any stage. Make no mistake about it: this is not the last chance. Nobody believes that, and the Prime Minister need not simply repeat what we have heard so often in the past.

So far as the 12-year-old is concerned, like Ms McWilliams I have no doubt about the sincerity of that young girl — no doubt at all. She is innocent and naïve. I have three children. One of them is twice the age of that girl, and he has had no more years of peace than she. There are children up and down this country who have not had one more week of peace than she. Last night I was speaking to a councillor of 30 years of age, who has never had one moment's peace. I do not believe that there was a year's peace in between at all; there was a year of preparation for more war. Certainly in my household there was no indication that peace was on the way. We were still looking under the car for bombs.

Using the naïve and the innocent to justify yielding to the machiavellian and the evil was disgraceful, and it illustrates the whole basis of the Prime Minister's policy. And the whole basis of his policy is that we must get peace — peace is the ultimate. There was no indication in his speech that he was not talking about peace at any price. The whole paragraph that deals with the subject is about the need for peace — peace, when there is no peace. The real danger is that as soon as people get it into their heads that peace is the priority, it ceases to matter what principles are set to the side to achieve that goal. Peace is the pearl that we all must reach out for. That is not the direction in which this province should be looking.

Are we to say to all those who have been prepared to give their lives over these years that their sacrifice meant nothing? We could have surrendered 20 years ago and they would have had their peace. That is what would have happened. If peace is the ultimate prize, we might as well have surrendered long ago. But peace is not the ultimate prize. The ultimate prize for any civilized people is freedom and liberty, and if you give that away, you give everything away. Simply to give in, step by step, to the gunmen and the bombers is to mount up, day by day, more problems for the future.

That is what we are being asked to do by the Prime Minister in this latest sell-out. It is trite to say it again, but true nonetheless — just as we are told that we cannot say no all the time. I wish to goodness they would give us a question that we could say yes to. But everything that they are asking deserves a negative response. The reality, so far as this province is concerned, is that we are set on a course where the Provisional IRA are entitled, according to the two Governments, to do no more than they did the last time: call a tactical cessation of violence, just like the one which, 17 months afterwards, the then Prime Minister recognized to be phoney. They are required to do no more than before, and the next day — not even the next day, but later the same day — they can go through the gates of Castle Buildings, take up residence in their offices, and have meetings with Ministers, meetings with the Chairmen and bilateral meetings with other parties — and I am sure there are other parties who will be prepared to have bilateral meetings with them. They can do all that immediately. Then, in six weeks, they will be entitled to be in plenary meetings as well.

How could anybody assess the bona fides of any cessation of violence in that period? It is impossible, as was indicated, I think, by Mr Trimble. The actual time during which the test will take place having been stated, these people need only be sent to the Bahamas for six weeks. When they come back, they will have passed the test and can start their preparations all over again. But they will be inside, and, as Mr McCartney said, we can be absolutely sure that once they are in we will never prize them out. The question, therefore, to those who support a pro-Union position is this: "Are you prepared to get into the gutter with the IRA?" Are they prepared to do it? That is the question.

I do not believe that the IRA are sincere and genuine about wanting to be part of a peace process. I do not believe, moreover, that they are capable of being part of the democratic process. I do not believe that their structure, their organization or their personnel could ever make that adaptation. Believing as I do is what allowed me to get through 17 months when other people were trying to marginalize us, isolate us and tell us "This is genuine. This is real. We feel it in our stomachs that this is real." We were told all of that, and we were told that we should be grasping this opportunity and taking risks for peace. But I did not believe that it was genuine. If I believe that something is not genuine, why would I put myself in the position of pretending that it is? Why should I fool myself and the electorate into believing that this is, indeed, a genuine process?

Some people say that the Prime Minister is not really sincere, that he is simply going through this exercise in order that the IRA will be shown to be outside the political and democratic process and that nobody can be blamed if they are left behind. I do not believe that for one minute, and I certainly do not believe that that was the position of the Dublin Government when they too signed up to this package. Why would the IRA not be in? They made demands. They said that they wanted one, two and three, and they have got one, two and three. Why would they not proceed on that basis?

2.45 pm

There is only one thing stopping them from declaring a cease-fire today — only one thing — and that is that this document has not got through the talks process yet. That is the only thing. If it gets through the talks process, the IRA will be in. So if there are any Unionists who think that they will be clever and say "Let us appear to be nice. Let us appear to be forward-looking. Let us appear to be willing to reach out to others. Let us give it our blessing and we will call the IRA's bluff.", I can tell them that the IRA will be calling their bluff before too long.

Rev William McCrea: I remember the day the Westminster election votes were counted. I remember well standing in the school in Omagh, eyeball to eyeball with Sinn Fein. I heard one of the IRA/Sinn Fein workers — one of their supporters and leading members — saying "Cease-fire or no cease-fire, we will get you, McCrea." That is the reality at the heart of IRA/Sinn Fein. They are murderers in their hearts, and they will always be murderers in their hearts, because they believe that that is the only thing that Governments have listened to. And they have every reason to believe it because it has been proved over and over and over again. It is not the authority of their speeches or their ability to argue why we should move in a particular direction that brought about the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the framework document or even the Downing Street declaration; it is simply the power of their

guns and the power of their bombs. That is the reason the British Government have crawled to them time and time again.

Ms McWilliams states that we are not dealing with defeated forces, that they are effective guerrilla forces. Let me remind her that so far as my constituency is concerned, the only reason the IRA is not a defeated force is that the Government have never taken it on and defeated it. It is not as if it could not be defeated. IRA heroes? No hero shoots a woman in the back on the streets of Londonderry. No hero plants a bomb behind a hedge and then watches a person being blown to pieces, as happened to two young people outside Cookstown. No, those people are not heroes, and they are not worthy to be called an army. There is no Irish Republican Army. If they want to be an army, let them come out and face the forces of the Crown. Then we will see exactly who has the power and the ability to fight the battle.

We have listened to Mr Blair's speech and to the speeches of others. In reality, they have been searching around for words — words to try to outwit and play a little game with Sinn Féin/IRA; words that somehow suggest that we are not in a battle, that we are not in the fray to fight for our existence and for democracy as it ought to be fought for in the United Kingdom and the free world. No, we are playing a little game now. We will use some weasel words; we will stoop to the gutter to find some weasel words like IRA/Sinn Féin themselves. Somehow, we will outmanoeuvre them; somehow, we will outwit them; somehow, we will enter into the competition of Jesuitry; and somehow we will be able to leave them on the side. Have we all forgotten the reality? So far as the media are concerned, these people are masters of propaganda. They have gone through every school to fool the people worldwide. But they are not fooling people out of decency and honour and democracy. Who do we think is being fooled?

Some of the people who made speeches today do not, in their hearts, believe a word of what they were saying. In truth, they have been trying to ride two horses. In truth, they have tried to fool. At the end of their speeches we do not really know what they have been saying. Where do they stand on Mr Blair's speech? Let me remind Members of what he said:

"The whole House will join me in condemning that pointless and cowardly crime."

Unfortunately, the Government have not learned that it is not a pointless crime so far as the IRA is concerned. There is no pointless or mindless violence in its heart. It has a clear purpose in mind. It knew exactly what it was doing. It had the paper — the *aide-mémoire* from the Government — and immediately after getting it, it had the Government crawling and giving it everything it wanted. Then it shot two young policemen — one serving in Cookstown, and the other in Magherafelt. It shot them down like dogs. That is not mindless violence.

When Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister she said that she could not allow the violence to continue. She therefore entered into the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But for the IRA, more violence means more concessions. It has every reason to believe that, for it has had 20 — no, 30 — years of it. There has been a succession of gutless Governments that have taken words — decent and honourable words — and cut them asunder. They have twisted words to try to get out of commitments made to the people of Northern Ireland. And as for playing a game,

let me say this: Westminster has been playing a game with the Ulster Unionists for years. They have moved us around the chess-board. They have taken advantage of our dignity and our respect for democracy. And what are we told? We are told that we must be willing to go in and face Sinn Fein.

I have known Mr Hugh Smyth personally for many years, and I want to tell him straight that I am not afraid of Sinn Fein thugs any day. I have lived all my life with these murdering scum in my constituency.

Mr Hugh Smyth: So have I.

Rev William McCrea: Yes, and I am not afraid of them either. Let no one ever suggest that the DUP is afraid of any thug. We have faced them on many occasions, and I have also said in the councils that I am not afraid of them.

On one hand Mr Hugh Smyth says that he wants them in the talks, and on the other he says that once the issue of consent is put to them they will go out of the talks. So he wants them in to get them out?

Mr Hugh Smyth: Will the Member give way?

Rev William McCrea: No.

I do not want Sinn Fein in the talks, because I do not believe one word it says about the cease-fire. It tells us today that what we need is a restoration of the cease-fire. What is a cease-fire? People cease firing. They cease at this moment. But that is not a renunciation of violence. It is not a condemnation of or a turning-away from and a repenting for the way it has walked. I do not want a restoration of the failed, tactical, fraudulent cease-fire of 1994. I want to see an end to the murders once and for all, and the only way to achieve that is to withdraw the weapons of murder from the hands of those who are willing to destroy the people of Northern Ireland.

I heard Mr Ken Maginnis on the radio yesterday morning saying that we will have to humble ourselves and let these people into the talks. To a democrat, that would not be humbling himself. I am happy to listen to anyone. I am most willing to listen to a democratic debate even though I may have differences of opinion. When a debate has been powerful, and a speech persuasive, I have been willing to listen, and many times I have changed my mind on a particular issue. But we are not talking about democrats. I am not humbling myself before the murderers of my people. To this day they have murder in their hearts.

Others told us "This is the real McCoy. We have peace." Did we have peace for a year? Let me relate what went on in my constituency. This was the peace that we were told we had for a year: we had the rearming of the Provos; we had the regrouping of the Provos; we had the training of their volunteers; we had what was called the blooding of them, as they engaged in certain acts; we had the targeting; we had the intimidation; and we had the threats. And during that year people were moving out. The Loyalists had to move out of Republican

areas, as those areas were once again ethnically cleansed. That is what we call the year of peace.

Well, let me say to everyone that that is not the kind of peace that I want. That is not what I call peace. Mr Robinson is right. I long for freedom and liberty for all the people of Northern Ireland and an honest and genuine peace. But you cannot have democracy in one hand and the bomb and the bullet in the other. In a democracy such approaches do not go hand in hand.

The Chairman: We look forward to Mr McCartney's summing-up. As it is now 2.56 and we have another debate to complete within the hour, perhaps he will be quick.

Mr McCartney: I am certainly not guaranteeing to sum up in four minutes, if that is what you are implying, Mr Chairman.

We have had a large number of very useful contributions, nearly all of them striking a very similar note.

So far as Mr Nesbitt's contribution is concerned, I was not quite sure why he wanted to wait a while or give this a bit of time. It rather suggested a statement attributed to St Augustine:

"God make me good, but not yet awhile."

I should like to take up a point adverted to by Mr McCrea — that the IRA can, indeed, be defeated if there is a political will. But people fail to address the basic issue that, as Clausewitz said,

"War is politics by other means."

If the politics of the British Government and the Foreign Office are ultimately to disengage from Northern Ireland, they cannot really — if they are to succeed — commit their security arm to putting down totally and comprehensively those who, in a curious way, would effect that policy for them. This is one of the paradoxes of having a Government with a political policy that is counter-productive to a full-blooded security direction for the security forces. So I share Mr McCrea's view that if Northern Ireland were truly considered to be part of the United Kingdom — if its citizens were truly regarded as being as British as Margaret Thatcher's electors in Finchley, or John Major's in Huntingdon — we would not have had the Anglo-Irish Agreement or the last chances that are offered with nauseating regularity to terrorist groupings.

Let us also consider a theme that has run through several of the speeches — the theme that this train, this unspecified train, should be put in transit even without Sinn Féin. Such suggestions fail to understand or appreciate the real facts at issue. The whole peace process was based upon a very simple premise — namely, that Sinn Féin, in return for a cease-fire, would obtain a united Ireland by instalments.

The Downing Street declaration was as near as the British Government could go to meeting the requirement that partition would be ended, and the framework proposals were a declaration of the mechanisms whereby that united Ireland by instalments would be achieved. In return for this, the pro-Union majority were to receive what was called a peace dividend — an objective glorified by both those interested in profit and those who would deem themselves prophets: the great and the good, the captains of industry and some of our religious leaders. All of them told the Unionist people that they would get a peace dividend. And, as for the propaganda merchants, they were at it full bore: “Daddy, wouldn’t it be lovely if it were like this all the time?” We got a heavy dose of schmaltz to egg the pudding. All of this was on the basis of an IRA cease-fire, on the basis that the real objective was conflict resolution, not democratic settlement.

3.00 pm

We have this curious situation where Sinn Fein/IRA, because they are bad boys, are to be left outside the process. This means they can continue to do what they have been doing for the last 27 years, and if the security response is anything like what it has been to date, they will continue.

What are the pro-Union majority supposed to get on this train journey? I will tell you what they are getting. They are getting what the Prime Minister emphasized in his statement at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society show: a renewed commitment to the Downing Street declaration and the framework proposals. If you continue on this train you are going to a destination where there will be no peace dividend because the IRA and Sinn Fein will continue to do what they are doing. However, you will be expected to make the same concessions under the same terms of negotiation as were present when the IRA were to stop and you were to get a peace dividend. The first set of proposals was unacceptable. To continue on this train without any peace dividend would be totally absurd, yet that is what some are suggesting. On British Rail, if someone says that a train is leaving, even the most cretinous passenger tends to ask “Where is it going?” But no one as yet, to my knowledge, has said specifically where this train minus Sinn Fein is going and what price you have to pay to be on it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is going to be blown up by the IRA.

Mr McCartney: That is a possibility.

Let me look at this suggestion that Mr Blair is a man of integrity. I do not doubt his integrity as a person and as a human being, but I really have a crisis of conscience when I am asked to ply my intelligence and logic to see if the policies that he advocates can actually square with the integrity which he asks us to accept. It is one of those situations where you say

“I believe; help thou mine unbelief”,

because there is such a paradox. People also say, and Mr Hugh Smyth argues, that what we want is a wee devolved government for this place of ours. Carson did not want a devolved government. A devolved government was, he said, the badge of difference. But it had some

advantages: it provided accessibility of government, it provided a degree of local sensitivity, and it afforded some other benefits. There is no doubt about that, but its objective —

Mr Nesbitt: Will Mr McCartney give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I am not giving way. Mr Chairman, I get this from Mr Nesbitt. He deliberately interferes at a crucial point in my train of thought.

What we do get, and what we are getting in this case, is a suggestion that we can have devolution, but at an unacceptable price. Devolution is there not to provide more sensitive or accessible government but as a vehicle of transition to take the people of Northern Ireland from here into the Republic. That is what the devolution aspect of the framework document proposes. That is exactly what it is going to do. I do not know where the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party or anyone else is going to take us. *[Interruption]*

Let me make it quite clear to Mr Nesbitt that I am not giving way at all. I really do object to this. I have indicated quite plainly to the Member that I am not giving way.

The Chairman: I must say that that is beginning to come through to me too.

Mr McCartney: The trouble is that the Member adopts the pose of a praying mantis, which it is almost impossible to ignore.

But let me return to the theme.

The Chairman: I am sure that Mr Nesbitt will allow you to finish your speech.

Mr McCartney: It would have been finished long since but for these interruptions. This is a very serious matter that we are talking about. We are talking about life and death, and what is being said deserves attention on that basis.

The truth is, as Mr McCrea and Mr Robinson said, that there has been an attempt to enter into the area of emotional blackmail with the production of the letter of the 12-year-old child, written in all sincerity but with a degree of naïvety. Over the past 30 years I have had to deal with many cases involving the victims of terrorist outrages and compensation claims. I have talked not only to children who have known only a year of peace but to children who have not known any peace and who have lost several limbs. I have talked to many parents who have lost their children entirely, so really I am not altogether affected by the PR pathos — if I can use that term — that is being injected into this to give a false sense of balance to the real issues. It does no one any good to rely on this sort of schmaltz.

I move on to a point made by Dr Paisley about judging the document immediately. We are told that we are not to judge the document immediately. How else would we judge it? We are not asked to judge discussions upon the document — it is presented as a *fait accompli*. It is presented as the best judgement of the two Governments on what we ought to do. It is not presented as a document that is open to discussion. It may be considered, but there is no suggestion that it is open to variation. It is rather like an Order in Council: you can refuse it or you can accept it, but you are not in the business of amending

it. So I agree with what Dr Paisley has said: we must judge it now because that is the way in which it is offered. I really do fail to understand the suggestion that we must not judge the document immediately.

Let me turn to some remarks made by the absent Ms McWilliams and her suggestion that everybody in South Africa says not to bother about decommissioning but to get on with the business of settling the political matters. Almost everyone concerned with the settlement in South Africa says that they made a fundamental error. People ranging from Mr de Klerk to General Viljoen all say that they should have been much more stringent in applying a decommissioning schedule, because their country is now awash with arms and the level of violence has reached new heights. It was a mistake, according to those gentlemen, not to proceed with a vigorous policy of decommissioning.

This morning I read Mr McKittrick's article. He says that everything on Sinn Fein's shopping list has been popped into their basket by the generous and kind Mr Blair, who is astounded that they have not treated him with the good faith and openness that he has shown them. It is not an association of Girl Guides that he has been having these dealings with; it is one of the most deadly, barbaric and foul organizations ever to have walked this earth, and for him to be astounded is surprising.

I want to finish by reading from an editorial in another broadsheet, so that way we may get a different perspective from that of 'The Independent', which is perhaps on one side of the spectrum. This is from Thursday's 'Daily Telegraph':

"It might have been supposed that terrorist atrocities proved the need for setting even more rigorous conditions for Sinn Fein/IRA entry into talks. Instead, this time, the Government is actually making it easier for them to join the ranks of the respectable constitutional parties. After the 1994 cease-fire they had to prove their *bona fides* for three months; now, they get in after a mere six weeks, if the Ulster Secretary certifies that they have been good boyos. If they have the wit to hold their fire during that period they will be in the talks, perhaps for good."

Mr Robinson is absolutely right: once they declare a cease-fire they will be into Castle Buildings, into bi-laterals, talking to the senator and his two companions, and talking to the Governments. After six weeks they will be admitted to the plenary. They will be straight in after an unproven cease-fire. The editorial continues

"If they are bad boyos, then Sinn Fein can simply cite the precedent of the small parties associated with the Loyalist paramilitaries, who have been allowed to stay in for reasons of state. In these cases, neither the Irish nor the British Governments have been noticeably rigorous in upholding the Mitchell principles of non-violence."

And here is the finale:

"Take a step back for a moment, and think about what is going on here: a populous, economically successful state — with the best army, police and intelligence services in Europe — is undergoing limitless contortions in order to bring a bunch of untrustworthy fanatics into the political process. Instead of upholding the rule of law in its own sovereign territory, it is prepared to hand responsibility for collecting illegally held weapons to an amorphous international body, from which no terrorist will have much to fear."

The truth is that these proposals cannot conceivably be acceptable to anyone who believes in the Union. These are proposals that must have the effect of uniting all brands of Unionism in one solid body. We cannot prevent the Secretary of State from inviting them in, but we have this control: there cannot be all-party talks without all parties. There cannot be all-party talks unless the representatives of the majority are present, and we can make it perfectly clear to the Government — as a united Unionist family — that these proposals are not acceptable to any of us. United, as Carson said, we stand, but if we divide on this issue, we will deserve to fall.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

The Forum notes the statement about political development talks made by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons on 25 June 1997.

WHITEABBEY HOSPITAL

The Chairman: Mr Hugh Smyth, Chairman of the Health Committee, wants to make a short statement on a health matter which is of particular concern to the people of Whiteabbey. Do Members agree to his doing so?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McCartney: I have other business, so I cannot stay for the Member's speech.

Mr Hugh Smyth: It is not a speech. It will be over by the time Mr McCartney gets out of the door.

I am very grateful for the chance to speak about Whiteabbey Hospital. Following Mr Neeson's request two weeks ago, the Health Committee lost no time in visiting the hospital. The Northern Health and Social Services Board is reviewing all the provision in its area, including Whiteabbey, and we understand that it will be many months before a decision is taken.

We recognize the great value of Whiteabbey Hospital to the community it serves, and we seek to ensure that the decision-makers will take this on board. I can only report that we believe there to be no immediate threat to Whiteabbey, but the Forum may be assured that my Committee will watch developments closely and seek opportunities to consult and to act in the best interests of all the people.

3.15 pm

Rev William McCrea: In noting what Mr Hugh Smyth has said, I ask the Health Committee to remember that, also in the Northern Board area, there is a question mark hanging over the Mid Ulster Hospital. I ask the Committee to visit that hospital and consider the matters that are relevant. There is certainly a lot of apprehension, a lot of concern, and I too would appreciate that help.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I assure the Member that we will be doing that.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr Peter Robinson: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum takes note of the speech delivered by Lord Dubs, the Minister with responsibility for local government in Northern Ireland, during the SOLACE conference at Belfast's Waterfront Hall on Tuesday 17 June 1997, in which he indicated an intention to explore areas of local government that could be developed, modified and improved.

As I am sure Members know, "SOLACE" stands for "Society of Local Authority Chief Executives".

The Waterfront Hall speech by Lord Dubs, as it was reported in the local papers, will have left many people with the impression that this Government is about to reform local government in Northern Ireland and give significant and important powers to local authorities. However, if one were to labour — and that is not a pun — through the speech's 37 pages, one would be left scratching one's head to determine what additional powers local government was going to get, for the structures that are suggested would actually take powers away from elected representatives.

The whole thrust of the speech is towards more involvement with partnerships, community representatives, trade union representatives, business representatives and statutory representatives who work in conjunction with elected representatives at council level. Of course, examples of economic development partnerships, the peace and reconciliation partnerships and some of the civic partnerships are put forward as evidence that these really work and that this is the way to move forward. So the whole basis of the speech is to consider more powers in the context that this is the way we should be moving. But it seems to me to be a way of removing responsibility that should belong solely to elected representatives, of ensuring that responsibility is shared with people who are not elected, who are, in many cases, self-appointed and, in most cases, unrepresentative.

There are some indications that there are to be changes in local government — changes that will have a dramatic effect if they are made in Northern Ireland. For instance, we are told that in Great Britain new Labour is looking at the possibility of having directly elected mayors. The people would elect the mayor, and the mayor would have executive authority — very American in style, you might say, Mr Chairman, if you were listening.

The other suggestion is that there should be a continuous electoral process under which a third or a quarter of councillors would be up for election every year. Those of us who have gone through two elections this year may not cherish the prospect of being certain of a council election every year of our lives, but that is another proposal being considered by the new Labour Administration. They indicate that, so far as powers are concerned, they are looking at areas such as health, housing and planning to see what changes there should be in the councils' consultative, representative and executive roles.

Many of us have long argued — though nobody has got down to close definition — that there is a very strong case for giving more power to local government. Those of us who are in local government recognize that there are areas that could be dealt with more effectively and efficiently at local level than through the quangos or the Departments that

currently hold those responsibilities. Indeed, if the good lord — the one in the House of Lords, not the one on high — wanted to improve local government in Northern Ireland by removing a whole swathe of quangos and passing the responsibility that has been exercised by them into the hands of locally elected representatives, that would be a very good thing indeed, and very welcome.

The other issue that is raised in Lord Dubs's speech is the matter of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). He has indicated that he will delay — not stop; just delay — the closing date for CCT for leisure services, and so on, until November. But then, with a sting in the tail, he indicates that the Government are considering introducing a duty of best value — something they have been playing about with in Great Britain. Anybody I have spoken to about the effect that that would have on local government tells me that under a best-value regime we will be praying for a return to the days when we had CCT. Best value will require you to have best value not just at certain levels but everywhere. You will be market-testing every service and provision that you have — whether it is how you do the wages in the finance department or how you do certain things in administration or environmental health. Everything will have to be best value. We are going to have to look very closely at what best value means to the new Government because it could be very onerous indeed in terms of freedom for local-government decision-making.

I am glad to see that CCT is at an end. However, I believe in competitive tendering because it is the responsibility of councillors to ensure that they are getting the best value for the ratepayers' money. But CCT has often given rise to additional costs. In many cases where work has gone out to the private sector we have later found that we could have done it cheaper ourselves. People can come in with a tender that is below the in-house bid, but then you get bills for work that was not taken into account. I am, therefore, quite happy to see the compulsory element dropped, but councils should still be competitive in terms of the services that they provide.

As time is very limited, I have touched on just a few of the issues in the Minister's speech. The Minister must have a very full programme of consultation with councils in Northern Ireland, the various parties that have local-government representatives and bodies that represent councillors, as well as those that represent staff and the chief executives. It is vital that we should not simply, for the sake of doing something new, walk into arrangements that would create more problems for us.

A great debt of gratitude is owed to local-authority representatives in Northern Ireland. They get very little thanks — very little indeed. They are often derided, and their roles and responsibilities are downplayed. In many cases we even do it ourselves. We talk about councillors as if they have responsibility only for opening the parks, burying the dead and collecting the bins. Very significantly, they have more power and influence than is often thought, and where they attempt to use it, they can do so very successfully. They have performed a vital function at a time of massive democratic deficit in Northern Ireland.

So, let us make sure that we get it right for them, rather than simply put further pressures and burdens on them by making changes that cannot be implemented for the betterment of the people.

The Chairman: I think you meant November 1998 in your reference to the extension of CCT? You did say November, but it is next year.

Mr Peter Robinson: I did not put a year on it.

The Chairman: I believe that the intention is next year.

Mr Davis: Mr Robinson has briefly outlined what Lord Dubs had to say. I would like to dwell, at a more personal level, on the frustrations of a local councillor.

It is well known that for the past 24 years Northern Ireland has had quasi or sham local government, with truncated executive powers. Aldermen and councillors have endeavoured to relay to the ratepayers and electors key administrative decisions and policies made by faceless bureaucrats that affect the daily lives of ordinary people.

Those of us in local government have experienced the public's sense of frustration with the system. Naturally, people look to their district or borough council for redress when public services fail to satisfy or to operate properly. The frustration is transferred to the district councillor, who finds his executive functions unfulfilling, his representative functions futile, and his consultative role absolutely maddening. Well might we councillors complain, in childlike and impotent anger, that we are the unable, led in control by the unknowing, doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much for so long with so little that we are now qualified to do anything with nothing, and nothing with anything.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the sense of impotence and frustration among councillors should have found expression in a call for restructuring of the present system and for the return of more functions to local government. It is not unreasonable that men and women who seek to serve their fellow citizens in the councils of the province should wish to use their talents in fields beyond their present functions — the three Rs (rates, recreation and rubbish) or, as the local wits in Lisburn often put it, emptying the bins and burying the dead — essential though those services are.

In the context of this debate, it is neither surprising nor unreasonable that the Forum should endeavour to convince the Government and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that the time is long overdue for serious consideration to be given to the return of some, if not all, public-service functions to local government.

The undue influence of central government and its agencies in local government is detrimental to the liberty of the citizen. As J L Motley said a century ago,

“Local self-government is the life-blood of liberty.”

The great historian Macaulay also testified many years ago that nothing is so galling to a people as a paternal, meddling government which tells them what to read and say and eat and drink and wear. And we could add some things to that list: what to plan, when to fill in pot-holes, where to live, when to repair footpaths, and so on.

There is bound to be frustration when no Northern Ireland politician can expect to run anything more important than swimming pools or refuse collections. There are, of course, risks in anything we do, but there are just as many risks in doing nothing. But what is to be done with a system of local government which experience has shown to be undemocratic, uneconomic, insensitive, inefficient and bureaucratic? The sensible thing — and Mr Robinson has referred to it — would be for Lord Dubs to enter into talks with all the district councils throughout the province.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party welcomes the Government's commitment to a comprehensive political settlement, as stated on page 8 of Lord Dubs's speech. The current talks and the Forum are most important, and I hope that they can bring about such a settlement.

We note that the Minister talked about directly elected mayors in England. But things here are different. In a divided society such as Northern Ireland we must bring democratic parties together to share responsibility, and not give power to a single individual who cannot or does not represent all sections of the community.

We welcome the commitment to consulting elected councillors on a wide range of matters. Councillors are close to the people, and until an Assembly is set up we will have a very important role in representing the community to Ministers in all Departments.

3.30 pm

We would welcome the planning advisory body, provided that it was broadly based to represent all interests. Lord Dubs gave a warning on the need for mayors and chairmen of councils to be representative of the whole district. We regret that in the past some have not been, although many have sought to reach across the community divide. Whether councils get more powers will depend on how fairly they are seen to use those that they have. The sooner all local councils are seen to be fair and to be sharing civic posts and responsibilities among all elected people, the sooner we in the Alliance Party will give wholehearted support to the return of more powers to local councils.

Mr Shannon: The signing, at the beginning of June, of the European Charter of Local Self-Government — something rejected by the Conservatives over the last 12 years — is indicative of a new approach. It is a welcome vote of confidence in the value of local authorities. Its importance is that it requires decisions to be taken at the lowest practicable level of government and implies freedom for councils in the exercise of their functions, as opposed to the ever-increasing central control that has been a feature of recent Governments.

This new attitude was evident in a number of important announcements made on Tuesday of last week by Lord Dubs, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister for the Environment, when he addressed the Society of Local Government Chief Executives. The first initiative he announced was the possibility of legislation to give local councils in Northern Ireland "a power of general competence" to do what they consider is appropriate in the interests of their district and its people. If this materializes, it will represent a major relaxation of central control.

At present we in local government can only spend money on things which we are specifically empowered to spend it on. What is proposed would permit councils to spend money on anything they considered to be in the interests of the ratepayers or the district in general, with the exception of those things which they are specifically prevented by legislation from doing. Obviously, there will be some constraints. For example, I understand that councils will not be permitted to spend money on something which is a function of any other public body.

We therefore await with interest the detail of the proposal, which, I believe, will soon be finalized. Will it mean that councils, for instance, are free to raise money for economic development — free from the present constraints on the amount which can be raised and the need for departmental approval for all proposed action?

The second strand of Lord Dubs's package is his intention to proceed with the establishment of a planning advisory body. This is a matter on which there was consultation before the general election. The purpose of the new body is to give elected members a say in and therefore ownership of, broad planning policy. This is also to be welcomed. For too long, planning policy has been dictated by civil servants, who are not answerable to the electorate. Some parts of this policy have been greatly disliked by elected representatives. No one wants a free-for-all with uncontrolled development, but at least now the people, through their elected representatives, will be able to influence and, indeed, decide policy.

Much remains to be revealed. For instance, how will candidates for the relatively small number of places available on such a body be selected? May I suggest that it be a cross-party body with, perhaps, two representatives for each policy area.

Lord Dubs also confirmed that in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) will be replaced, as soon as is practicable, with the concept of best value. We have yet to see how this will develop in practice. It is clear that economy, efficiency and effectiveness will be required from local government, and this may well extend to services not previously subject to CCT — at least not in Northern Ireland. Best value will be a duty, and, as I understand it, if a council is not achieving best value based on set criteria, competitive tendering may still have to be an option.

The welcome aspect of the new regime will be the ability to avoid the expense and disruption of the tendering process where services can be demonstrated to be providing best value. Great care will be required, however, in drawing up the methods which will be introduced to measure best value, to ensure that the difference that demographic spread and scale make to the ability of councils to achieve lowest costs, allied to satisfactory delivery of services, is taken into account.

In the case of Northern Ireland, Lord Dubs announced that the current timetable, which requires contracts under CCT for leisure services and construction and maintenance work to be in place for 1 April 1998, will be relaxed and a new date — 1 November 1998 — substituted. He stated that this was to enable him to take on board any proposals to modify the current CCT regime and to allow time to see how proposals for best value in Great Britain

shape up. This is another very welcome development and must be taken as an indication that action will be taken, if possible, to substitute the best-value option for CCT for these services.

Hilary Armstrong, the new United Kingdom Minister for Local Government, emphasized that a priority for the Government will be increasing consultation at local level between councils, the business community and other statutory interests when councils are taking major expenditure decisions. This may change the way in which councils go about some of their business. The concept of consultation is good, but we must ensure that the final decisions are taken by those who are answerable to the electorate. For instance, the model used in the special support programme for peace and reconciliation may be appropriate for that programme. But it would not be suitable where councils are raising the money through rates, because as minority partners they do not have the final say in the projects being supported. If councils are to be answerable to the electorate for the way in which public money is spent, it is essential that they continue to have the final say on such expenditure.

In conclusion, I should like to outline a number of points concerning these proposals. First, we welcome the Government's new approach to local government. Secondly, we await with anticipation the introduction of a power of general competence for local government. Thirdly, we accept the proposal for a planning advisory body as an interim measure until such time as local government can be given full planning powers. Fourthly, we commend the Government on the proposed replacement of CCT with the concept of best value, and Lord Dubs on his relaxation of the timetable for leisure services and construction and maintenance work, but we ask that great care be taken in drawing up the methods of measuring best value. Fifthly, while commending the principle of wider consultation in decision-making, we draw attention to the need to leave the final decision on expenditure with those who are answerable to the public for raising the finances.

I support the motion.

Mr Robert John White: Mr Shannon has put in a nutshell what Lord Dubs would do, if he were to do anything. He is going to explore, develop, modify and improve, but my fear is that he will do nothing — that this is all just window-dressing. It is odd that he should have made his remarks to the organization that is in charge of local government, SOLACE. He was certainly buttering them up. He probably felt he had to, but it is questionable. Mr Shannon hit the nail on the head when he outlined the five things Lord Dubs ought to do if he is serious about this. If he is going to do what is needed, I certainly welcome his approach. If this is only a diversionary tactic, there would not be a lot of point in expending energy on it.

I have a suspicion that the aim of a number of the parties that are not here — the SDLP in particular — is to divert attention from this and, indeed, to prevent local government from returning to the way it used to be.

I am one of those who were around in the pre-1973 days, when things were real. People stood at the door of the town hall as you came out, ready to rip you to pieces if they did not get a house. The housing scene was put right and is now run very well. However, a body which covers all of Northern Ireland — and I am sure someone will disagree with me — is not appropriate because the housing needs in Coleraine are very different from those on the Shankill. To start with, the population is very much more concentrated. Planning cannot

be applied across the province. It has to suit the particular area. If there are more people, you need more water, and you certainly need a bigger sewerage system to take it away.

Pre-1973, local people had almost complete authority to make decisions about public health, roads, and so on, as well as the minutiae of local government. But 1973 came and, unfortunately, went. After that we buried the dead. Someone said that we should not take our functions too flippantly. Local government does many things, but mostly we have been left to dig the graves, bury the dead and empty the bins, with a wee bit of tourism to pass the time if we get bored. That, in essence, is what we do. Mr Peter Robinson mentioned the power and influence that councillors have. That is an attribute, but sometimes we do not use it successfully, or use it enough.

The Government, and particularly the Civil Service, need not get too hysterical about what councillors might do. Councillors actually managed the province extremely well pre-1973. When the ability to say where a plan should be for, what it should be for or how something had to be built rested totally with the elected councils, they did take a serious attitude. No one who was on a local council at that time will disagree with me.

Councillors can take a flippant, non-serious attitude to a question when asked if they agree with what a planner is proposing. We all shout for the neighbour, for the person who has lobbied. If we are unsuccessful, we can go home and say "Well, I tried, but it was the planners." If we are successful, we may tell the voter "I sorted out the planners." If we are unsuccessful, we can hide behind the reality, which is that we have no authority in planning.

Tell me if we are not all guilty of it. We know perfectly well that we are. We get the accusation now and again — *[Interruption]* If someone has a conscience about it, that is his problem. On occasion, whispers go abroad: "The planners will do this for you if...". I am not going to say what the "if" is, but there can be a problem when you have 22 councillors or 100 councillors — or whatever Belfast has (they sound like 100). Mr Sammy Wilson has left, so I can say what I like about him. If you have a given number of councillors making a decision, and if there is any chance of a number of them being got at — be that number small or large — you have a much greater problem convincing 20 or 30 than you have changing the minds of two out of three planners.

3.45 pm

I am being very serious when I say that in any group of sensible people in this province, the majority will arrive at the right conclusion. In my own council area, when planners did not have the authority to make decisions, they came to the council with a recommendation, and the councillors could do what they liked with it. I can think of only three specific cases in my six years before 1973 in which mistakes were probably made because we did not take the planners' advice. The function was taken as seriously as that. The Government, the Civil Service and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Office would have very little to fear — in fact, nothing to fear — were they to satisfy the local people by giving them some control over their future, and that could be done by handing back to them some of the things that belong with local government.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Mr White thought I had gone away. I was just sitting silently and appalled by his admission that he actually blamed the planners when things went against his constituent, but took the credit when things went in favour of his constituent. It never crossed my mind that any councillor would do that. In fact, it almost takes away from the argument that I wanted to make: that more power should be given to councillors. Such a discredited bunch of people would hardly warrant the extra responsibilities that we want for them.

I want to make a couple of general comments about Lord Dubs's speech. First of all, Lord Dubs recognizes that there is a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it does not take anyone to be too well genned up to recognize that. However, there is a mistaken belief — in fact, sometimes we as public representatives in Northern Ireland fall into the trap — that, somehow or other, if we wait long enough, the opportunity will arrive for us to address Northern Ireland's democratic deficit at a regional level and then solve these problems. This is the kind of simplistic point made by the likes of Mr Hugh Smyth, who is sure that if we all were to sit down together, we could somehow or other, magically and overnight, reach an agreement — one which would return devolved structures to Northern Ireland and give us that democratic accountability.

The same thinking comes through in this document where the Minister talks about looking at the overall settlement. I do not believe that the overall settlement, or the regional settlement that we were talking about earlier will come about that easily. Therefore, what we should be doing immediately is looking at how we can address the problem at local level, at council level.

The second point I want to make is that you can easily tell that this speech was written by a civil servant, and not just because, as Mr Peter Robinson pointed out, there are 37 pages containing little of any substance. In a comment on page 7, Lord Dubs recognizes that there is a democratic deficit. But he points to the role played by the public service in Northern Ireland, not least by those involved in local government — and I assume he is talking about civil servants — and to how that has helped to compensate in some ways for the deficit. I wonder whether he is talking about those bureaucrats about whom this body has spoken so often — those who have closed hospitals and then found that that was a mistake, or who have closed schools, or recommended their closure, and then found that that was a mistake. Or is he referring to the officials of Making Belfast Work who have been hauled over the coals by the Public Accounts Committee for giving out moneys without a great deal of care?

I do not believe — and this is not the arrogance of an elected representative — that it is good for any society to have public servants, however well-intentioned, however well involved locally and locally drawn, taking decisions without the degree of public scrutiny that only a body of elected people can bring to bear upon them. This is another reason for looking at the role of local government.

What can be done immediately to address the problem? Lord Dubs has mentioned a number of issues. He has mentioned the role of planning. We have had the paper on changes to planning administration in Northern Ireland. I am not attracted to the idea of another advisory body where civil servants can listen to advice and promptly ignore it. I am even less attracted to the idea of an advisory body which, it is suggested, be made up, rather like

another quango, of some public representatives but mostly of those with other planning interests, such as conservationists and architects. This takes me back to Peter Robinson's point: it appears that the Government are prepared to look at all kinds of avenues which dilute, rather than enhance, the role of local councillors.

Nevertheless, there is a role for councils to play in both strategic planning and local planning. I find it very objectionable to sit on the planning committee of a council which has unanimously opposed a particularly sensitive development — and it is quite clear, even from listening to the planning officer, that the arguments are finely balanced — but whose views are ignored. The planning officer comes back and says that in his professional opinion the development should go ahead, ignoring the view of 100% of the people on the council.

It would be very easy to move local planning back to the councils. I have found no evidence that the councils would abuse their function. Indeed, given the legal position, with judicial reviews, planning appeals and the awards sometimes made when appeals are upheld, councillors would find themselves under some restraint. They would be very unlikely to make such flippant decisions as were referred to by Mr White. There is a role for councillors to play at a strategic planning level as well. That issue has been discussed in the Forum before. Such an arrangement would require co-operation between councils, but it could be introduced without all those other elements.

Economic development is another issue for which councils could be given more responsibility immediately. We already have the ability to spend money, but it cannot be spent, for example, on acquiring land and developing it, or on making it available for other people to develop. That could be one of the best ways for councils to promote economic development in their areas. There are economic-development issues that could be made the responsibility of local councils, enhancing their role.

Lord Dubs talks about having wider public representation on public bodies. That is something which could be achieved immediately. He said that it was

“our intention to achieve greater representation of councillors on public bodies and to ensure that these appointments fully represent the wide political spectrum.”

I wonder what he is getting at? I wonder about his intentions. Is he saying that to ensure that the people on these public bodies represent the kind of mix that the Government want, he is going to take away some of the ability of councils to make those appointments and give the Minister a more active role? It would be a retrograde step to give more responsibility, or more places, to councillors and at the same time enable the Minister to select those to be appointed to public bodies. That would lessen local democracy.

I must address a point made by Mr McCarthy. He said that the Alliance Party would judge how local councils used their responsibilities before agreeing that more responsibilities be given back to them. Then he outlined his criterion. It was not that local councils should show that they had made efficient use of resources; it was not that local councils should show that they had done a good job on behalf of the ratepayers; it was not that local councils had demonstrated that they could undertake, and see through, initiatives. It was purely that local councils should, somehow or other, involve everybody, irrespective of whether involvement

was merited. I must say that is a very strange criterion. If you want to judge whether or not people should have responsibility, you ought to look at the way in which they exercise responsibility. Can they actually deliver what they have set out to deliver? Maybe this shows the shallowness of the Alliance Party's thinking.

In the longer term, if we are going to have a bigger and greater role for local councils — and that is the immediate route to redressing the democratic deficit — we will have to look for more radical surgery on local government. We know that, for many of the bigger responsibilities, some of the separate units are perhaps too small to achieve the economies of scale.

If the Government are to go down that route, we may have to take a wider look at how local government is organized and run in the province. But if this is a real commitment, it will be welcomed as one way of immediately redressing the democratic deficit. Secondly, there are things, which councils have made known to Ministers in the past, that could be done immediately to give a greater role. Thirdly, in the longer term, all vital services currently controlled by quangos must somehow be returned to the control of locally elected representatives. These powers must not remain in the hands of people who are unaccountable.

The Chairman: It is coming up to 4 o'clock, and we have five more people to speak and then the summing-up. Shall we roll this over to next week?

It was so decided.

The debate stood adjourned until 4 July 1997.

The Chairman: It has been an interesting day. Let us keep our fingers crossed for the next 10 days.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.59 pm.