

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 10 October 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.04 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EUROPEAN UNION: PEACE AND RECONCILIATION FUND

The Chairman: I received a letter from M Jacques Santer yesterday which I am sure Members will be very pleased about. I sent a copy to every Member. It is in response to a letter which I sent to him in July following the debate on the European Union Peace and Reconciliation Fund.

Members will be delighted to see that he is putting forward a proposal to the Council of Ministers and to the European Parliament that 100 million ECU — about £70 million — be allocated to the programme in 1998. Credit should be given to those in the Forum who suggested that we write to M Santer, and I congratulate them on that.

Mr Empey: May I just say one thing about Mr Santer's letter. We would like to express our appreciation for the fastidious way in which Northern Ireland's Members of the European Parliament have pursued this matter. It is appropriate that that should be recorded.

FORUM: CHRISTMAS RECESS

The Chairman: I know that it is a bit early, but I am sure most people will want to make arrangements for the Christmas period. On behalf of the Business Committee, which discussed this yesterday, I recommend to the Forum that we adjourn on Friday 12 December 1997 and reconvene on Friday 9 January 1998. May I take it that you are all content with that?

Members indicated assent.

**FORUM:
STANDING COMMITTEE A (POLITICAL AFFAIRS)**

Motion made and Question proposed:

This Forum appoints the following Members to comprise Standing Committee A (Political Affairs): Mr Ken Maginnis, MP, Mr Robert Coulter, Mr Sam Gardiner, Mr Robert Stoker, Mr Nigel Dodds, Mrs Iris Robinson, Mr Jack McKee, Mr Mervyn Carrick, Lord Alderdice, Mr Steve McBride, Mr Malachi Curran, Ms Monica McWilliams, Mr Hugh Smyth and Mr Gary McMichael. — *[The Chairman]*

The Chairman: I should explain that the names of those who have been nominated by the smaller parties to represent them and who are not Forum Members do not appear in the motion since under Rule 14(4)(a) they cannot be members of a Committee. Of course, such representatives can take part in the meetings subject to the provisions of Rule 14(4)(a).

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum appoints the following Members to comprise Standing Committee A (Political Affairs): Mr Ken Maginnis, MP, Mr Robert Coulter, Mr Sam Gardiner, Mr Robert Stoker, Mr Nigel Dodds, Mrs Iris Robinson, Mr Jack McKee, Mr Mervyn Carrick, Lord Alderdice, Mr Steve McBride, Mr Malachi Curran, Ms Monica McWilliams, Mr Hugh Smyth and Mr Gary McMichael. — *[The Chairman]*

The first meeting of the Political Affairs Committee will be at 1.00 pm on Thursday 16 October in Room 50, at which time a Chairperson will be elected.

**HOSPITALS:
FORUM COMMITTEE VISITS**

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

The Health Committee has wasted no time in responding to Mr Shannon's request to visit the Ulster Hospital. The Committee visited this hospital on Wednesday, and Mr Shannon was, of course, invited to attend. We are now well acquainted with the problems facing the Ulster Hospital, and we were most impressed with the efforts being made by the hospital's staff and management. This was in spite of the lack of resources required to meet the needs of the community which it serves.

The Committee also met the Minister earlier this week and impressed upon him not only its concerns about the hospitals but its concerns about many of the other problems facing the Health Service. We were pleasantly surprised by his knowledge. We hope that the meeting will be the first of many and that it is the beginning of a better understanding at the top of the province's health needs.

Mrs Parkes: I had the privilege of leading the delegation to meet the Health Minister on Monday of this week. It was a very interesting meeting, and the Minister had obviously been very well briefed on the Committee's report.

We raised issues such as the amount of money that is being spent on administration, the length of waiting lists, cancer services and quite a few of the other matters that were raised in the report. We also raised the forthcoming changes to the Health Service. Needless to say, he could not give us any real answers to those questions, but we did impress upon him the need for consultation and discussion. However, he seemed to be interested in the report and said that it had come at an opportune time.

We also mentioned other issues which Members have brought to the Committee's attention such as the South Tyrone Hospital, Whiteabbey Hospital and the Mid-Ulster Hospital. However, we did not really receive any satisfactory answers to those questions; the Minister simply referred us back to the boards on those. However, it was worthwhile, and I want to thank my Colleagues who came with me and Mr Arnold who was also there.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Committee for its very prompt action in going to the Ulster Hospital, which is an issue that people in the area are very concerned about. The Vice-Chairperson took the opportunity to ask Mr Ferguson a number of important questions, and although he may not have given the answers which we wanted to hear, the meeting certainly aired matters that concern the people in the Newtownards and Strangford areas.

I know that the issues discussed were very close to the heart of the Committee, and I hope that Mr Ferguson will take them on board. Accident-and-emergency services, maternity services and the population drift towards that area were highlighted on Wednesday, and we thank the Committee for taking the opportunity to do something about them.

Mr Morrow: I want to acknowledge the fact that the Committee visited the South Tyrone Hospital at the request of the Forum. I was not present when this matter was raised in the Forum last Friday, but I want to comment on their visit. I trust that when the Committee met the Minister they impressed upon him the importance of retaining the South Tyrone Hospital as an acute-services hospital. I appreciate their coming to the South Tyrone, and I look forward to a different outcome than that which I think the Government have in mind for it.

Rev William McCrea: When Mr Morrow asked that the South Tyrone Hospital be looked into, he was informed about the visit and invited along. I am delighted that Mr Shannon was also asked by the Committee to visit the Ulster Hospital with them. But I am rather disappointed that when it came to the Mid-Ulster Hospital, which I raised in the Forum, I was not invited along.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Mr Chairman, may I respond to that? It was certainly not intentional, and as Chairman of the Health Committee I apologize most sincerely to Mr McCrea. He can be assured that it must have been a complete slip-up as it has been the Committee's policy to invite along those Members who request such visits. I take responsibility for this and apologize. I can assure the Forum that this will not happen again. A Member who requests such a visit will be invited to come along with us.

The Chairman: Is that acceptable, Mr McCrea?

Rev William McCrea: Yes.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT: WORKING GROUPS

The Chairman: Now we have a motion on local government. At the Forum's request I wrote to Lord Dubs and invited him to attend. He has sent an apologetic letter saying that, unfortunately, he really could not come today. He was not, by any means, refusing the invitation out of hand.

Mr Foster: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum regrets that the Government have continued to exclude elected representatives from working groups set up to consider changes in local government in Northern Ireland.

In supporting this motion I will refer to the general lack of democracy in this province — there is, indeed, a negation of democracy in Northern Ireland which undoubtedly worries all. It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt who said

"Democracy alone of all forms of government enlists the full force of men's enlightened will. It is the most humane, the most advanced and, in the end, the most unconquerable of all forms of human society. The democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase of human history — it is human history."

Those are not just Sam Foster's words; they are words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and I am sure that we all agree with his sentiments.

Indeed, that is the aspiration of all Northern Ireland's citizens, yet, for so many years, we have had a democratic deficit. In these past years successive Governments have denied us real democracy. In fact, instead of talking about a democratic deficit, it might be better to say that in general democracy has been denied to us in Northern Ireland. Her Majesty's Government's evasion of this has led to second-class citizenship in the province when we are entitled to first-class citizenship — just as in any other region of the United Kingdom.

Democracy is predicated on the idea that ordinary men and women are capable of governing themselves. Yet we in Northern Ireland are not allowed to do that. Democratically elected political parties on the mainland have indeed, over the years, negated democracy when they have got into power. So we in this part of the United Kingdom have suffered intensely. We have suffered greatly from quangoization. They think that this is democratic: choosing people who have not been elected by the people — what a contradiction that is. I am sure that we all, as elected representatives, find that most offensive.

At no time do I doubt the sincerity or the ability of such nominees, but if they are to accept the power which comes with these decision-making bodies, should they not put their names before the electorate and become representatives of the people? It was Abraham Lincoln who said

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy."

It expresses mine also.

We think of the composition of the health boards, the health trusts, the education boards, the Fire Authority, and the Police Authority — and possibly soon the planning advisory boards and group committees as well — to name but a few of the quangos which we have to endure. And surely the biggest insult of all is the influence on and the sanction given by an outside Government to those names which are proposed within Her Majesty's Government's jurisdiction.

10.15 am

How long will this community have to suffer humiliation? There seems to be a distinct lack of trust in the representatives elected by the people. All this is so offensive to those — the minions — who put their names before the electorate. One of the things that drive us in the direction of this motion is the need for a body, including chief executives, to look into the working of local government.

What reason can there be for nominating the members of boards and committees? Is it a question of distrust, or are we felt to be incapable? Over the turbulent years many capable and influential people opted out of politics. Whether that was because of disgust, lack of trust or fear of nailing colours to the mast I do not know, but others were big enough to step forward and become elected representatives.

Some people like the idea of having access to power and influence, so they offer themselves as nominees. I abhor such an arrangement, and I trust that the Government will not nominate people on the basis of class. Such distinction is repugnant, whether it be based on social, academic or financial grounds. Actually, some of it percolates into the Forum at times. Right across the board one finds people who think that they are very interesting.

I do not have up-to-date figures relating to quangos, but the amount of money involved must have increased since 1995, when the absence of a local administration and the lower level of district councils spurred a challenge to the methods of appointment. Then the health service, in the hands of four area boards and 13 trusts, was responsible for spending more than £1,250 million of public money. The number of appointees on boards and trusts totalled 100. There were the five education and library boards involving 181 appointments and a total budget of almost £1,000 million. The Police Authority, with 20 appointed members, was responsible for £600 million of spending. The Housing Executive, with 10 appointed members, spent about £160 million annually.

The Nolan Committee said that it had been bombarded with letters of complaint about alleged jobs for the boys. Surely such lack of democracy is an indictment of the Government. One hears talk about policy and about fair treatment across the board. Where is the fair treatment in Northern Ireland? Where is the democracy?

The Government must ensure that democracy prevails for us as a British people. Nothing less will do. There can be no dilution of our rights as citizens at any time. Everyone here is entitled to first-class citizenship.

Democracy is based on the premise that ordinary people have extraordinary possibilities. Class stratification should be removed wherever it raises its ugly, offensive head. Someone once said "People who want to understand democracy should spend less time in the library with Aristotle and more time on the buses and in the subways." I am sure everyone here agrees that in this respect a tremendous injustice has been done to Northern Ireland. Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, and his inclination to injustice makes it very necessary. I am afraid that we here lack it.

True democracy will not come about easily. People must be given the everyday rights of citizenship. Of course, there is in the community an element that refuses to subscribe to such citizenship. A majority must not treat a minority irresponsibly, but neither can a minority overrule a majority. Northern Ireland must stop being treated so abysmally, and its people in such an insulting fashion.

Democracy is not just a way of governing; it is primarily a way of determining who shall govern and, broadly, to what ends. Democracy decides matters by counting heads instead of breaking them. In any forthcoming arrangements, elected representatives must be entitled to an input. They must not be left aside. Others must not be allowed to come in over their heads. Elected representatives must have tremendous influence. They must have a much greater say in decisions about our future. It is not enough for the great and the good to have influence in respect of paltry decisions. One thinks of things that were done in the past and hopes that similar decisions will not be made in the future.

We should write to the Northern Ireland Office requesting that elected representatives be included on these bodies. Lack of democracy must not continue *ad infinitum*.

Mr Gibson: We are talking about the proposed reorganization of a system that is now 24 years of age. I vaguely remember the move from six county councils to 26 district councils. We all remember the origins of the quango. Over 20-odd years we have evolved a system which has given rise to anti-democratic sentiment. It has become fashionable to join those who can't — and those who can't, quango.

The quango has produced a new species — those who like to tell the rest how to proceed. They have elevated themselves to a position where one might regard them — certainly they regard themselves — as the great and the good. Ultimately, they prove to be good for nothing. Things evolve, and in some cases inherent faults cause dissipation. This applies to the quango system. Of course, the quango will do everything in its power to ensure that it can struggle on. The current movement to set up working parties is an attempt to continue to extend the system. There will be a move to retain boards and various regional organizations. The whole idea behind them is that democracy is not to be trusted. Evidence of this is to be found throughout the province.

The South of Ireland still enjoys the county system, and people are quite proud of it. It was introduced 100 years ago, and an administrative system that was efficient, effective

and democratic evolved. We departed from that system because of rebellion and upheaval in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, but we have had enough of working parties. Elected representatives must be allowed to come into their own and decide the future of Northern Ireland. The process should start with Ministers and work downwards. Whether we have six, 26 or 40 local authorities is probably immaterial, but decisions should not rest with civil servants or chief executives or people with a hidden agenda.

Membership of a quango means that one has not only to be acceptable in the ordinary way but also to pass the vetting system of Maryfield. A new game is to come out at Christmas. It is called "Spot the DUP member on a quango" — an impossibility. It is no longer just a matter of being a person of the right type: one has to pass a test set by an outside agency — Maryfield.

This motion is timely. Mr Foster was very careful not to state exactly what areas should be covered. In my view, it is the eight main agencies that deal with what we regard as local-government functions. Policy could be set at regional level, but administration should be carried out by locally elected representatives. There is a great deal of resentment. The quango is seen as having outlived its usefulness. Those who are involved had better realize that the system of which they are a part has raised temperatures to such an extent that some people might be tempted to engage in a type of rebellion.

It is time the future of Northern Ireland was in the hands of elected people. Democracy works if it is allowed to work, but for decades we have been denied it. I support the motion.

Mr Neeson: Like many others, I had reservations initially, but it is clear from the case made by the Ulster Unionists that there is a process under way whereby unelected individuals are getting together to consider the whole concept of local government.

I am disappointed that Lord Dubs is not here today. I accept that there is a genuine reason for his absence, and I hope that the invitation is open. I spoke to him last Friday about the document on an integrated transport policy, which we had debated the previous week, and I got the impression that he is prepared to listen. Obviously he has ideas of his own. Indeed, he is in many respects very much his own man. We saw examples of that in the cases of the proposed super-dump at Magheramorne and the controversy about water privatization. I hope that this debate will influence his decisions.

The working groups that are being set up are clouded in secrecy. Like Mr Foster and Mr Gibson, I have serious reservations about the decisions being taken by the Society of Local Government Chief Executives. If institutions are to be effective and are to have the support of elected representatives, those people must be closely involved in any review.

10.30 am

However, any changes in local government must not in any way undermine the primacy of the talks that are taking place at Castle Buildings. I am delighted that over this past week we have got into substantive business and that we are getting down to the nuts and bolts of local government. I am very pleased that this is now happening, but it is important

that any change in local government takes into consideration any proposals about devolution in Northern Ireland that may come forward from the talks at Castle Buildings. Devolution is coming whether Members like it or not, and that is something I welcome. I believe that the vast majority of Forum Members will welcome the fact that devolution is on its way. It is on its way to Scotland, it is on its way to Wales, so I firmly believe that any changes that take place in local government must take into consideration any devolved institution that will be established in Northern Ireland.

It is somewhat pertinent that next year sees the 25th anniversary of the reorganization of local government. We all know that it never really accomplished what Macrory intended it to. That is due very much to the absence of a devolved government in Northern Ireland. Despite the lack of power which some people believe there to be in local government, I must admit that I have serious reservations at this stage about any extra powers being given to local government in Northern Ireland. The important thing is to get a devolved government established and then consider which powers should be given to local government.

We, as elected representatives in Northern Ireland, should not be afraid of change. Many people are now of the opinion that 26 district councils in Northern Ireland are too many. It is important that any system we create is effective, efficient and accountable. Change has already taken place. We have already seen major changes in planning. I welcome the fact that the Government are now establishing policies based on the Belfast City region and the strategic review of planning throughout Northern Ireland. These are important developments and ones that we, as elected representatives, should be very much involved in. I have reservations too about outsiders being involved in reviewing the operation of local government. We are the people who have direct experience of the workings of local government, and we are the people who have direct experience of the needs of the local community.

Mr Chairman, you may remember that several months ago I raised the issue of ALANI. I said that, in many ways, there was a need for change there. I am delighted to say that there is now a group of us, including Members of the Forum, some of the chief executives and individual consultants, looking at ways of making a local-government body in Northern Ireland more reflective of the district councils. I welcome that. The thing is that it is not only appointed officials who are involved in that review but elected Members of the Forum and district councillors as well. We were not appointed by anybody to carry out this review, but it was widely recognized that there was a need for it. I hope that we can put forward proposals that will be acceptable to all the political parties in Northern Ireland, proposals that will give local government a strong voice in dealing with many of the important issues that are of common interest to us all.

All around us change is taking place. But if change is to take place, elected representatives have an important role to play in creating that change which, I believe, is necessary and will be welcomed.

I support the motion.

Ms Sagar: I too rise to support the motion. It is a very general motion, so, Mr Chairman, you will be pleased to know that I will not be repeating what everybody else has said.

Consultation and partnership are building blocks for stable and balanced governance. The Government have indicated their concern that there should be a more open and inclusive style of government. We support and encourage these moves towards a more modern view of the political process. The Women's Coalition places at the heart of any political process the importance of inclusion. That being the case, we support the use of broad-based consultation designed to gather the views of all sections of the community. This does not rest with elected representatives alone, but with other interested bodies such as the community and business sectors as well.

It should also include those who suffer most from exclusion — women, the young, the unemployed, the disabled and the ethnic minorities. How many people in this room are women? How many are members of the DUP? I will throw them in there as well. How many of us are under 30? How many are unemployed? How many are disabled? How many of us belong to ethnic-minority communities? How representative can we claim to be?

District partnerships offer an innovative model for participative democracy. We consider it a democratic imperative that the social, economic and political exclusion of sections of this society be addressed with some urgency. Indeed, this must underpin both the current talks process and any future arrangements. It is increasingly recognized internationally that the legitimacy of any system is based on these principles of inclusion and the corresponding accountability of elected representatives.

However, the proper place for this is the current talks process where a framework for progressing Northern Ireland's body politic must be crafted, and crafted so that it may properly address the challenges of this modern age. We must learn to welcome and to work with difference instead of trying to stifle it. We believe that true democracy is when you include everybody and do not exclude people.

There are more than elected representatives in Northern Ireland; we feel it is time for all views to be heard.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I support the motion that is before us.

I know I cannot be the only one here who remembers the time 25 years ago when local authorities had real power. I was a member, for a short time, of the old Belfast Corporation. Taking away power from local authorities was the gravest mistake ever made. Let us not forget the Macrory Report which set it all up. I think I am right in assuming that it was our own Stormont Government that removed the powers of local authorities. Perhaps there was a little bit of jealousy because that was where all the work was being done. That was a mistake, and I will come back to that. Mr Neeson has already mentioned that there are those of us here who would welcome devolution. I know that probably the majority in the DUP, for instance, believe in a devolved administration. But we have to be careful not to give powers to local authorities only to have an Assembly sitting up there doing nothing.

I believe the reason that no elected representatives were invited on to these so-called boards was simply that they do not trust us.

Mr Morrow: Is Mr Smyth fully aware that when the Macrory Report was brought out it was on the clear understanding that there would be a Stormont Parliament? That is where the big deficiency arises.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I am quite aware of that.

Mr Morrow: Sorry, I did not take that from what the Member was saying.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I have said two or three times in the Forum that it was always envisaged that power was going to come back. What sort of power that should be is what is in dispute.

As I was saying, the reason we were not invited on to these boards was simply that they do not trust us, and that is wrong whether that lack of trust comes from a Tory Government or a Labour Government. I remember many occasions when Cabinet Ministers said to me that Belfast Council should be the prime council, that we should be leading by example and letting all the different parties have chairmanships. Now that is fine. I have nothing particularly against a sharing of responsibility, but what annoyed me was that these people were telling me that we should be doing this as of right.

There is a surprising thing about this which I am sure many councillors will be aware of if, as people on my council have, they have taken wee trips now and again. During those trips to meet councils like Birmingham or Manchester or Sheffield or Leeds or wherever, you would find that whoever was in control controlled everything. Birmingham, which we used to visit quite often, was a prime example. It was a Labour-controlled council and they just went in and took every chairmanship and every deputy chairmanship and filled the various committees with their members. The truth of the matter was that their council did not need to sit because all the decisions had been taken. A council meeting was just a sham which lasted for only 15 or 20 minutes because all the business had already been done.

The same thing happens in Tory-controlled councils. In some of the London areas we visited, the Tories had taken all those chairs. So it ill becomes anybody to try to ram down my throat the great need for us to be leading by example.

We do not have power-sharing in Northern Ireland. People can point to Londonderry, they can point at the moment to Belfast City Council, but when the crunch comes —

Mr Peter Robinson: We do not have any power to share.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Yes.

If we are going to share responsibility it needs to be done from the heart — no false sharing. When the crunch comes it is not a sharing of responsibility because they used their right hand to vote. They proved that in Londonderry with the last Mayor whom they wanted rid of. They have done it in various other councils.

We need to emphasize to whatever Government are in power the real need for us, the elected representatives, to have a say in what is going to happen. I believe that it can be done. I agree with Mr Neeson that there will be a devolved administration here. That will happen whether we reach an agreement at these talks or not — I hope and pray that we do. We are looking at a Government which — I was going to say will be in power for 10 years, but when you look at what went on at the Tory Party conference, they will be in power for about 110 years. Do not be under any illusions — this Government will introduce a Bill that will bring about a Northern Ireland Assembly one way or the other.

That is even more reason for these boards to be done away with. I would far rather see all the political parties here being invited to give their views on how they see power being transferred at an Assembly level to local authorities. I believe we can do that. I believe an Assembly should have overall control of the likes of planning, health, housing and the environment. But, again, why should we not be looking at local authorities having responsibility for roads? Any councillor here knows that 75% of his constituents' problems concern the roads system. You try to convince your constituents that you do not have anything to do with roads — they simply refuse to believe it.

10.45 am

The same goes for libraries — and we spoke about this at the Committee the other day. Why should local authorities not be allowed to control the library system? For that matter, I am a great believer in giving education back to local authorities because they are the people on the ground. They know what the needs of their constituents are, and they should be allowed to provide for them. But that will not be done because, as some Members have said, do-gooders are invited to talk about our future just because of the background they come from. We are the people who, every four years, have to put ourselves forward to be rejected or elected, so it is we who should have the final say. And I make that appeal to the Government. I, too, am sorry that Lord Dubs is not here. I have met him, and I accept what Mr Neeson said. I believe that he may well be one of the few politicians prepared to do their own thing.

The other thing in our favour is that a few of the present Ministers have been councillors themselves. They do not know what it is like to be a councillor in Northern Ireland, but at least they have been involved in local authorities.

This must be brought to a head. We can work in harmony with each other. I do not see a great deal of difficulty in a devolved administration which is responsible for the matters that we have spoken about. At the same time, the local authorities should be allowed to play a greater role.

Twenty-five years ago the standard of education in the area that Mr Eric Smyth and I represent — then provided mainly through local councils — was far higher.

Over the past 15 years there have been numerous complaints about kids coming out of school simply unable to read. In a school in my area, for instance, only five children passed the 11-plus — deplorable. That just would not have happened under the local authorities.

I congratulate the Ulster Unionist Party for moving the motion and once again bringing this matter to the Forum's attention. It is good to debate subjects that can unite all the parties in determination to make sure that democracy is returned to Northern Ireland. That can and will be done with goodwill from us all.

Mr Robert John White: Of the Government's attitude to councillors, an appropriate slogan would be "Let them get elected but make sure they have no effect." This problem has been our bugbear for a long time. We hear slogans such as "Power to the people", and we know the gentleman with the hand movements and the nice slow speech — Tony Blair. This thing about power to the people is a lot of nonsense. For MPs it means giving the people power to elect them so that they can take the power back. And any elected person who is less than an MP is given nothing. This shows a rather poor attitude towards fellow representatives at a lower level. It should be remembered that no matter how poor a view a civil servant or Member of Parliament may have of his fellow countryman who happens to be a councillor, that person does have something to contribute. Even if we are totally stupid, we have something to contribute. Even if they are not as orderly as those of the Government or the Civil Service, the views of ordinary people must be taken into account. And councillors are ordinary people who are elected by ordinary people.

One of the mistakes that we made in the past concerned the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I am not opening up a sore, but I do want to make a point. There was a lot of protest. I was as deeply involved in it as the rest. A set of chief executives were given powers, and these have never been clawed back. We have suffered the effects of that disaster ever since.

Let me go back to 1973. The Stormont Government commissioned the Macrory Report. But only the parts that were liked were implemented. A particular party was allowed to obliterate the rest, and there has been no replacement for Stormont. We have suffered this deficit for many years, but it was, I am afraid, the doing of our own Government at that time.

An element in the Government and in the Civil Service says "We have power here. Let us make sure we keep it. And if there is some sort of quango going, let us pick the nice chap." We hear about nice people. I do not particularly want to be nice, but the attitude is "Let us get the chappie who will give no trouble." I apologize to the ladies for using "chappie". I do not know the female equivalent; but I include the women.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Everyone with any political reasoning is concerned about the number of yes-men who are appointed to quangos in Northern Ireland — for instance, those who invited Sinn Féin/IRA to address the Police Authority. That sort of thing is contemptible, is it not?

Mr Robert John White: It has to be, I suppose.

It is assumed that there is self-interest among councillors. The biggest fear of all is that councillors cannot see things independently. Take the part of the world that I know. I might well want the district boundary to be at the far side of Bushmills and not at the River Bush, but the people in Moyle would not like that. I do not believe that the average councillor cannot get above that sort of thing; I think he can see the bigger picture. It is sad

that the Government feel that they are all-powerful, believing that God has endowed them with all wisdom and given none to anybody else. Alexander Pope once said

“For forms of government let fools contest what’s best administered is best.”

That is probably the Government’s attitude to elected people. I do not agree with it in any way.

There are quangos, councillors and community groups. I am not sure that the quangos are not being replaced, to some degree, by community groups. Nowadays you are nothing if you are not consulted as a part of such a group. What do the community groups have to put into anything? They are limited in what they do, but they get a lot of money to spend. Since 1973 local government has been responsible for slightly over 2% of national spending, yet there must be hundreds of councillors. The rest is spent by the Government, quangos and community groups.

Local government needs to get back to being accountable. That is paramount. As another Member said, if a councillor tells people that he is not responsible for holes in the road or for the fact that a neighbouring house is half a storey too high, they do not believe him. Surely a person who has been elected must have some power. We need to push much harder than in 1973, so that local government will get its rightful place. We must commit ourselves to first-hand involvement to make sure that the disaster of the past is not repeated. We have been in a disastrous situation since 1973.

People who are elected as councillors are responsible for absolutely nothing. When you go into the details you find that the law of the land prevents them from even taking an angle on Sunday trading or pub licences. Even in the simple area of planning, there are legal parameters. Councillors take decisions and are then told “Ah, but you were outside the law. You cannot do that.” We need to get back to some sensible form of local government with not too much begrudging from the tier above.

I support the motion.

Mr Eric Smyth: I too support the motion.

I have been a Belfast city councillor for many years. The council gets more to do but has little power to do it. It is only right that the political parties and elected representatives should have a say in the make-up of and functions of councils.

I am not afraid of change, but it must come by honest means. I oppose change made by devious people behind closed doors. Such processes must be condemned. Decisions should be made by people who are elected.

It is good that the Ulster Unionists have brought this motion forward. I suggest that it should be moved in council chambers also. The 26 councils should come together. There is no doubt that Republican councillors would not agree with us — they do not want Unionists or anybody else to have power except on their terms — so there would be a bit of difficulty. However, the vast majority would support what I am proposing. All the councils must come

together to fight as one force and to make our position known to the Government. We must have an input into the changes. We who work in local government every day know what it is all about, and we must have a say in any changes that the Government recommend. That say should not fall to those who are on quangos and want to keep themselves there. People associated with education and library boards, for instance, know that the rights of councillors, as a minority, are often overridden.

We are elected and are responsible to the ratepayers. It is important that we be answerable to the voters. Members of quangos are answerable to nobody. If they make a mistake, there may be a bit of shouting, but that is all. We who are elected take our responsibilities very seriously, and we want to make the right decisions for the good of the people.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: The Women's Coalition speak constantly about inclusiveness and refer a great deal to community groups. Councillors are elected by the people, but in the case of community groups nobody elects anybody. These bodies are very unrepresentative.

11.00 am

Mr Eric Smyth: Yes, I agree; I was going to come to that. I do not agree with those who say that community groups should have a say. The community groups that I know do not represent the people of Northern Ireland. You go to see them and discover that they are small; sometimes you only get 10 or 15 people gathered in a room. That is not proper representation of the people's feelings. The only way to test the feelings on the ground is to have elections. The members of these groups who say that they speak for the people do not put their names forward for election to see what the voters think of their views. That is the only way to test the feeling on the ground. So it is not right to say that these community groups and minorities should have a big say. I am not against listening to them and taking their views on board — everyone has the right to express himself — but they do not have the right to make the final decisions because elected representatives are the people who have to work with any decisions.

Some Members have spoken about a new Assembly. My party agrees that we should have an Assembly, and I hope that it will be under British rule and the British way of life. It should reflect the majority point of view of this country — it should not be a sham produced from the talks that are taking place under the framework document. It is sad that some Members have raised this today. We were going to be good boys and say nothing. But as they have brought it up, it gives us the opportunity of saying that we will not stand for a half-way house to a united Ireland.

We want — and I hope that the Ulster Unionists will support us — a Parliament which is under the Constitution of the United Kingdom. That is the only one that we can agree to. The majority want to stay within the United Kingdom. We live under the laws and Constitution and monarchy of the United Kingdom, and we want to stay there and run this country that way, and that is the only way it can be run.

We cannot agree with what is taking place in the deluded and deceitful talks at Stormont. We cannot agree with those secrets. When the Secretary of State tells us that she

cannot give the DUP the minutes of what has taken place, I wonder why. Is she frightened that we might expose what they are saying and what is happening up there? If she has nothing to hide, she should not be ashamed to give us the minutes — she is willing to give them to Sinn Féin and the SDLP. And the previous Government kept the enemies of this state informed about what was going on during the years when they were talking. The IRA knew everything: they knew what was going on in Westminster, Downing Street and Stormont. They were kept informed.

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, while your oratory is splendid you are straying from the motion.

Mr Eric Smyth: Mr Chairman, the Alliance Party got away with it — you did not stop them.

The Chairman: I am stopping you.

Mr Eric Smyth: The Secretary of State does not want the representatives of the people of Northern Ireland to have a say in what sort of local government they want. The Government like to impose their ways on the people of Northern Ireland, and I hope the day is coming when the people of Northern Ireland will rise up and say “We have had enough.” However, as one person said to me yesterday “When you are law-abiding they seem to take advantage of you, and those who cause trouble and violence seem to get their way.” But the message is getting through to the people of Northern Ireland about what is taking place. Now we see that Bloody Sunday is going to be given away to them as well, and we see the sell-out there —

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, I have cautioned you once. You really must get back to the motion.

Mr Eric Smyth: Let me remind you that the Government fail to heed what public representatives have to say about local government. They receive deputations at Stormont, they listen to your point of view, but, unfortunately they do not take on board the feelings of local representatives.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Does the Member also condemn the way in which the Government and, indeed, some local authorities across Northern Ireland ignore elected representatives from the Forum? Many invitations are issued to those in local government to attend functions in their electoral areas, but Members of the Northern Ireland Forum are excluded. Does the Member agree that is a deliberate snub to the elected representatives and, indeed, to the people who sent them here?

Mr Eric Smyth: That is the point I am making. The Government and some other people do snub Members of the Forum and other bodies. We see it all the time in the city council. It is about time that we, as elected representatives, put an end to it and shamed these people. It is wrong. We are elected whether they like it or not. We submitted ourselves to the people of Northern Ireland and were elected to be here and in local government. The message is getting through that we are not having it any longer and that we want to have a say in decisions about the future of local councils. We will push for that, and we should press the

local councils to support us and push it further. As one unit, we could get the message across to the Minister concerned together.

Mr Davis: I notice from the motion that the Government are continuing to exclude elected representatives. Surely that should come as no surprise to Members of the Forum or to people outside because it has been the hallmark of successive Governments since 1973. Indeed, if you go back to the document — and my Friends on the Benches opposite will be fully aware of this particular document — that started the ball rolling in 1980 at that infamous meeting between Mrs Thatcher and Mr Haughey, you will see that its ambit covers over 30 topics to be discussed by senior civil servants from the Irish Republic and Britain. It is shameful that British civil servants — and I have a list of their names here — took part in all this. That was 1980; and we have now arrived at the situation we are in today.

Things took another turn in 1985 when Sinn Fein first arrived in the council chambers. I listened to Mr Smyth talking about Belfast City Council. In 1985 the Sinn Feiners arrived — 59 of them were elected — and the whole thing has taken a turn for the worse since then. The scandalous thing about 1985 was that 10 of the 59 who were elected had convictions for serious terrorist offences: one Belfast city councillor — Bobby Lavery — had received five years for firearms offences; Henry Cushinan got eight years for firearms offences; Tommy Carroll got two sentences of four and 15 years for firearms and explosives offences; two councillors called Brendan Curran both got 15 years for explosives offences; Brian McCann got five years for IRA crimes; Tommy Maguire had been released two years previously, having served eight years for conspiracy to murder; Cormac McAteer got 15 years for attempted murder; Pat Toner got three years for harbouring terrorists; and Gerald Doherty got 15 years for attempted murder and for attempting to blow up the Guildhall in which he then sat as a councillor. These are the people whom the Government have taken on board and are dealing with. We, as elected representatives, are expected to sit down with these people and work on various committees with them.

As a very important businessman said in 1985, “The more Unionists who stay in council chambers with Sinn Fein, the more acceptable Sinn Fein becomes, and the situation assumes an air of normality.” And that is what is happening — this air of normality among business people, the clergy and a host of others. All the law-abiding citizens of the province, in particular those in local Government, have been passed over. In England they have full control, but we are controlled by the Northern Ireland Office’s lackeys. Many of those who have been appointed to these quangos have stood at council and other elections and have been rejected by the electorate. Yet the Northern Ireland Office continues to appoint them to these quangos which now number over 200. And those at the top of the quangos have well-paid jobs.

Mr Neeson referred to secrecy — that has been the hallmark of successive Governments. We are not to know anything about it. It will be like the Anglo-Irish Agreement: it will arrive two days before. But we are not to know about anything. Since 1973 elected representatives — and I am one — have played their part in bringing this about. We have given this veneer of democracy to the system in Northern Ireland, but we do not have democracy. We dress up from time to time and we carry out our functions, but, as the motion says, the Northern Ireland Office does not recognize us.

Rev William McCrea: As someone who has served in local government since 1973, I rise to support the motion that is before the Forum today.

It is rather interesting to hear a foreigner telling us on television that there will not be a united Ireland in his lifetime but that the way in which we are governed in Northern Ireland will change. Of course, we are being dictated to day and daily about how we are to be governed in this part of the United Kingdom. It is an absolute disgrace that we have nothing better than a rigged system of Government. Decision making in local government and in every facet of our lives is rigged by those in authority. The present situation is an insult to elected representatives.

I listened to my Friend, Mr Ivan Davis, saying that the hallmark of the current state of government is secrecy. I have to tell him that when the Democratic Unionist Party was looking for documents about the present talks process, it was his party that joined in refusing to give us those documents. The secrecy is to continue; we are not to have openness; we are not to know about anything that is going on. There are many who are playing along with this game of secrecy to keep the truth from the ordinary people of Northern Ireland. I hear people talking about power for the ordinary people. Who do we think we are? We are the ordinary people, we are ordinary citizens.

The Women's Coalition talk about accountability or rather about lack of accountability because that is the last thing that is wanted in this country. I am simply a member of the community, elected by the community, going constantly to the community and asking them for their support through the electoral system. The present situation is progressing, taking power further and further away from those who stand for election, from the person who puts his name forward and allows the people to decide whether he should represent them or not. But all you have to do today to be important is join with others and become a community group. It does not have to be representative of the community, it just has to be a wee clique of two or three people gathered in a room to get the name community group. That is all you need.

I remember they had a community organization in Castlederg. One Protestant person joined the organization, but most of the rest of the members were Sinn Fein supporters. They had a token Protestant so that they could call it a community organization. I am told that the Protestant did not go to the meetings, but he got them the community-group status and they got the grants. The grants were flowing in, and the money was flowing out. But accountability for its expenditure did not seem to matter.

Councils have to account for every penny they spend. Elected representatives have to account for everything they spend, yet little groups that are setting up all over the country spend millions of pounds. Some day the lid will be lifted off some of them and the worms will come out, and I can assure Members that some of their expenditure is anything but decent. To go back to the group that I referred to, I had members of the Roman Catholic community in the Castlederg area begging me to go to the Department to start up a community organization because Sinn Fein was drawing money from the Prince's Trust and other organizations — they were quite happy to use that money.

11.15 am

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member also accept that when all the terrorist prisoners are released, they will head into these community groups and get further funding to show that these are the people who really represent the community?

Rev William McCrea: The Government are encouraging groups to be set up and nests to be developed which, someday, will come back to haunt them. Many of these people have not renounced their violent past, neither have they renounced their terrorist activity, with a coat of respectability they are able to carry on.

Ms Bell: In what respect is this relevant to the motion?

Rev William McCrea: With the greatest respect, Ms Bell does not, perhaps, understand that she is not the Chairman of this Forum; it is the Chairman's responsibility to tell me that I am straying from the motion. I am sure that Mrs Bell has respect for the Chairman, but she should have the decency to allow him to chair the Forum. She should also remember that she is taking upon herself a task which the Forum has not given her. If the Lady wants to make a speech, I will be happy to listen to her. Whether I get any pearls of wisdom from it is another matter. She should, however, not interject — she has taken some of my time. She should remember her place and allow us to carry on. *[Interruption]*

Ms Bell: Mr Chairman, the Member is straying from the motion. I am asking you to rule on that.

Rev William McCrea: Mr Chairman, the Lady is sitting there shouting at people; her behaviour is certainly not very ladylike.

The Chairman: I suggest you get on to the motion.

Rev William McCrea: That is what I am trying to do, but I was diverted by a person who just drops into the Chamber occasionally and then drops out again at will.

What is niggling the Alliance Party about this motion is the fact that they have had more patronage from the Government than any other party. Alliance Party members are on boards, quangos and trusts — in positions they have never merited. So are their wives and their husbands — every Tom, Dick and Harry. When they stand for elections, they are rejected. They do not get the backing of the electorate but, of course, they can always rely on the patronage of the Government to give them a bit of position and a pat on the head.

This motion is very relevant to our situation. Many of the chief executives look on elected representatives as an obstacle to their authority, but I believe that elected representatives should have the authority because they have to go back to the people; they get the support of the people, and they should be allowed to rule on their behalf.

I agree with Mr Hugh Smyth's comments about the hypocrisy of many of those from Labour and Conservative authorities who come across the water and tell us what to do. When they have the power, they hold on to it. They do not know anything about

responsibility-sharing, power-sharing, position-sharing, or any other kind of sharing; they like to keep it for themselves. It is not a case of "Do as I do" but "Do as I say". That is hypocrisy. They have a lot to learn, as far as our country is concerned.

In this part of the United Kingdom we have the right to a proper, democratic system of local government as well as central Government. To be fair to Macrory, his report has to be read in the context of his synopsis on a Stormont Parliament. For him, we were an appropriate part of the jigsaw.

I believe that this motion deserves to have the Forum's support, and I am happy to give my support wholeheartedly.

Mr Benson: Most of the points that I wanted to make have already been adequately covered, especially by Mr Foster who dealt with them very well. We have heard a lot about local government on the mainland and how a party that is in control holds on to power. I have met many local government members across there, and I am surprised at how many of them do not know, even after 24 years, that we have so little power and that there is such a lack of democracy here.

Yesterday I was at a site meeting in connection with a planning case in my area. One of the people there is a professor who, until the particular problem that necessitated his being there cropped up, was not aware that we did not have the sort of powers he thought we had. That is the situation, even amongst local people — and some very intelligent people. We need to spell this out to everybody and let them know that while we may be elected, we certainly have very little power. Apart from bins, burials and leisure, all we have in everything else is a consultative role.

Some people referred to the fact that we are not to be trusted or that we are not capable. I can speak for my council and, I think, for most councils in Northern Ireland, and the duties that we do have — the bins, the burials, and so on, are carried out very efficiently. I think everybody would agree with that and I cannot, therefore, see why we should not be trusted.

Recently, I had to lead an ALANI deputation to the Minister to discuss the consultative committee meetings which we have not had for a number of years. Local government representatives used to meet with the Minister and his senior civil servants and were able to raise the very important issues that were causing problems for our constituents.

At a meeting with the Minister, one of the very senior civil servants there actually said — and he was rebuked by the Minister — that he had no time for local government. Here was a senior civil servant saying that as far as he was concerned, ALANI was non-existent, he had never missed it and he was talking about how well they had got on without it. I can understand that. Reference has been made to chief executives, and I agree with those who said that in 1985 a number of powers were given to chief executives during the protest stage, powers which never came back. In a lot of cases chief executives are working directly with senior civil servants, and the only time that a council sees something is when a proposal is nicely brought forward for them to rubber-stamp. This weakens councillors' positions and we should start to put that right.

Reference was made to a body that has been set up which, I think, is known as the Good Practices Group. The chief executives have already been nominated to this body but no elected representatives. In relation to that, I also note Mr Neeson's comment that 26 councils are, probably, too many. Imagine what would happen if that sort of issue were to be discussed. If the chief executives were there, and a suggestion was made that the number of councils should be reduced to 15, you can imagine what the chief executives would have to say about that. It would be a bit like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas.

We must have elected representatives on all these bodies which are going to be looking at local government. After all, we are the people who have to stand for election every four years. We will have to spell out to the Minister very clearly that we want democracy back. We want fewer quangos and more elected representatives.

Mr Shannon: The motion highlights what is, perhaps, the most contentious issue in relation to local government. The big concern of elected representatives and many of the constituents who elected them is that non-elected people are put on committees to make decisions. They are, in fact, professional quangos who move from board to board making decisions for which they have no mandate.

What committees or boards do these quangos sit on? We all know they are the education boards, the health boards, local committees, trust committees and so on — all making decisions without reference to the electorate. I accept that many of the people who are appointed to the boards are interested and committed, but in numerous cases they are quite simply not in touch with the people. They have not been elected and, ultimately, they are not accountable to the electorate.

One example of the decisions taken by some of these board members during the last nine months was that on water fluoridation. All the councils, bar one, were against putting fluoride in our water; all the MPs were against it and both traditions within the community were adamantly opposed. But what happened? The boards, full of that new breed of person, the quangoite, pushed ahead with the proposal, oblivious to the feelings and thoughts of the electorate whom they quite simply ignored. The Government appointees on the boards were given the task of agreeing with Government policy — a bit like the nodding dog of many years ago. I am sure we can all remember the nodding dogs that used to be in the back windows of cars. When you went over a bump, the head nodded; when you went to one side the head went that way, and then it went the other way. That is what the nodding dog does; it swings its head whenever and wherever the car goes.

What we have is a system of government that bypasses elected representatives and the electorate, and to redress that situation we need to restore faith in public service with a strong vision of a better government. In a new development announced on 18 September by the Northern Ireland Political Development Minister, Paul Murphy, he stated that they will engage the concerns of the ordinary man and woman on the street, reduce bureaucracy and make Government relevant to their needs. We need to see a greater openness and accessibility, especially in relation to quangos. I would like to see public access to these closed shops where decisions are taken against the wishes of the electorate. We wish to see and ensure best value for the public — a Citizens' Charter in which the electorate and its

elected representatives have had a say. Best services can be provided better by elected representatives and those with expertise in their field.

The Government must listen to the people. The Labour Party has continually told us that they will listen to the voice of the electorate. Let them prove it now that they are in power. Who better to develop services than elected representatives accountable to their constituents?

The development of that trust which is needed between the public, elected representatives and those who provide the services can only take place when the elected representatives are on the committees and the boards that have the final say in decisions that will ultimately affect all our lives.

Let me give one last example of how democracy is being ignored. The New Deal task force announced on 8 September of this year includes people of great calibre and ability, and no one denies that, but it ignores one thing — elected representatives. There are 13 members, and they are listed in this paper issued by the Northern Ireland Information Service. There are 13 members, including three ex-officio members, but not one elected representative. The make-up of this team again highlights the democratic deficit; it is very evident.

We need changes — dramatic changes — and elected people only should be on working groups set up to consider changes in local government.

I support the motion.

Mr Coulter: As the person who prepared the motion, I rise, naturally, to support it.

The heart of the matter lies in the fact that democracy is not being given its rightful place in Northern Ireland. A number of people have mentioned the group that has been set up to study best practice as against CCT in the councils. Indeed, representing the Association of Direct Labour Organizations, I met with that group only to discover that the chief executives on it were not prepared to include elected representatives on the Association.

11.30 am

The other glaring example that I came across recently was in my own council. When we wrote to the Roads Service asking for information about the review that is taking place and the part that local councils will play in that review, we were given a document on Monday evening, part of which referred to the consultants' report. This report is the second review of the secondary organization of the roads authority and so is at the very heart of the changes. When we asked for a copy of that report the reply that we got was that the consultants' report was an internal Roads Service management document. As far as the councils are concerned, the Roads Service is completely unwilling to have anything to do with giving full information. All we get is filtered information about the reorganization.

This motion asks for elected representatives to be in at the decision-making and drafting stages of any new legislation. When I say drafting stages I am minded of the working group that was set up on best practice against (CCT) Compulsory Competitive

Tendering. It said "Certainly we will come back and consult with all the elected representatives on the local bodies." But the point at issue was not consultation. Those of us who are on councils know that consultation is merely a charade. They come and tell us what they are going to do, and take absolutely no notice of our recommendations. I am asking for elected representatives to be involved at the drafting stage, when the working groups are called together. If there is one thing that would build confidence among elected representatives it is giving them their rightful place. The officers of a council are the employees of a council but the elected representatives are the representatives of the people.

I have absolutely no doubt that if the Minister takes today's motion on board, the future government of Northern Ireland will be more democratic.

Mr Foster: Basically everything has been said. As I said at the very outset, the democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase of human history — it is human history.

It is obvious that the present system of local government is not at all acceptable, and it is evident that all the elected representatives here are upset by the lack of democracy. So democracy must prevail. The point has been made very forcibly by those who are nominated on to respective boards that the way in which local government functions is entirely undemocratic. It is given over to employees who — and I have no doubt about their ability — are not elected by the people. We are the ones who are entitled to have an input into any suggestions which may be coming forth.

This is more than a call, it is a cry for a return of proper democracy. Despite the veto of the SDLP who negate the "democratic" part of their name — it is a misnomer — there is a cry from people right across the province for democracy to prevail in Northern Ireland just as it does in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Mr David Campbell: Would Mr Foster agree with me that the main reason that elected representatives are excluded in Northern Ireland is that the majority of them are from the Unionist tradition? In order to exclude a Unionist input, the Government exclude elected Unionist representatives.

I ask him, in summing up, to make one point very firmly. When this motion is forwarded the covering letter should ask who took the decision to exclude elected representatives and why. And let us have the reply in black and white before the House when we get it.

I am concerned that Members today appear to make excuses for the non-attendance of the Minister at this debate. We are not here to make excuses for Ministers. This House should have been the first port of call for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she took up her appointment, and it should have been the first port of call for her Ministers as well, because this body represents the elected people of Northern Ireland. It is because the majority of the elected representatives are Unionists that they are not interested in what we have to say, and that is why they are not here.

Mr Foster: I agree wholeheartedly with what Mr Campbell has said. It is, undoubtedly, discrimination against the Unionist community. They do not seem to put any

trust in us. That is very offensive, and I suggest that the questions he asked be put to the Northern Ireland Office.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum regrets that the Government has continued to exclude elected representatives from working groups set up to consider changes in local government in Northern Ireland.

The meeting was suspended at 11.38 am and resumed at 12.00.

EMPLOYMENT: ACE SCHEMES

Mr Casey: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum expresses its concern at the recent freeze on recruitment in the ACE schemes. This freeze imposes a 25% cut-back in allocated placements. This could cause irreparable damage to the ACE schemes and the valuable services provided to the community.

The Labour Party condemns these cuts which were recently announced by the Training and Employment Agency. At the start of the 1997/98 financial year, occupancy of the ACE programme stood at 6,468 places. Reductions in funding have since reduced the number of places that can be supported to 5,200, and on 5 August 5,188 places were filled. Unfortunately, that does not satisfy the Training and Employment Agency which works on an average system. They say that on average 5,749 places are available in spite of the fact that only 5,188 places are occupied.

A further freeze on recruitment, which was announced at the end of September, will result in a further 25% reduction in the number of approved posts which stands at 5,200. This means that the number of approved posts will be reduced to fewer than 4,000.

These cuts which are being implemented under the guise of budgetary control are simply another attack on the ACE scheme and come at a time when attention seems to be focused on the Welfare to Work scheme, and that does not inspire confidence in the future of the ACE programme.

The Labour Party recognizes that innovative projects are required to help young people obtain stable employment and give them a meaningful and hopeful future. However, what real and meaningful projects are being put in place for adults? Does ageism now begin at 25?

The Welfare to Work programme will offer four options which will only be open to young persons aged between 18 and 24. The first is the employer option in which young persons will be offered temporary employment accompanied by a training plan. There will be a training and education option in which people with no qualifications will be offered full-time placements on a recognized training course for 12 months. Then there will be a

voluntary option leading to placements in the voluntary sector for up to six months together with a £90 per week grant. Finally there will be an environmental option of placements with the environmental task force for up to six months.

In accordance with current Training and Employment Agency thinking, people over 25 years of age will be excluded from all these programmes. We are told again that a think-tank or task force has been drawn up to put the flesh on the skeleton of the Welfare to Work scheme in Northern Ireland, but I do not think that any organization which represents the unemployed has been given a place on that think-tank.

Mr Reg Empey: Does the Member agree that the complete absence of elected representatives from that body is very regrettable?

Mr Casey: I had not got to that part. Going back to the earlier debate this morning, elected representatives have once again failed to be included on this think-tank.

The Chairman: You mean that there is not a single elected representative on it?

Mr Casey: No. Not that I know of anyway. The Northern Ireland Federation of ACE Schemes also requested that someone from that organization be included on this think-tank but that was turned down too.

The unemployment problem will not be solved by addressing young people's problems and by throwing a sop to adults. We must adopt an all-round approach: one in which we recognize that providing a work environment for young people also means providing a work environment for their parents. We know that long-term unemployment sometimes runs in families. Sometimes it almost seems to be hereditary. If we are going to try to bring young people into the work-force, we also need to do something for their parents.

The ACE programme can make a major contribution to the future of the Welfare to Work scheme and it must be sustained as an ideal in the new proposals. It seems strange that extra funding, which would have avoided these further cut-backs, could not be found when in a matter of months the Government will be investing £140 million of new money into the Welfare to Work scheme — which will include a community programme. It beggars belief that part of this windfall tax could not have been found to sustain the ACE programme at its present level of 5,200 places.

The ACE programme, with its established infrastructure and expertise, should not be abandoned in favour of some new innovation. We call upon the Training and Employment Agency to give serious consideration to the retention of ACE as part of the Welfare to Work programme or even to make it additional to the Welfare to Work programme.

In my recent discussions with the Department of Economic Development it was said that these programmes will not affect ACE and that the money which is presently invested in the ACE programme will still be there on top of this £140 million destined for the Welfare to Work programme. We will learn sometime in the future whether that is fact or fiction.

The ACE programme has provided meaningful employment for many people over many years, especially the long-term unemployed and women returning to work. It is still needed but there is no obvious provision for it in the new proposals. Throughout the many years of hardship ACE has not just provided work; it has also provided valuable service to local communities — it was often the only vehicle for stability, and it gave hope to individuals. Are the Government now implying that we no longer need those services and the stability which the scheme provided, especially at a time when the community-care programmes are also being drastically reduced?

It seems inconceivable that, while the unemployed, through the Jobseekers' Allowance, are being encouraged, coerced or forced — take your pick of the word you want to use — to seek employment, a door of opportunity to gainful employment and to serving the community through ACE is being closed to them by the imposition of this freeze on recruitment. This is a classic example of two Government agencies being at variance in their respective policies — in this case the Training and Employment Agency and the Social Security Agency.

There is clear evidence that many adult people — some of whom have not worked for years — are now coming along to ACE schemes to take up employment in that way. It is a retrograde step that they are to be prevented from doing so because of the cut-backs which will prevent the ACE schemes from taking them in. Many ACE schemes had already interviewed people and arranged for them to take up employment, yet they were not even allowed to take them on. The people who were interviewed and had been given jobs cannot now take them up.

The Labour Party urges the Forum to support this motion by conveying its concern to both the Government and the Training and Employment Agency. It would be a gross insult to the voluntary sector if the time, effort and, indeed, the considerable financial contribution which it has made to ACE — if we take into account the fact that ACE funding was restricted to a premium per person — were to be for nothing. That premium, under which ACE was allowed to attract so much for overheads, did not meet the actual cost of overheads, and many projects had to raise money to balance their books. Some of the voluntary organizations put as much money into paying overheads as they did into projects, since the Training and Employment Agency allowed them to pay the cost of overheads incurred by the ACE programme.

It would be shameful to ignore the inestimable contribution that ACE has made to the community during its 15-year existence.

Mr Benson: I support the Labour Party's motion, which is very important. I speak as one of the founder members of the Newtownards Community Work-force which was an ACE-scheme provider. At that time four out of the eight board members — it is run as a limited company — were elected representatives. Yet everything was done on a voluntary basis — none of the board members ever received any remuneration — and I can assure you that the number of hours put in by the board to ensure that those schemes ran was quite substantial.

When the ACE scheme was set up we could only recruit those who had been unemployed for one year or more. Therefore, we brought people into an employment situation who sometimes felt as if they were not wanted. Practically all of these people had no qualifications whatsoever, and sometimes their education was not of a high standard. So one of our functions was to provide an element of training to enable them to get employment when they left — they could only stay on an ACE programme for a maximum of one year. We got the money from the Department of Economic Development, and the board allocated it. About 90% of that money went on wages while the other 10% went towards the cost of the overheads.

We never competed with local businesses or any agencies that provided a service. But as we know, home-helps and so forth were cut back quite severely. So we tried to get some of the workers whom we had recruited to provide a home-help service. They would light a fire or make a cup of tea for an elderly or disabled person — the sort of things that should have been provided by the Government but were not being provided. We also had a painting- and-decorating section where we trained people in these skills and, therefore, improved their employment prospects. Those people went to the homes of the elderly and disabled to paint or decorate a room for them. They also cut their grass about two or three times a year if they had grass or weeds that they were unable to manage themselves.

That was the sort of work which was being done, but this experience meant that these workers were employable once they left us, and at the last count about 60% of those people have found full-time employment. That was a good deal better than having them languish on the dole, as they would have done had there been no ACE scheme. That is why it annoys me so intensely that the previous Conservative Government started the cut-backs. But the present Government are doing nothing whatsoever to change that situation, and that disappoints me too.

One of the big problems is that if there are to be any further cut-backs this scheme will no longer be viable. And I would like to explain how the scheme works. Ten per cent of the money you get is for overheads. If you are going to have, for example, grass-cutting sessions or painting and decorating, you need premises, for which you have to pay rent. Then you have to have a vehicle to transport the people back and forward — in our area we go down as far as Greyabbey and over to Comber. You have to pay insurance on the vehicles. You have to maintain the vehicles. So, if you were breaking even when you had 95 workers, and they cut that back, as they did, to 60, it becomes more difficult because, although your overheads have not changed, your income has been reduced. Indeed, what we have had to do is try to get various voluntary organizations or charity bodies to give us some subscriptions to make us viable.

12.15 pm

Now they are cutting back further and, to be quite honest, I think that what they are working on is getting rid of the ACE scheme, and that really annoys me intensely — where are these unemployed and disabled people going to go? What are they going to do? We employ an element of disabled people in the scheme who are only able to do limited things. But these people will be unemployable and nobody will be prepared to give them any opportunity to get into a work situation.

In addition, because we will not be able to employ these people, those who depend on us for a home-help service will not be getting anything either. The whole thing is very disturbing. I would like to think that this Government would show a little bit of caring which the last Government did not and try to do something to improve the situation and stop these cuts. In fact, I would like them to reinstate some of the finance so that the numbers can be increased again to make the thing viable. Otherwise, ACE is going to fold, and that will be very sad. The Minister must be told that he needs to do something about this, and if he is not going to do that, then he needs to replace it with something else to deal with the problems that these cut-backs will leave behind.

Mr Carrick: While I share some of Mr Benson's skepticism on the subject of ACE and its future, nevertheless I have to remind Members that when Mr Ian Walters and Mr Gerry Loughran addressed the Economy Committee they stated, clearly and plainly, that there was a role for the ACE programme. It was one of a number of measures that were being reviewed within the context of the Welfare to Work programme, but the early feeling was that the good points of the ACE programme would be integrated or incorporated into the Welfare to Work programme. Indeed, when they were pressed on this point, integration seemed to be very much part of their thinking.

So while supporting the motion in general terms, I acknowledge that we are in a transitional period. That is something that we do not have much control over, and we must acknowledge that. We must be realistic about this transitional period coming before the proposed introduction of the New Deal or the Welfare to Work programme which, theoretically, will address, under a package of initiatives, the wide range of unemployment issues. Coming back to Mr Casey's point, I understand that the Welfare to Work programme will not confine itself to the age group of 18 to 24, but will deal with other groups including those beyond the age of 24, those with special needs, those with disabilities and those in remote areas. The needs of all these people will be addressed in the Welfare to Work programme within the special Northern Ireland context. That was something positive that came out of the meeting with Mr Loughran and Mr Walters.

However, I hope that the experience gained and the lessons learned from the Action for Community Employment since 1981 will not be ditched but rather that its strengths and the positive contribution made to society over the past 16 years will be integrated into the New Deal programme.

The Northern Ireland Economic Council's response to the long-term unemployment consultation document highlights a number of weaknesses in the ACE programme. Those involved in ACE may not entirely accept the findings of the Economic Council. However, such weaknesses were obvious from the weak evidence regarding the long-term employment prospects of the participants. It was shown that ACE only caters for a minority of the long-term unemployed and that the work funded by the ACE programme is of a lower economic priority. I know that some people argue with those findings and assessments. However, the same Economic Council does acknowledge that the activities undertaken by ACE do contribute to the wider, social economy.

It is therefore essential that the valuable skills and infrastructure that have evolved under the ACE programme — and, in particular, the abilities of the core workers — continue to be used in the disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland. This essential element of the wider, social economy is best provided for at local community level by local people in a tailored, local programme. There is, therefore, a case for rationalization of the ACE programme so that it becomes refocused to address this niche in our local socio-economic life. But the Government must recognize that the ultimate success of any such programme is dependent upon adequate financial resourcing and the political will to support local initiative.

Continual pruning of financial resources has seriously weakened the whole structure of the ACE programme. Therefore, pending the integration of a refocused programme within the Welfare to Work programme, I call upon the Government to resist the easy option of further cuts in financial support until a cohesive, comprehensive policy is in place to address the long-term unemployment problem.

Mr McBride: I am happy to support the motion.

Unemployment is, of course, a major concern in Northern Ireland and a major scourge of the community. It is something that the Forum's Economy Committee has been looking at in great depth over a considerable period of time and its report will be coming before the Forum in a matter of weeks. The report will be wide-ranging and will, I hope, give us a chance to debate this major worrying issue.

This is a time of great change and uncertainty in dealing with unemployment. There is great concern that the ACE schemes, which have made an important contribution, are being killed off quietly by the withdrawal of funding and without any clear policy announcement.

The ACE schemes have, as has been said, come under a fair amount of criticism in recent times. Undoubtedly there are weaknesses and things that could be improved, and some schemes are less satisfactory than others. But, equally, there is no doubt that there are strengths there. A good deal of good work has been done and skills acquired. And another important aspect to the ACE schemes is that they have a real sense of local ownership, and it is extremely important that that is built on.

We are in a period of change and uncertainty. We now face the introduction of the New Deal. Much of that seems attractive as it is presented, but we simply do not know the details. We do not know what the implications for existing schemes are going to be. We need to develop that. We need to watch what the Government are proposing as it becomes clearer and think seriously about it. But we should be concerned that the good work that is being done and has been done is built on. We must build on the merits of the existing schemes as we move into a new approach which, I hope, will give us a new impetus in solving the problem of unemployment.

Mr Gibson: This morning we have listened, with some interest, to the comments that have been made by the Members who have addressed the motion. Sometimes our sympathy for the unemployed can affect our judgement. I can remember all of the Enterprise Ulster schemes as far back as my schoolboy days when small groups of men took off the bad side

banks on the rural roads. So efforts were made even then to try to cure the problem of unemployment.

Only last night, when I was looking at some of the problems in my own area, I heard people speaking in grandiose terms about bringing in 800 jobs. I realized just how unrealistic that is since we only have 248 unemployed people under 25 years of age and the vast majority of those have not got a skill. The 790 unemployed aged 25 and over in the area all worked in the construction industry before the depression in the building trade, and those men are now probably seeking diversification.

I am also aware that in Mr Needham's time he tried to tackle the blackspot problem of Strabane which had probably the highest unemployment rate in the west of the province. They sat down with all the area's major employers and eventually the discussion got so heated that they contacted the employment office. They brought out all the books and the employers went down the list and discovered that people there were adopting a five-weeks, four-days work cycle. All of the people had been employed by somebody at various times. But some of them were working the system — creating a dependency culture and avoiding losing out on a host of benefits — by breaking their work contracts before the six-week period was complete. I am not accusing anyone from the unemployed figures that I have quoted from the Omagh area of being in this bracket at all. But a necessary job has to be done on training and skills.

One of the largest employers in the county is Finlay Hydrascreens. But they have to bring in skilled welders. There are many men and young fellows in this group who can all weld. In fact, probably everyone in a rural area has had a go at welding at some time or other. But the skilled welding that is required for Hydrascreens, where various metals are involved, is a highly-technical job and, therefore, it takes a lot of training to get someone to the level required. But despite the fact that the Training and Employment Agency was encouraged to run a skilled-welding course, this was not supported by the private sector who deemed that the standards being taught were not adequate to enable workers to meet the demands of their jobs.

So, in supporting the motion, I want to see a work scheme created which will give each person a worthwhile skill: a skill that does not just jump a hoop to satisfy the agency providing it but one that is recognized by the private sector and so gives genuine employment prospects. In other words, there is no point in giving someone on a scheme, be it an ACE scheme, Jobskills or the Welfare to Work programme, the pretence of having a skill; it must be the genuine article. What I hear daily from the private sector is a demand for standards that are genuine and acceptable. Therefore, if we are going to produce welders, for example, those welders must come out of the scheme able to perform to the demands of that particular industry.

12.30 pm

Members who represent rural areas know that the FACES scheme involves a lot of stone-wall building. Most people recognize that as a job which is extremely skilled — almost an art in itself. Only a few people can reach the very high levels of competence required. We have discovered that some people are carrying out so-called skilled training programmes in

stone-walling, but the results of these have often been quite disastrous as one can see when one looks around the countryside. These people are not enhancing stone-walling. Indeed, some of the FACES scheme is becoming quite suspect. A stone-wall, the building of which requires a high level of skill, is supposed to look very attractive and quaint, but this training scheme is turning out to be unsatisfactory both to the person who has built the wall and, certainly, to those who have to live with it.

The intentions behind that scheme were good, but, again, it is the ability to deliver the skill to the required level and a persistence within the Training and Employment Agency to drive towards that level which seem to be lacking. There seems to be a reluctance within the agency to go to the top level of achievement. They may put this down to many things, but a new energy must be brought to the delivery of skills in whatever field, be it electrical, plumbing or whatever. When we are competing with those from the South of Ireland in, say, the technology market, we discover that they have sent their young people to America to areas known for their technological skills. They have come back well equipped with skills and they have created a pool of labour in the Silicon Valley of Cork which has an acceptable level of competence and which can meet the needs of the next factory coming into the area.

We have to think a bit more about what the needs of the region are. How do we drive the Training and Employment Agency to achieve those standards so that we create what is sometimes talked about very glibly but does not exist — this pool of skilled labour? The truth of the matter is that we have a pool of people, but when we look at those people — just over 1,100 males in my area — we discover that none of them could claim to be genuinely skilled. No one, locally, has the means of equipping them with the skills that an employer coming in might require. We are depending upon the private sector to fill a void, but the Training and Employment Agency also has a job to do.

This motion has highlighted the need in this society, but it has to be tackled in such a way that genuine satisfaction and prospects are brought to those who are unemployed. We, as a people, have always taken a delight and pride in our individuality and individual skills.

Ms Bell: This is a very significant and important motion. I hope that the Government will listen to the comments made here, many of which come from Members having direct experience and knowledge of the ACE schemes.

The recent changes in the ACE positions are just the latest in a wave of cuts in the Action for Community Employment programme. The Alliance Party joins other Members of the Forum in expressing dismay at these cuts and at the damage they will do to community projects and employment opportunities, particularly for certain vulnerable groups. There really is little new to say on this. We have had this debate before, but I want to reiterate a number of concerns. As always, already marginalized communities and groups stand to lose the most. The North West Community Network serves hundreds of community groups in areas with the highest unemployment rates in Northern Ireland. In a letter to the Secretary of State the network predicted that the impact of the latest ACE cuts would be devastating. The network felt that community groups, especially small ones, will be the hardest hit, with many playgroups, local community associations and pensioners' groups losing much-needed staff who run the local community services. The last time I spoke on this subject I talked about the situation in North Down. It has not improved — indeed, it has got worse.

Across Northern Ireland over 100 core, long-term community workers funded through the ACE schemes, will lose their jobs — over 100. The essential work that they have been doing in the social and economic development of their communities will be lost. Already local groups have had to eat into their overheads to compensate for earlier cuts, not just to ACE but to Jobskills, urban regeneration, youth services and even libraries and education funding. Increasingly, such groups are unable to take up the slack. Many are in debt because of the cuts. The impact of the latest restrictions will go beyond the target of a 25% reduction in filled places. The axing of these posts will make the task of meeting community needs more and more difficult as groups are forced to reduce to end services that they have been providing. Remember those services include meals for people, visits to people who do not have anyone else to visit them, and things like that — small but very important things.

The cuts to ACE beg yet again the question of the Government's stated commitment to the additionality of the European Union special support programme for peace and reconciliation. Community groups have been looking forward to developing new and innovative projects with the European peace funds. Now if they manage to survive at all, they may have to look to the peace package funds to maintain their core services. What will happen to these groups when the special support funds dry up in a few years' time? Similarly, can the £140 million that has been set aside to implement Welfare to Work in Northern Ireland be, effectively, additional to current funds, or will it simply make up the deficit in Training and Employment Agency coffers caused by the reductions to other programmes like ACE and Jobskills?

If the Government are serious about reducing unemployment, all programmes must be fully restored. The signs of additionality would be more people in paid work and new projects on the streets of Northern Ireland as community groups tapped into European Union special support funds, but additionality can only be proven at Treasury level.

No one has ever said that the ACE programme is perfect either for workers or for the community projects. ACE positions are short term, making it difficult for community projects to develop strategies for the future. The services provided by these workers, such as child care, home helps for the elderly and support for people with disabilities and so on, have been a mere stopgap in the face of inadequate public spending on health and other social services. However, if ACE is cut further, will there be anyone left to pick up these pieces? Their limited duration and low wages mean that ACE posts are also far from ideal for workers. Yet the experience and training opportunities provided by these schemes have been crucial stepping-stones for workers from traditionally disadvantaged groups such as women and the long-term unemployed, and especially for women who have been out of the paid labour force for long periods.

The Training and Employment Agency's corporate aim is to assist economic development and help people find work through training and employment services delivered on the basis of equality of opportunity. One of its six principle objectives is to ensure that agency policies and programmes promote our commitment to equality of opportunity and fair treatment. Allegedly, the recent cuts to ACE are the result of the Training and Employment Agency overspend. This mismanagement casts doubts on whether the agency is the appropriate body to administer the ACE programme. The agency's apparent disregard for a

programme that has been among the most effective in counteracting social exclusion by providing employment and social services for vulnerable groups calls into question its commitment to its stated aims.

There was a recent review in which an organization for the unemployed found that the ACE scheme was the most popular of the current Government employment schemes. It was particularly true for women who have been unemployed and for the long-term unemployed. Most of them had never been in the labour market or had only been in it for a very short time. They found that going into these schemes helped them not just to get a job for a time but also to reinstate some feeling of their worth and value within the community.

We welcome the Government's expressions of commitment to consultation and social inclusion, but we also hope that they will adhere to those principles by listening to the communities, by listening to people like us and by taking action to reverse the latest cuts.

I support the motion.

Mr Eric Smyth: I rise to support the motion.

The ACE scheme, to me, is very good, especially for those who may have been unemployed for a long time and who want to work and do something to support their families. However, I am a wee bit concerned that the ACE scheme does not go far enough. We need to concentrate on the up-to-date skills such as computer skills and the different skills needed in the aircraft industry and in the shipyard. There is not enough finance going into training young people in these skills. We hear many firms complaining these days that there are not enough young people trained in computers and yet there are many organizations struggling to get finance to get computer training off the ground and to take more young people on.

It is nice to have work for a year, but it needs to go beyond that. Young people need two or three years' training in order to get into the big industries. In my area there are many young people who try to get on to these ACE schemes but cannot get a job with them. Because of the cuts the money is no longer there to take them on. So, unfortunately, they are still on the buroo. These are young people who want to work, who certainly do not want to be running about the streets. They want to be out working and learning something and doing something.

I agree with many of the Members who have spoken today. We need to impress on the Government the need for more finance to keep the ACE schemes going. If there are going to be changes for the better, nobody will be against that. But if they are making changes simply because they want to get rid of the ACE scheme they should come out and say so. We had the Training and Employment Agency at a meeting of the Economy Committee. I remember that when they were asked if they wanted to do away with ACE they said they did not — they wanted to work with it and build on it and also work with the new businesses which are coming in and the new schemes that the Government are going to introduce. We do not know much about that at the moment. Everyone has a right to work, and we hope they do stand over what they say they are going to do to get people off the dole and into work again. We will wait and see.

But we are still concerned that they are cutting the ACE schemes. People do want to work and these schemes are a good opportunity for non-skilled people who may not have the ability to work in high technology but who can do manual work and so forth. It is good that they are able to get a job and do this. But these are the jobs that are being cut, and many people are finding themselves on the bureau for a long time.

The Chairman: There are a number of other Members who wished to speak but they are not here, so I shall ask Mr Hugh Casey to wind up.

Mr Casey: I would like to extend my appreciation to the Members from all the different parties who have risen in support of the motion.

This is a very important issue, especially for the people with whom I am associated in my area and who have participated in this programme for the last 15 years.

12.45 pm

I can think of quite a lot of young people of 26 or 27 years of age who have been to university — and gained degrees or honours degrees — who never had a job in their lives. They joined the ACE scheme, gained one year's work experience and received further training and, as a result, quite a lot of them have moved on. Some of them hold senior positions in the Civil Service; some went into industry and commerce; and some of them are personnel officers. If it were not for the ACE scheme they might still be unemployed, or, like quite a lot of graduates at the present time, they could be working in hotels as bar staff, waiters or waitresses. It is a terrible waste for a young person to devote four, five, six or seven years to his education and then find himself on the scrap-heap.

I heartily agree with Mr Gibson that we need skills, but quite a lot of the people he talked about have been failed by something which he was involved in himself — education. Some of them do not have sufficient skills in maths or even English while some of them have no knowledge of science. They have consequently found it very difficult to access programmes where these skills can be provided. It is going to take an integrated programme of education, training and employment to alleviate the long-term unemployment situation in Northern Ireland.

I am very pleased that members of the Economy Committee expressed the wishes of the people to those who gave evidence to the Committee — Mr Gerry Loughran, the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Economic Development, and the director of the Training and Employment Agency. I hope that the promises which were given will be honoured, but I am afraid that if they continue to impose cuts and financial sanctions on the programme it will not survive. It is my hope that the Training and Employment Agency and the Department of Economic Development will have a rethink on this and will find the money required to sustain the programme. We are asking for the programme to be sustained at the current level of 5,200 places — the level to which it was reduced in the original cut-backs.

I would like to remind Members that the ACE schemes have a signed contract with the Training and Employment Agency, which requires the agency to provide funding for so many posts for people coming into the programme. It is a breach of contract on the Training and Employment Agency's part not to fulfil their obligation having entered into it in writing. And this has been going on for years.

I defy anybody to run a business in which somebody else has invested money but is withdrawing that money at intervals. I do not think that the business would survive. Let us face it: the ACE programme is a business and ACE schemes have to be run as businesses. They have to go through the same things that businesses go through: they have to take out insurance; they have to maintain premises; and they have to buy equipment.

It is only through being innovative that some ACE schemes have managed to survive thus far. They have contracted to organizations like the Housing Executive — they cut the grass in gardens and then get a contribution from the Housing Executive towards the cost of machinery and protective clothing. They have entered into contracts to provide domestic services to the health and social services boards. However, restrictions were placed on them in that they could not do work which would normally be done by employed people.

It is a fact that quite a lot of contracts have been entered into. For instance, in Lurgan the social services have contracted out the meals-on-wheels service to a couple of organizations. This was permitted because they were not infringing on anybody else's employment and took place because the social services drew the line and stopped providing meals-on-wheels. They are now providing the voluntary organizations with some finance which enables them to continue to supply the meals-on-wheels service. This is how some of the ACE schemes have sustained themselves.

We have heard quite a lot of talk, both inside and outside the Forum, about the lack of pre-school provision and facilities for children under five years of age. But if it had not been for the ACE schemes, we would have been in a much worse situation. Most of these pre-school play groups were started by and sustained through the ACE programme. Every time there are financial cut-backs somebody loses his job in a pre-school play group and that either means that the children have less supervision or that the number of children has to be cut down. In some cases the pre-school play groups have disappeared altogether. This is another way in which ACE has provided a very necessary service — sometimes in very difficult circumstances — and I do not think that enough credit has been given to it.

The ACE schemes have also assisted with after-school projects of which there is a great shortage. This is where children are taken into community centres and community halls and are looked after until their parents come home from work. If it were not for these projects some of them would have been left alone at home, or left to walk the streets and get up to their own devices, or parents would have had to depend on a neighbour to look after them. Now they are encouraged to come into the centres after school to do their homework, play and then go home. This is a great release for their parents. Any of us who are parents know that when it comes near to bedtime and you try to get the children to sit down and do their homework, it can become a terrible experience — they are so tired that they cannot concentrate. The parent then has to sit down and spend a lot of time trying to encourage them to do it.

I may be digressing a bit. We heard about filibustering at the Business Committee — some people had been asked to speak for an extra 20 minutes. Nobody has approached me to do that but when it comes to the ACE scheme I probably get carried away. I have been involved with it for so long. Thank you, Mr Chairman, for giving me so much licence.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

This Forum expresses its concern at the recent freeze on recruitment in the ACE schemes. This freeze imposes a 25% cut-back in allocated placements. This could cause irreparable damage to the ACE schemes and the valuable services provided to the community.

The Chairman: I will be very happy to make sure that the record of this debate goes to the Minister. I am sure he will give it his attention, and I hope it will make a useful contribution to the debate on the ACE scheme.

I wish you all a very happy weekend.

The Forum was adjourned at 12.54 pm.