

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 31 October 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.00 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: I have been studying the Forum's recent Records of Debates, which indicate a growing tendency to stray from the subject. If the cap fits, wear it. I shall be less tolerant of even minor irrelevancies because if one Member is allowed to stray, it is tempting for others to do the same. Be warned.

We have a full programme of business today, so I suggest that we allow one hour for each of the two Committee reports.

LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT

Mr Nesbitt: One normally starts by saying "Thank you, Mr Chairman", but you have just said "Be warned".

The Chairman: "Thank you" is not irrelevant.

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum adopts the final report on long-term unemployment prepared by Standing Committee E (the Northern Ireland Economy).

First of all, I want to thank members of the Committee — in particular, the Vice-Chairman, Mr McAlister — for all the effort that has been put in to this report. I would also like to thank the Committee Clerk and his staff because long-term unemployment is probably one of the most difficult economic aspects to investigate. But Mr Clements has gathered various strands of information from a number of sources and pulled them all together and for that the Committee and the Forum are indebted. We also had the services of Mr Simpson, our adviser, to whom we also pay tribute.

I just want to make a few general comments about the report to set it in context, as it were, because other Members will be speaking in detail on the subject. We are not considering short-term unemployment; short-term unemployment here is now comparable with that in the rest of the United Kingdom, so that does not present the same problem as long-term unemployment. Northern Ireland has been one of the fastest growing areas of the United Kingdom, and, consequently, the labour market has absorbed a fair proportion of the short-term unemployed: those who are mostly well qualified, probably also well motivated, and therefore most likely to be employable.

It is the long-term unemployed who present the biggest problem of all. I think that a few background dynamics are relevant to set the scene because this report is not a panacea. But although this report will not in itself give an impetus to the elimination of long-term unemployment — the problem is a very deep-seated one — its recommendations are an attempt to resolve this intractable problem that has plagued us for so long and which will be with us for some time to come. For example, over the next 10 years about 40,000 jobs will be required just to keep the unemployed numbers at current levels. Migration has helped a great deal in Northern Ireland. However, if peace does come we will see — just as we did when there was a temporary respite from violence during the 1994 cease-fire — that people either do not migrate as much or, indeed, that they return to Northern Ireland. So the securing of jobs just to keep the *status quo* could be an ongoing problem.

Industry, in general, is concerned about the future of Northern Ireland, and even more now with the second cease-fire. Although there was a certain amount of euphoria after the first cease-fire, industry is now rather more wary of making a commitment, especially to bringing new industry to Northern Ireland, because of the uncertainty of the permanence of peace. "Once bitten, twice shy" is a phrase that might be apt here, and that is another aspect to it.

Northern Ireland is also heavily dependent upon the public sector — 132% more dependent than the rest of the United Kingdom. And we are beginning to see that the Labour Government, which came in under the guise of new Labour, could equally be described as new Tory because, if anything, they are as tight, or even tighter, on public-sector expenditure than the Tory Government were before. In fact, it might be fair to say, with all the ramifications associated with it, that the dynamics of public spending have become politically neutral; neither party will go back to the old fiscal policies of the 50s and 60s when in came big-spending Labour and then Tory tight restraint. That situation has gone, and we have to live with that.

Another factor is that one in three of the manufacturing employers in Northern Ireland are small businesses comprising 25% of manufacturing output. But, by very definition, the small-business sector cannot recruit large numbers to alleviate the unemployment problem, so that is another aspect worth considering. Even if jobs are created, as they have been, a large number of them are part time and go to females, whereas what has quite often been needed from the down-sizing of manufacturing through the past years are permanent jobs and male jobs. So there is a mismatch, to a certain extent, in terms of the type of jobs that are needed and the people who need them.

Another aspect of concern is the Department of Economic Development's estimate that manufacturing output in Northern Ireland will go up by about 40% over the next five to six years. Members may think that this is tremendous news but they reckon that this percentage increase in manufacturing output will only account for a 10% increase in jobs — a 10% increase in jobs as opposed to a 40% increase in output. The disparity between the two figures is explained by the increasing use of technology in manufacturing which means that you can have a lot of output with very little input in terms of the labour supply, and that is another problem with alleviating long-term unemployment. In fact, inherent in that is another

dimension which is that high-tech jobs require highly-qualified personnel and this, in turn, points up the problem of the lack of education and training among the long-term unemployed.

Another aspect coming through which does not help is the perception that the entrepreneurial get-up-and-go of the small-business sector needs a little bit of lifting, as it were. There is a feeling abroad that the small-business sector is more of a satisfier than a maximizer. In other words, the employer is satisfied with having enough to do and with having a reasonably satisfactory living standard, but he is not sufficiently motivated to make the small business grow large, which is what is required if more employees are to be recruited — yet another dimension to this problem.

One other point that I want to mention, which is not in the report — and I do not wish to get into a debate on it because I promised that this would not be a contentious morning — is the important distinction to be made in Northern Ireland between those who have and those who have not, and that transcends the religious divide here. The long-term unemployed represent the have-nots of Northern Ireland. They are to be found on the Shankill just as much as on the Falls; they are to be found in the west as much as in the east, though we accept the statistical fact that more Catholics may be unemployed than Protestants — but that is a different dimension and relates to the matter of discrimination which does not form part of this report. But what really needs to be alleviated in Northern Ireland is the difference between those who have a job — and, indeed, the public-sector people are very well off here — and the have-nots who are extremely badly off. And the have-nots transcend the political and the religious divide in Northern Ireland.

I just wish to draw Members' attention to two points in the report before other Members deal with other aspects. Item 63 on page 34 refers to the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme. We have debated the ACE programme before, and in that report we expressed some concern that ACE represents an aspect of the social and economic dimension in Northern Ireland which may not have been fully reflected in deliberations by others. We are therefore concerned about the ACE scheme to a certain extent. When Mr Loughran was questioned about this — and it is good to note this and put it on the record — he said

“What we are doing at the present time we will continue to do.”

He gave a commitment, therefore, to the continuation of ACE. However, he followed up his evidence of 25 September with a letter to the Committee dated 27 September and another dated 17 October in which he confirmed that consideration will be given to how the New Deal provision, as well as existing measures, can best be aligned to ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness in meeting employment and training needs. But there is no commitment in writing there; indeed, he added that no decisions have been taken yet pending consultation, so there is maybe a drawing back there to a certain extent. The Committee wants it noted though that he did give that commitment — and we have his verbatim evidence on record — that the present situation would continue.

One final aspect which I want to mention is contained in paragraph 9.4 on page 37 which deals with the need for training. That is a key element. There has been much talk about partnerships and about getting industry involved in providing jobs for the long-term

unemployed. Much has been said about the training required but you need an effective training process which will reflect people's aspirations and act as a partnership conduit with the employer's side by matching them with the jobs. So there is an important link between those who can give advice — those who are working through the Training and Employment Agency and various other agencies — and the unemployed.

10.15 am

It was interesting to note that the Northern Ireland Economic Council pointed up this very important difference between Northern Ireland and elsewhere throughout Europe: for every 150 people seeking work in Northern Ireland there is one person to give advice, whereas elsewhere in Europe — and they quoted Sweden — the ratio was 36 to one. There are far more people there to ensure that training is being provided and that people who go on training courses are matched to the employers' vacancies. That is an important link in the chain that must be there. When we asked Mr Loughran about that on 25 September — not too long ago — he said that they had not thought about it yet. Mr Walters of the Training and Employment Agency said at that same meeting that he believed that the advice service they were providing was of excellent quality. He said

"The service that they are getting at the moment is, I believe, a good one; the service that they will get in the future will be an even better one."

When asked what sort of bench-marks were used to judge the quality of the service he said that they had not yet been thought of. However, I refer again to this letter about ACE that we received from Mr Loughran on 17 October:

"Action is already in hand to ensure that staff will be in place and trained to deliver the New Deal from April 1998."

So we are told that action is now in hand to ensure that those people will be in place to deliver the New Deal.

Mr David Campbell: I listened with interest to Mr Nesbitt's earlier comments on the ACE scheme and read the report with interest. Would he perhaps comment on whether the Committee thinks that the agency or, indeed, the Department take ACE seriously. Do they recognize the achievements of ACE over the past 15 years?

Mr Nesbitt: My Friend, as distinct from the Opposition, asks interesting questions.

We had a discussion, as I said earlier, with the ACE representatives. They were concerned that they were, as Mr Campbell said, not being fully recognised by the Government and all the apparatus of government for the contribution they make. That is why we make that point about the social dimension of the contribution of ACE and the fact that there are certain aspects of the Northern Ireland economy that make a difference. We realise that ACE was brought in at a time when there was long-term unemployment and that they were filling a gap.

We were very concerned when we looked a little further at the Northern Ireland Economic Council's report on long-term unemployment which was rather scathing of ACE.

They made the point that ACE creamed off those who were most likely to find work. Therefore, as they pointed out, the ACE scheme was not made available to those most in need. They also pointed to a statistical fact which would perhaps be difficult to dispute: those who had been on ACE were no more likely to get a job than those who had not been on ACE. They also said that employers, when interviewing potential employees, were no more likely to interview someone who had been on a ACE scheme than someone who had not. So the Northern Ireland Economic Council were rather damning of ACE. They also indicated that funds which, as I said earlier, are tight should be redirected from ACE to other ways of improving unemployed people's prospects of finding employment, and we were concerned about that.

We asked Mr Loughran for his view. We put it to him that ACE was saying one thing and the Northern Ireland Economic Council another. In the context of that discussion the answer he gave was that all will remain. However, from what he has said later on in writing, one is a little concerned about his commitment to things such as ACE schemes. Nevertheless, when we questioned the Northern Ireland Economic Council on this aspect of ACE, that body indicated to us that one facet of ACE which perhaps needs to be looked at is the criteria that are used to select people for the scheme.

Perhaps this should not be about condemnation of the ACE scheme or condemnation of the large number of voluntary people who give of their best to try to help people into employment. Perhaps it should be about a tightening of the criteria by which people are selected and recruited to ACE. In other words, it is not so much about the destruction and elimination of ACE as about the adaptation of ACE to reflect a different situation. When we met with the ACE Federation they indicated that they wished to be adaptive to a new situation and that they did not want to be seen as some little do-gooder type organisation that did not make a real contribution to society. So we come down firmly on that one paragraph which says that, before condemning ACE, there is a need to look at just what contribution it does make. That, I hope, has given a rather full exposition. It was not something I had notes on to speak about in detail, but I think it reflects the tenor of the discussion that we had about ACE.

Finally, as I said at the outset, this report is not a panacea. There are underlying dynamics to the unemployment problem of long-term unemployment in Northern Ireland which will take much more than a simple report or a simple New-Deal measure to redress.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Nesbitt. I must say that I find this an excellent report, very business-like and factual and its recommendations are clear. I hope that we will not now say that we have dealt with long-term unemployment and that it will be forgotten about. Keep working at your 30-odd recommendations and see how they can be progressed.

Mr Carrick: First of all, may I apologize for the absence of the Vice-Chairman, Mr McAlister. It has not been possible for him to be with us this morning and, I will try to substitute for him. May I say, on his behalf, a word of thanks to the Chairman for his leadership, to the members of the Committee and for the administrative support that we have had from the secretariat. It is much appreciated indeed.

During the Committee's deliberations a number of recurring themes presented themselves in the evidence that was given and in the debate that ensued. These themes are identified in the report under section III: entitled 'Summary of Evidence'. The Committee pursued the examination of these themes and in section V of the report the conclusions are listed in the same thematic sequence for ease of reference. Two of the conclusions refer to access and culture — numbers 3 and 4 of section V of the report. I have been charged by the Committee to pay particular attention to these two conclusions.

There is and has been, I believe, an ignorance of, or perhaps an unwillingness adequately to address, the social and economic evil of long-term employment in some areas. By that I mean geographical areas — rural districts, for example, and remote towns and villages. But there are also the limitations of the existing employment programmes evident in pockets of social deprivation in what are generally accepted to be areas of affluence. There are also social and environmental areas where the current programmes have little or no impact. It is not only school-leavers and young people in working-class environments that it affects, but also, increasingly, we have the example of graduates from third-level education who find themselves unable to secure employment and thus join the aimless drift towards benefit-culture dependency. There are also the middle-aged who unfortunately, for various reasons, find themselves redundant. Valuable work experience obtained by those people ebbs away and is lost to society as they search in vain for another job opportunity.

Endemic long-term unemployment debilitates and reduces self-worth. It undermines self-confidence and destroys self-esteem. The creeping paralysis of hopelessness and helplessness prepares the way for the psychological acceptance of the culture of uselessness and idleness. Every effort must therefore be made to remove the stigmatization mentality from those unfortunately caught in the unemployment trap and from those who view the unemployed from the vantage point of gainful employment. The psychological and cultural impact, together with the social consequences of being unemployed for a long time, cannot be over-emphasized.

The knock-on effect of the parent being unemployed for a long period can adversely affect the attitude of a child in pursuit of employment, the child often opting for the easy option of following in father's footsteps and waiting for the giro drop. Indeed, whole communities can be engulfed in the long-term-unemployed-despair syndrome with the absence of motivation and stimulation giving way to unemployment inevitability and benefit-dependency culture. So, while it is essential to address the long-term unemployment problem from an economic perspective, with all the integrated training and education support which is obviously necessary, it is also vitally important to bring about change to the current mind-set.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: Would the Member accept — and I welcome the reference to culture in the report — that there are particular difficulties within our culture? One is that there is a perception that idleness is someone else's fault and also that idleness is almost irrelevant. Does the Member also accept that within our culture ageism is a particular difficulty in that older people are looked upon as being useless and younger people are seen as the only ones who have something to offer? I welcome also the reference to that in the report.

Mr Carrick: Thank you very much for the intervention.

During the deliberations of the Committee those very issues were addressed and recognized as being real issues and issues that must be incorporated into the Government's new thinking in the Welfare to Work programme. The new Welfare to Work programme must integrate elements of the existing programmes which have proved successful — for example, that part of the Action for Community Employment (ACE) programme which addresses local, social and environmental needs. But in addition the new programme, the New Deal, must include the following: first, safeguards against ageism becoming part of any solution for the long-term unemployed; secondly, measures to ensure that no second-class tier of unemployed is created; thirdly, targeting of education and skills training especially in areas of high poverty and social deprivation based upon accurate and reliable indicators (there was an acceptance that the Robson indicators were no longer a reliable guide to the totality of the problem); fourthly, a proactive and positive programme for rural areas to bring about a correction of the imbalance which currently exists in the social and economic fields; and fifthly, tailored and structured programmes to suit local needs, both geographical and social, which must meet the demands of and be in harmony with the local government economic units. The New Deal programme must also provide the motivation and incentive for the unemployed actively to pursue employment prospects rather than remain in the benefit culture.

10.30 am

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Does the Member share my concern that the New Deal, as propagated by the current Government, appears to be a raw deal for the unemployed? Does he agree that it is not an adequate substitute for many of the schemes that it is intended to replace and, indeed, appears to be inadequate given the terms of reference that have been set up by this Government?

Mr Carrick: Yes, indeed. While there are elements of the New Deal programme which, theoretically, should help to address the long-term unemployed, the Committee has reservations regarding its practical outworking.

Finally, the Welfare to Work programme must also include elements to stimulate and encourage individuals and communities, under self-help enterprises, to move away from this inevitable syndrome of long-term unemployment.

Mr Neeson: Like others, I would like to commend the report. It seems a long time since the Committee embarked on looking at the problem of the long-term unemployed — in fact, this was one of the first issues which the Committee looked at after it was formed. I am particularly pleased to see the report coming before the Forum today. It puts forward a number of very constructive proposals and, looking at the various appendices, I can see that quite a number of very eminent and relevant people have given evidence.

I intend to look at some of the recommendations that the report puts forward. I am particularly pleased that it gives recognition to the Robson indicators, which, I believe, have blatantly discriminated against a number of areas in Northern Ireland, particularly my area, Carrickfergus, as well as Banbridge, Castlereagh and even Moyle. We have been taking legal

advice on this issue because, quite clearly, there are large pockets of very high deprivation in so-called areas of affluence — I would question whether they were affluent areas even to begin with — and that is a problem. I am very pleased that it has been highlighted, and I would like to think that the Government will take the matter seriously. Not only does it impact on the question of where industry is located and the other factors which the Industrial Development Board (IDB) and the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) consider, it also impacts on all forms of grant-aid, including European money which is becoming more and more important.

Mr Morrow: I welcome the fact that Mr Neeson has highlighted the problem with the Robson report and areas like Carrickfergus. The Robson report does seem to have been very discriminatory to Unionist areas, in particular. In my home town, Dungannon, all the Unionists wards were left out; they were not deemed to be areas in great need. I welcome the fact that Mr Neeson has highlighted this and I look forward to his council — if it is his council's responsibility — taking this matter to task and to its findings.

Mr Neeson: I would not disagree with anything that Mr Morrow has said. It is a fact that those are the areas which have been hardest hit by the Robson indicators.

Recommendation number 8 clearly puts forward the scenario that a more proactive approach is required to encourage employers to take on trainees from the long-term unemployed. This is important because, as anyone who is unfortunate enough to have been unemployed knows, if you are out of a job, it is much more difficult to get a job. Employers must, therefore, recognise that being out of a job should not discriminate against applicants for jobs.

On the question of innovative, community-led initiatives, some of us tried last week to deal with the accountability and monitoring of various local, economic initiatives. There is a role to be played there and, quite clearly, the peace and reconciliation money, for example, has been helpful in local job creation. These local initiatives can complement the work done by the various job-creation agencies such as IDB and LEDU.

Another issue that is highlighted is to do with child care. I agree entirely with this one, and I am sad that the members of the Women's Coalition are not with us this morning. Recommendation number 17 suggests that the lack of affordable child-care provision should be addressed at community level in association with employers and the Government. In our modern society this important issue must be addressed. In my area, we are building a community development centre, which will be a major new initiative, and within that development child-care facilities will be provided. This is an important consideration for single mothers who want to go out to work and the recommendation is very commendable.

Mr Gibson: The Member has just touched on one aspect that concerned me as I was reading through the report. I refer to items 4 and 7 in the summary of recommendations. Was the emphasis wrongly placed on the cultural and psychological impact on the long-term unemployed? Having looked at a large number of Action for Community Employment (ACE) workers and having managed projects in which they were involved, I have found that they had a greater absence rate — a greater illness rate. Indeed, it was so noticeable that I have encouraged Queen's University to carry out research into the fitness of the school

population. There was evidence to indicate that some of these people were physically unable to work consistently and steadily for a 35-hour week, so they were lacking in the culture of employment, of promptness — the ordinary, very basic skills of turning up on time and carrying out a simple instruction to a reasonable standard. There is a perception in society that because someone is an ACE worker he is not expected to produce the same standard of work as a regular employee. I am a little concerned about the cultural aspects of this, and the standards to be demanded and expected should be embodied in any scheme and emphasized. A lot of employment is caught, not taught, and the right attitude to work is what is important.

The Chairman: Mr Neeson, will you take that on board?

Mr Neeson: Yes, Mr Chairman, although I think that that was a bit more than an intervention.

The Chairman: It was relevant, however.

Mr Neeson: It certainly was. Mr Gibson has highlighted an issue — in fact, a range of issues — that need to be looked at.

I would like to finish by highlighting the future of the existing schemes. As training director of Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency Ltd, I am very aware of the work that we have done over the years, particularly through Action for Community Employment (ACE) programmes. While I see some major benefits coming out of the so-called New Deal, I am concerned that the investigation and study that is presently being carried out by the Government and their agencies does not really tackle the future of the core work-force in the existing Local Enterprise Agencies. There is always the danger that change may be brought in for the sake of change.

I hope that the issues which have been brought forward in the report will be looked at individually together with the concerns that were expressed during the recent debate on ACE schemes. All of these issues should be looked at so that we can develop programmes that will be worthwhile and will provide sustainable employment for those who, unfortunately, have been unemployed for a long time.

Mr Casey: On behalf of the Labour Party I want to say that we welcome the report and wish to congratulate the Chairman, the members and the secretariat on its depth.

The report contains submissions and comments from many sources and highlights the complexities involved in dealing with the problem of long-term unemployment. It probably poses more questions than it answers, and that is quite natural given the complex situation for which so many solutions have been advocated.

Some of the themes running through the report seem to have almost universal support. One is the need for partnerships to tackle the problem. In its contribution, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) said that the lack of a co-ordinated approach from Government Departments, agencies and the private sector, combined with the social-security system which does not motivate individuals to find work, inhibits effective action to address long-term employment. There is a continuing requirement for community involvement and a

contribution from the Action for Community Employment (ACE) Federation itself, from district councils and even from the CBI, whose paper says

"Strengths

- parts of the ACE scheme are held in high regard
- schemes such as ACE which appear to have relatively good results do help to create the 'work culture'
- some people have obviously used the schemes wisely in their progression into 'real' employment
- some organizations appear to have an effective management and administrative set-up."

These are very important factors to consider when dealing with long-term unemployment in the future, especially the need for continuing community involvement. The value of the ACE scheme in tackling unemployment, allied to its social impact on the most vulnerable sections of society, cannot be emphasized too highly.

10.45 am

Another theme which runs through it — and Mr Neeson has already referred to this — is the need for more child-care facilities to enable single parents to participate and women to return to work after bringing up their families. That needs a concerted effort. There are moves afoot in England to provide more funding for pre-school provision and for nursery accommodation within primary schools. This would really be a step forward.

As I said in the debate on the ACE scheme, we have created a Foyer scheme which will provide accommodation with training in vocational and life skills and all the other things that make a person become more employable. We will also have a crèche in place for 44 children and after-school facilities for 40 children. Already we have places booked for 24 children, so once again this highlights the contribution that the voluntary sector is making towards creating employment, as well as tackling long-term unemployment.

One of the concerns that we have with the New Deal is that it is largely untried and, indeed, may infringe on or cause the demise of some of the existing tried and trusted provisions. We have five programmes at present, and the creation of a further four programmes under the New Deal will result in overkill. Somebody is going to have to suffer; somebody is going to have to go. Why put all the finance into the untried and ignore that which has been tried and has proved to be effective?

Secondly, we question the ability of the Training and Employment Agency to provide the necessary resources for the gateway aspect of the programme and for the counselling and advice element. It will take more than the people who are employed in the various job centres to provide this service, and who is going to monitor those who are going to be employed? The Department of Economic Development had a work scheme before under which people were on employers' premises for something like £20 per week, but there was no monitoring whatsoever. People were given a year's employment, after which they were chucked out and someone else was brought in. It became job substitution and cheap labour, and there is a very grave danger that the New Deal could go the same way if it is not properly monitored.

I was very impressed by the in-depth submission from the ACE Federation about how ACE could be improved. I sincerely believe that their proposal would create a worthwhile programme for providers who, being community-based, have the incentive, the structures and the expertise to make a useful contribution to the problem of long-term unemployment.

I commend the report.

The Chairman: There are five more Members to speak, and I would like to finish by 11.15 am if possible.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Are you trying to tell me something, Mr Chairman?

The Chairman: Not in particular.

Mr Hugh Smyth: You will be glad to know that I have a bad throat so I will be very brief.

First, I want to congratulate the Chairman, Mr Nesbitt, his deputy, the hard-working Committee and the staff for producing an excellent report. As Mr Casey said earlier, it asks a lot of questions. Naturally, it does not give us the answers — this is probably the most difficult report that will ever come before the Forum.

Unlike many others, I am not a big fan of the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme. I believe that there are real jobs which are being filled by ACE workers. Those jobs should be made permanent. Ask anyone who has been involved with the ACE scheme what happens. If you get an ACE worker in — as we have in many of our Shankill Road offices — it takes you three or four months to train him to do the job. You get about two or three months of effort out of him, but then he starts subconsciously to wind down as the end of his year approaches. And then you have to go through this whole process again next year and the year after. So it does not value the people who are supposed to be being employed.

Mr Casey: In the foreword to the submission from the ACE Federation they talk about the result of a survey of 23 ACE sponsors in north and west Belfast. We are told that 6,605 people have been employed by those groups over the past five years. Of these 2,449 (37%) have found jobs, and 282 (4.25%) have progressed into further employment. What I would like to —

Mr Hugh Smyth: I was only giving the Member a wee turn.

Mr Casey: He gave way to me —

Mr Hugh Smyth: But no further.

Mr Casey: I have not finished.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I am not giving way any longer.

The Chairman: You have made your point, Mr Casey.

Mr Casey: The point is that they are employed in offices on the Shankill Road to gain work experience and become more employable.

Mr Hugh Smyth: Let me answer that. Indeed, Mr Nesbitt answered it. There is nothing to suggest that the people to whom he is referring would not have got the jobs in any case. The mere fact that they are in an ACE scheme does not, in my opinion, give them a better opportunity than those who have not been in an ACE scheme.

Let us look at the damage that ACE schemes can do. I know young lads who went into an ACE scheme so that they could come off unemployment benefit. They went from around £40 a week on unemployment benefit to around £90 or £100 on an ACE scheme. They adapted themselves to a wee standard of living for that one year, and then, like the vast majority, they were dumped back on to unemployment benefit. I have found that such people are much more difficult to control and to live with. They do not settle down because for one year of their wee lives they were shown the bright lights, only to have them snatched away. Six thousand jobs were referred to, and there are many, many more. The Government should make those jobs permanent because they are paying the various different agencies in any case, and someone might as well fully reap the benefits of 10 or 20 years' employment. So I am not a great fan of ACE, much as I welcome it in my area. The money that is poured into ACE should be used to make those jobs permanent.

One of the other alarming facts — and Mr Nesbitt mentioned it to illustrate the difficulty of our situation — is that we are going to have to create 40,000 jobs simply to stand still. That is a very shocking thing to be told, but it is the truth. And this makes me wonder what the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) and the Industrial Development Board (IDB) do. I hear periodically that they have brought jobs here and brought jobs there. I have represented the Shankill Road for 27 years, and the IDB has not produced a single job on that road. To the shame of the IDB, the second biggest employer on the Shankill Road is the board that Mr Eric Smyth and I belong to — the Greater Shankill Partnership Board. Through its early years programme — which is something that I would recommend to people in other areas — it is the second biggest employer. Again to the shame of the IDB, one of the biggest employers in our area is a nursing home that we created ourselves. These two ventures employ something like 180 people, and that is an indictment of the IDBs and the LEDUs of this world.

Somebody spoke about how the long-term unemployed are treated. And let me say that I know plenty about the long-term unemployed because in the Shankill — and I am sure you are fed up listening to me saying it, but I happen to represent the area and I will continue to say it — we have areas where 70% and 80% of the people are unemployed. I know young lads who have left school whose fathers did not work. Some of them are married with children of their own; they do not know, and will not know, what it is like to earn a wage. And it is not idleness as some people say — they simply cannot get a job.

The Health Committee heard yesterday from an expert, and one of the alarming things that he told us was that the suicide rate in Northern Ireland is continuously climbing, and one

of the groups he concentrated on was the 40 to 45 year-old unemployed. So something needs to be done for that reason alone. Something can be done — I do not think it is unreasonable to expect an effort from the Government and the IDB and LEDU. For a start, those two bodies should amalgamate. And it is time they got real people on to those boards because that is half the difficulty — the people currently sitting on them do not have a clue about what they are about.

We hear a lot about the peace dividend and the money that would be saved in the security budget. This was raised quite recently, but John Major promised me privately that any money saved on security would be ploughed back into the various different communities. However, that simply did not happen. Not only did it not happen in my area, it did not happen in any area. God willing, if the process holds, there should be massive savings in the security budget. And if that does happen, that money should be redirected to the training and retraining of the long-term unemployed. We need to match people with jobs.

Mr Empey, Mr Sammy Wilson and I have been in America, and we have all done our best to try to bring jobs here. But the truth of the matter is — and I can prove it — that though we have been successful in bringing an American company (American Mutual) here, which will create hundreds of jobs, not one person in my area is going to benefit because they do not have the skills that are required by this company. However, the firm hopes that we can get people suitably trained for the second batch of their intake. This is something we did ourselves, but, because of lack of finance to train the long-term unemployed in my area, not one of them is going to benefit.

I call on the Government to fulfil the promises that the previous Government made. And they are on record as saying, no later than yesterday, that any savings in the security budget would be ploughed back into the communities. The one area that that money should go to is training. In particular, we all want to give our youth an opportunity because they are our future. But we should not forget those in their 40s, 50s, 60s — the forgotten people. I know people in this group who are signing on the unemployment register. They have to prove in writing that they have applied for jobs.

One person showed me a file containing literally hundreds of job applications. The heart-breaking thing, apart from his not getting a job, is that he had received only three replies from 200 applications — three replies telling him that he was unsuitable. A whole pattern exists there, and it is all built round that magical age group. It now seems to be that when you reach 40 years of age you are finished, and that is wrong. We need to emphasize strongly to the Government that people are really only starting their lives at the age of 40 and that just as we cannot forget our youth — the future, our tomorrow — neither can we forget these people who form the backbone of every society.

11.00 am

Mr Clarke: I would like to thank the Chairman, Mr Nesbitt, the Vice-Chairman and all the staff for the hard work they put into compiling this report.

The creation of jobs and the tackling of the long-term unemployment problem are vast and complex issues that affect many strands of the economy. One particular issue which was

highlighted during our discussions was the problem of education and training. When should training start? Should it start in the primary school, the secondary school or after children leave school? I believe that training should start at an early age in the primary school. It appears to me that those children who left school at the age of 14 in the 30s, 40s and 50s had a better basic education than children who are leaving school today. Sadly, in many of the deprived areas some children now leaving school can barely read or write. Is this a reflection on our society? In some cases the children's grandparents have never worked and their parents have never worked, and for such children leaving school this environment is a way of life; the norm is to follow their parents on to the dole, and they all become long-term unemployed.

At a recent conference in Newcastle, an education and library board representative mentioned a case where one of the further education staff had called with a young mother who had expressed an interest in attending classes. The first thing the young mother said was "If my husband comes in, tell him you are from the social services." Obviously her husband thought that education was not important and would be a waste of time; he did not see the point in it. At the same conference underachievement was discussed; it was pointed out that some children who were being assessed for further education courses could barely read or spell simple words. Teachers were having to spend time bringing them up to a basic standard of literacy before they could commence their further-education courses. I am not criticizing teachers in the primary schools or secondary schools, but it seems to me that teachers spend an awful lot of time writing reports, carrying out surveys and providing statistics when they should be in the classroom teaching.

There are other issues as well — for example, the social issues. In some cases there are problems with the type of environment that children are brought up in. So how do we break the cycle of low self-esteem and try to reintroduce the work ethic into our community? These people must be given hope that there is more to life than being on the dole and being dependent on the social services. The schools should be emphasizing that each of us has a part to play in society.

Greater emphasis should also be being placed on careers advice in schools which would be beneficial to children when they leave school. There should be a good grounding in secondary schools to prepare children for careers, whether it be in bricklaying, plumbing, welding or whatever. We have now left behind the old policy where secondary schools taught children the basic skills for employment in those firms that were looking not for high education standards but for people who knew how to do certain things. That has gone by the wayside. Secondary schools should also work closely with firms in their area to identify the job opportunities there.

There is a lot to be done, and it will be a difficult task, but if we can identify the problems, we will be on the road to finding a solution. I recommend the report.

Mr Sammy Wilson: First of all — and I am sorry he has left — I am sure that we were all very surprised to hear Mr Hugh Smyth's admission earlier that Mr Major had lied to him. I understood that Mr Ervine and others felt they could trust their then Prime Minister. He is not any longer, of course, because the British people did not trust him and —

The Chairman: I think, Mr Wilson, that you were not here when I gave a rather fearsome warning about sticking to the motion.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Well, I was speaking to the motion. He made reference to this in his speech, and it seemed to relate to this.

The Chairman: If you do not mind my saying so, you are getting into that favourite territory in Northern Ireland of "whataboutery".

Mr Sammy Wilson: It is not "whataboutery" at all. I just thought it was worth noting the point that the Prime Minister in whom the PUP placed so much trust lied to them. I wonder if he lied about the Union being safe as well?

The Chairman: Long-term unemployment.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Yes, I will move on to the issue of long-term unemployment now. Of course there are quite a few Members of the last Government who are now among the long-termed unemployed as well because they lied to the people, and that is probably one of the things which we should bear in mind.

Several Members have already covered the report in detail, and I do not want to go over that ground, but there are three general points that I do want to highlight from the report. The first is this: long-term unemployment is a problem to which there is no easy solution. Fifty per cent of the unemployed in Northern Ireland have been unemployed for a long time, and they have remained unaffected by any changes to the general economic situation; even when there is an upturn in the economy we still find this hard core of people who seem to be resistant to such buoyancy. In fact, this region has the highest proportion of the long-term unemployed who are seemingly resistant to economic change in the whole of the United Kingdom.

My second point is that dealing with the long-term unemployment problem is not something which we can do without cost. I noticed some of the figures quoted in the report on the Wise Group in Glasgow — I am a bit familiar with this because I have spoken to some Labour councillors there — which was also taken into Newham. And these councillors pointed out how expensive it was. The report mentions that it actually cost £14,100 per job created, and even after you take account of the reduction in benefits paid, there was still a net cost of £8,300 for each person taken off the unemployment register and placed in training schemes to help prepare them for permanent employment. Indeed, the present Government have recognized that in order to take 250,000 teenagers off the long-term unemployed register they will need to use all the proceeds from the windfall tax — so that is not an inexpensive option to deal with this problem.

We have had a plethora of schemes and there has been talk about the need for an integrated approach; some people like Mr Casey are advocates of the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme, whereas others like Hugh Smyth think that the ACE scheme has not served us very well. But one thing that we can be sure of is that in spite of having Enterprise Ulster, ACE and youth training programmes the problem has persisted. So schemes in themselves do not provide an easy solution — and they are expensive.

My third point — and it was mentioned earlier — relates to the culture of unemployment. I can remember when I was first elected to the council being involved with a member, or former member, of the Alliance Party, Mr Addie Morrow.

Mr Neeson: He is still a member.

Mr Sammy Wilson: I was not sure whether he had seen the light — maybe he has not. We set up a scheme in east Belfast for long-term unemployed youngsters, and one of the problems that we found — and it really confirms what Mr Gibson was saying — was that many of them even found simple things difficult. We were fairly harsh and we punished people with economic sanctions, but many of them just found the discipline of coming into work, staying in work — and the things, in general, which an employer expects from his staff — very difficult. We probably lost about 20% of the people who came on to the scheme because we eventually had to dismiss them for not adhering to the rules.

I also noticed a fair degree of honesty in some of the submissions which people made to the Committee — the ACE Federation pointed out that in some areas, and for some people, there was almost what they called socialized unemployment. It became socially acceptable; people adjusted their expenditure patterns and life-styles accordingly, and the ACE Federation made the point that there was actually resentment among some people who were asked to take jobs.

We can talk about this problem in general terms and say “If only the Government would throw more money at it, the problem would be solved.” But I do not believe that that is right. More money does need to be thrown at it, but ultimately there will have to be an element of coercion. Now that may seem very unpalatable to some, but the ACE people, employers and those who have been involved in various schemes all recognize the need to coerce a certain hard core who would otherwise resist such schemes because of the way in which unemployment has almost become socialized either within families or communities, and I think —

Mr Casey: Will the Member give way?

The Chairman: Please be quick.

Mr Casey: I was just going to ask the Member if he had heard about the jobseeker's allowance.

Mr Sammy Wilson: I have heard of the jobseeker's allowance.

The Chairman: That was certainly quick, Mr Casey. Well done.

Mr Sammy Wilson: I have heard of the jobseeker's allowance, and it illustrates one of the points which I have been making. Many staff in DHSS offices have witnessed the effect of its introduction: a resistance among some people to being told that they have got to go out and look for work. This is a problem that we have to recognize in all this because there are two sides to the unemployment problem.

My last point is that the public sector cannot be expected to carry sole responsibility for this: the private sector must also be responsible. I can fully understand why the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) talk about employers wanting people to be job ready, but it seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse. The very fact that people have been unemployed for a long time means that they are not job ready. Some have never had jobs.

If we are not to have this kind of cynical attitude that Hugh Smyth referred to — the attitude where people know that they are going on to a scheme for a year and then they will be off it again — we have to be sure that people are put into jobs which are likely to be sustainable, and I believe that the private sector is better able to deliver that than some of the public-sector schemes. We have to find ways — and the report mentioned some — in which we can persuade employers to do this.

11.15 am

Mrs Steele: May I start off by thanking the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, the secretary, Mr Clements, and the members for all their hard work.

The preparation of this report involved the Economy Committee in detailed examinations of long-term unemployment and its effects on society in general, and I have been asked to touch briefly on one aspect. I make no apology for saying that it is recommendation 9 — the old-fashioned one. I do not know why I was picked to talk about the recommendation that traditional crafts and skills should be preserved and encouraged.

The Committee was concerned that in this high-tech age, in which nothing seems to be done or is important unless a computer or similar equipment is involved, traditional skills and crafts are being overlooked, by the Training and Employment Agency particularly. It is essential, of course, that greater assistance be available to industry as an incentive to providing secure jobs for the long-term unemployed, but smaller industries and businesses, which are usually located in small urban or rural areas, must be included also.

Councils and all kinds of communities are being asked to preserve old buildings and wildlife habitats and to restore old cottages and mills so that they can be developed into heritage centres. For all of these things, traditional skills and crafts are necessary: building drystone walls, thatching, stonemasonry, wood-carving, lace-making, patchwork quilting — and there are many more. The men could do the lace-making and patchwork quilting.

The Chairman: And the women could build the drystone walls.

Mrs Steele: That is right.

We can all think of many of these traditional crafts which are worth preserving and give a great sense of satisfaction to the persons involved in them. In the Committee's deliberations, we found that in France — and, being fond of always promoting everything British, I regret that we had to look to that country for inspiration — colleges throughout the country use their facilities, encourage attention to and give training in traditional crafts such as stonemasonry and wood-carving, and we urge the Training and Employment Agency, with

the co-operation of the further education colleges, to do likewise. Of course we must encourage new industries, technologies and skills, but let us not forget to preserve our native and ancient crafts and skills for future generations and help long-term unemployment in the process.

I commend the report.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mrs Steele. That was commendably brief. Well done. Mr Eric Smyth, please.

Mr Eric Smyth: Mr Chairman, may I also congratulate the Chairman and Standing Committee 'E' for their good —

The Chairman: Yes. I have noted that. We will certainly do so.

Mr Eric Smyth: Mr Chairman, do not put me off my flow; you will only make me go on longer.

There are three things that concern me — education, training and research — and they are all important for the future of this province. They are important to young people and to all those who seek to work, yet the Government have cut their funding by millions of pounds. That is wrong. Our children need to be educated; when they leave school they need to be trained in all the new skills that are emerging, and yet we hear from many firms that there is a lack of training and the different skills are not there. The Government should pour money into firms to encourage them to take on young people, train them and bring their skills up to the necessary standard. We have Queen's University which does excellent research, yet the Government have cut its budget by thousands of pounds.

I can understand Hugh Smyth's point about the Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes. It is true that in many instances young people, knowing that they are there for one year only, do not make any effort at all, but I know some young people who have gone on an ACE scheme and have taken the opportunity to get further education in typing or whatever. Some young people have done well and have gone on to other jobs and a better future.

Let me say that it is not all doom and gloom on the Shankill Road; I reared six children on the Shankill Road and none of them has ever been out of work; they have all been working since they left school. Everybody knows that my two sons were in gaol; when they got out of gaol they had full-time employment within two or three weeks.

When I look at the 'Belfast Telegraph' and other papers I see many advertisements for jobs, and sometimes I wonder why there are so many job vacancies in the papers. Why are they not filled? Is it to do with the standard of training? What is the reason? Maybe the Committee Chairman, in his winding up, can tell us why these jobs are not being filled by Northern Ireland people if there is so much unemployment.

It is not that people do not want to work. A lot of people do want to work and are glad to get on to an ACE scheme for a year. They find that it helps them to get out of the

house and gives them hope that something good will come out of it. To be fair, a lot of good jobs do come out of it, and people do get full-time employment.

Education, training and research are the three areas into which the Government need to put money to encourage young people and the older generation who wish to work as well.

The Chairman: Well done, Mr Smyth. That was commendably brief.

Mr Poots, those were good examples for you.

Mr Poots: Given the time constraints you mentioned at the outset, Mr Chairman, I will restrict my comments to one subject, and that is the New Deal and some concerns that I have about it.

The New Deal is to promote job skills for six months, but national vocational qualifications, in general, take more than six months to do, and I have serious concerns that the New Deal will not give young people an adequate length of time to train and prepare themselves for going to work.

The best way of tackling long-term unemployment is to create long-term employment. I have some concerns about the fact that the Industrial Development Board is currently pushing inward investment; I would like to see a greater push being made towards innovative investment from Northern Ireland people in their own produce, using their own raw materials and human resources. For example, 75% of the plants that are bought in Northern Ireland are imported from Holland and other parts of Europe, and yet we have all the facilities here to supply them ourselves. This is a very job-intensive industry, but we have the human resources and we could train people in the skills required to take up these jobs.

I would also like to express concern about ageism. The whole push is for people under the age of 25; if you are over 25, you have to have been unemployed for over two years to get into the New Deal and the Welfare to Work scheme. There are many good people out there who are over 25 and looking for jobs, but they do not have the necessary skills; they need to be trained in different skills but they will not be accepted into this programme.

I am concerned about the six-month period which is not long enough, and about the ageism aspect of the New Deal.

I will leave it at that, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Poots. That was a wonderful example.

I call on Mr Nesbitt to sum up very briefly.

Mr Nesbitt: I will be brief.

Mr Poots raised the question of ageism. For the record, I refer to a letter dated 17 October from Mr Loughran, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Economic Development. He said that the New Deal

"will also assist people aged 25 and above who have been without work for two years to break out of the cycle of long-term unemployment through the provision of an Employer Option."

There would therefore be provision for all age groups. We will monitor that aspect in detail.

I want to comment on Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes. There has been a wide variety of ACE schemes and as regards the contribution they make to society, some are much better than others. Coming back to the point I made earlier, the criteria for selection used by ACE could be improved. There are many people working for ACE, and perhaps the best thing to do would be to adapt the ACE programme to reflect needs and build into its structure what is currently being considered for the long-term unemployed. It is not a wholesale elimination of ACE that we need, but rather an adaptation of it. We recognize that there are weaknesses but let us adapt those weaknesses and improve on them.

Someone said to me this morning that the forces — the military side of Her Majesty's forces — have large numbers of vacancies waiting to be filled, and perhaps people might even consider that. That was said to me this morning.

The Chairman: I wonder by whom.

Mr Nesbitt: Well, Mr Chairman, if you wish to admit it, that is fine; I was not going to say that.

Mr Poots mentioned inward investment and indigenous industry, and we are also concerned about that. Support should be given to local firms, although I add the caveat that many of them are of small-to-medium size. Indeed, as I said earlier, 25% of Northern Ireland's manufacturing output is from the small-business sector. They do not and, by the very nature of their size, cannot provide a large number of jobs for the unemployed. As Mr Poots said, what the long-term unemployed need are long-term jobs.

I thank all those who made comments and reiterate my thanks to the secretariat and members of the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum adopts the final report on long-term unemployment prepared by Standing Committee E (the Northern Ireland Economy).

ELECTORAL REFORM

Mr Neeson: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum adopts the report by the Committee on Electoral Reform and agrees to forward it to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for consideration within the Government's elections review.

First of all, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to express my thanks to the Committee Clerk, Gail McKibbin, who helped to produce this report within a short time-scale. Members are aware that the Government are carrying out their own investigation into abuses at elections, and the Committee has tried to meet their deadline. All credit is due to Ms McKibbin for the tremendous amount of work which she has put into the report. I would also like to thank the Vice-Chairman, Mr Gardiner, and the other members who worked so diligently to ensure that the report was able to be brought before the Forum today. In addition, I would like to thank all those who gave evidence; we found it very useful.

This report puts forward proposals that are intended to make Northern Ireland's electoral system more fair — more just. But these proposals are also being put forward to assist the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, Mr Pat Bradley. Amazingly, this gentleman, who would have been in a position to assist the Committee, took it upon himself to refuse to come before us to discuss the issues. It is absolutely disgraceful that a civil servant should behave in such a manner, bearing in mind that we are here to assist him. Along with other members of the Committee and, I am sure, Members who are not on the Committee, I am disgusted at the attitude that has been adopted by this gentleman.

We must ask ourselves why this Committee was set up.

11.30 am

As Members are aware, we did have a debate here in the Forum about the electoral abuse that has taken place not only at the elections of this year but also at previous elections. Recognizing that many of the problems that have arisen have not been dealt with — and have not been dealt with by the Chief Electoral Officer, whom I believe should have been more forthright in dealing with the issues which he himself identified as major problems — the Committee was established to review the electoral process in Northern Ireland. It was quite clear to us that the electoral process in Northern Ireland has become contaminated by such things as the stealing of votes, multi-registration and also by the fact that democracy in Northern Ireland has been damaged by the blatant abuse of the electoral system over the years.

The report itself is a complete package, and Members must recognize that. I do not think one can isolate one recommendation from another. It is a complete package and, as such, it should be taken on board. We deal with the whole question — registration, the abuse of postal and proxy voting and preventing voting personation. This practice that we have in Northern Ireland of vote stealing is absolutely despicable. I do not want to go into detail on all the issues raised. I will leave that to the other members of the Committee. What I do want to dwell on for a short time is preventing voting personation, one of the major issues

that the Committee took on board. There is clear evidence that personation is widespread. I draw Members' attention to 7.4 in the report where a presiding officer stated

"In my position I could personally identify voters impersonating using allowance books, et cetera, but needless to say it is not my duty as Presiding Officer to refuse."

I will come to that issue later. A polling clerk and presiding officer said

"I have observed blatant impersonation on a large scale. Introduction of an election identity card is essential. Passports and driving licences are OK, but benefit books and plastic national insurance cards are a sham."

Mr Bradley in his report of 1993-94, which we found very helpful, acknowledged that concern had been expressed about the appropriateness of including medical cards in the list of prescribed documents as they are relatively easy to forge. So the evidence is there that personation at elections was widespread and did create major problems. The Committee is quite clearly of the opinion that the list of specified documents which an elector is required to provide before he or she is handed a ballot-paper is open to abuse and strongly believes that the list is being abused.

The Committee also strongly recommends that, in the first instance, the legislation should be amended to require photographic identification to be produced before a voting paper is handed over. Further to that, we believe also that the signature of an elector could be an important move to improve the system. The elector would not only be required to sign the electoral register, but when he came to vote he would be required to sign then as well.

As a Committee, we have been very realistic in the way we have dealt with particular issues. On the question of ID we have put forward three options to the Government, and those three options are: a national identity card which could be used in association with other matters; a voting card which all electors would have to produce before a voting paper was handed over; and a voting identity card for those electors who do not have the appropriate photographic identification such as passport, driving licence and so forth. Clearly the Committee is prepared to be flexible on this issue in that there are options for the Government, but the one principle which we fervently and strongly believe in is the principle "No photo; no vote." The Government must take this on board. We also believe that it is the clear duty of a presiding officer to refuse to issue a ballot-paper if there is doubt about a voter's identity — an objection from a candidate's polling agent should not be required. The onus should be on the presiding officer. That is just one of a number of issues that we looked at.

The report itself, we believe, is viable and puts forward ideas and proposals that can work. But one of the important aspects of it is this: if it is to work, and if we want to create a democratic system that is fair and just, the Government must be prepared to put forward the resources that are obviously required. No doubt Members will relate to some of these issues in the course of the debate. It is our intention, if it gets the approval of the Forum today, to forward the report to the Government. We have already requested an early meeting with them because there is a great deal which the report can contribute to the issue.

I am also aware that next week the Northern Ireland Select Committee will be dealing with the matter of electoral reform. And you will never guess who is going along to give evidence. None other than Mr Pat Bradley. We look forward to hearing what Mr Bradley has to say to the Select Committee next week.

We hope to meet with the Secretary of State in the very near future. It is our understanding that the Government will be bringing out an early response to the submissions that have been already made and what we are putting forward today will form an important part of that.

It gives me great pleasure to propose the adoption of the report by the Forum, and I look forward to hearing the contributions from Members.

Mr Gardiner: I would like to pay tribute to the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Neeson, for his efficient and effective leadership. I would also like to thank all the other members of the Committee for their hard work during its deliberation and for the constructive manner in which this report was put together. I want to record a special word of thanks to Ms McKibbin, who so graciously and professionally served the Committee as its secretary. This report is an example of how parties can work and co-operate together.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the individuals who presented written and oral evidence to the Committee. As the Chairman has already mentioned, the Committee was extremely disappointed by Mr Bradley's refusal to meet it and by the understandably similar refusal by Mr Bradley's staff. The Committee was also disappointed that no response was received from any quarter of the SDLP, given that some of their party members had been very vocal about electoral abuse following both elections in May past. No later than Tuesday 28 October, the 'Belfast Telegraph' printed in bold print "SDLP challenges electoral office". It would have been more appropriate if Mr Attwood and his party had been represented here.

There are quite a number of recommendations in this report which indicate how unsatisfactory the current electoral procedures are, and there are various issues within the electoral system which need to be addressed. The Chief Electoral Officer has, through his annual reports, indicated that he has been concerned for some time about several aspects of the system, but he has not, unfortunately, put forward any suggestions for solving the problems. The Committee welcomes the Government's review of what is an extremely important issue in a democratic society and which could be of extreme importance should there be a referendum on the future of Northern Ireland.

I add my support to the Chairman's view on the identification issue which the Committee viewed as one of the most important matters. Many issues are covered in the report, and the need for accurate and up-to-date registers is another vital one. Members of the Forum are very aware of the inaccuracies that have occurred in the electoral register. These have included multiple registrations and people being left off it. As the report indicates, the Chief Electoral Officer has a duty to compile an accurate register and to set up the necessary procedures for checking and confirming the information which has been supplied by householders. The Committee therefore recommends that the register forms should be revised to seek the signature, date of birth and national insurance number of each elector.

This additional information would provide the necessary information to enable the Chief Electoral Officer to identify more accurately the occurrences of multiple registration.

The Committee also believes that interfaces should be set up between the electoral office and the appropriate authorities so that the electoral office is kept informed of deaths by the registrar of births, deaths and marriages and of new housing developments throughout the province by the planning and housing authorities so that the names of people who moved into new housing developments can be added to the register. Such interfaces could play a significant part in maintaining an accurate register. An inaccurate and out-of-date register provides the scope for the abuse which is currently so apparent in the system. In many cases, a handful of fraudulent votes can make the difference between one person getting elected and another. An accurate and up-to-date electoral register would provide the basis for a fair and more efficient electoral system.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: While many of these proposals are very good, they are really dealing with the symptoms of a problem. When you have so many people acting in a criminal fashion, it is the fact that civil Government are not going to do anything with them if they are caught that is the difficulty. If they were caught and put in gaol, we, who are responsible, would have to subsidize them and pay for their keep. That is the fundamental problem. You can have all these restrictions, but you will not stop it unless there are suitable penalties for these people.

Mr Gardiner: I could ask what the alternative is, but I will not prolong it any further.

The Committee addressed many other issues which are important for providing a fair and more effective electoral system. The Chief Electoral Officer must be given the financial resources as well as the necessary staff and equipment to enable him satisfactorily to maintain an accurate register and carry out the recommendations in the report.

I commend this report to the Forum and hope that it will get full support.

11.45 am

Mr Peter Robinson: May I join in the tributes being paid to the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman and members of the Committee and also in the commendation of the sterling efforts of the secretarial team led by Gail McKibbin. I have in front of me, as a visual aid, the documentation that the Committee received, and I think of poor Gail having to photocopy all of this about a dozen times — it probably touched the ceiling — to provide the background information that enabled the Committee to do its work.

This was a very thorough investigation, hampered only by the refusal of the Chief Electoral Officer to appear before the Committee. It bodes ill for any changes that the Secretary of State might deem appropriate that we do not have a Chief Electoral Officer who feels sufficiently confident to come before elected representatives and answer their questions. It is interesting that the same Chief Electoral Officer is prepared to go on radio and television and answer questions but is not prepared to come before those who could question him with a much greater detailed knowledge of events at the times of elections. It was a very poor

performance on his part. However, he has not escaped the net. As the Chairman has already indicated, the Select Committee of the House of Commons will have the Chief Electoral Officer before it on 5 November — we will no doubt put a keg of gunpowder under him when he comes along.

I will attempt not to trample over ground that has already been walked over by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman. As I see it, the key issue in this matter is the need to have an accurate electoral register. We do not. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff have indicated that by the time any electoral register is published, it is already about 10% or 15% inaccurate. It is quite remarkable that we can have 80% and 85% polls from a register when only 80% or 85% of the people on it are entitled to vote. That seems to indicate that either everybody in a constituency who is entitled to vote is doing so or else someone is voting for them. These corrupt practices must be looked at because there are people who are seeking to tilt elections in their favour by stealing other people's votes.

If we look at the electoral register issue, the first matter that we have to deal with is filling the gaps. I find it absurd that in my own constituency the electoral register jumps from house number 2 to house number 8, and then goes on down the rest of the street. The electoral office, with the most simple computer programme, should be able to see where the gaps are and seek out the people who are entitled to vote in the houses that are absent from the list. This does not happen. We have electoral forms going out for registration which are not collected by the Electoral Officer's staff. The Chief Electoral Officer has to be made responsible for ensuring that everybody who is entitled to vote is on the electoral register. It just does not happen. Indeed, the form that is sent out to each home does not have printed on it the address where it should be returned to if it is not collected. There is a little space on the form which should contain the return address, but nine times out of 10 there is no address in that space. While those of us who are active in politics may well know where to send the form, the ordinary man in the street probably does not, and he is not going to take the time to find out. So it is important that the duty is left with the Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that anybody who is entitled to vote is on the electoral register.

Then there is the issue of multiple entries in the electoral register: people who decide, as certain well-known Sinn Féin personalities decided, that they not only require one man, one vote, but as many as five or six votes for every one of the Sinn Féin thugs that one sees around Gerry Adams — some of them were recorded on television as being multiple entries on the electoral register. We have got to ensure that there is only one entry per elector on the electoral register. Some have the convenience of being registered in more than one place. It is not an offence to be registered at more than one address on an electoral register, but it is an offence to vote more than once. There is a temptation, I am sure, for people who are registered more than once to take full advantage of that. We must ensure that a person is entitled to be registered only once in the electoral registers for Northern Ireland.

We must also have sufficient safeguards to ensure that the electoral office is able to check on whether or not there are multiple entries. It is insufficient simply to be asking for the name, address and date of birth if a person is under 18 years of age. Everybody's date of birth needs to be given because that is a way of cross-checking the electoral register. Everybody's national insurance number should be given — another means of cross-checking the electoral register. The other means that the Committee felt was appropriate was the

signature. Each entry on the registration form for the electoral register would be signed. The signature would not be available on the published register but would be available in the polling station. If someone came along with a Sinn Féin-printed medical card, or whatever, to claim the vote of someone else, and actually had to sign for that person, the electoral staff in the polling station would be able to check the signature given at the polling station against the one that was given at the time of registration. If the two did not equate, then quite clearly an offence would be being committed.

Those are the three things — the date of birth, the signature and the national insurance number — that the Committee felt it would be appropriate for the staff at the polling stations to have to enable them to draw the necessary conclusions.

The next issue is that you need to have appropriate computer cross-checks. Therefore, you need a computer programme and finance available to ensure that the electoral office staff are in a position to carry out those checks.

Mr Empey: Is it not the case that there may be legal difficulties in getting access to the computer which holds national insurance numbers because of privacy laws and things like that?

Mr Peter Robinson: It is another Government agency, so it should be easy to overcome those difficulties.

In another part of the report we have asked for legislation to include a requirement for the electoral office automatically to be given details of all planning approvals so that it would know every new house and, therefore, every new resident and could ensure that each one was put on the electoral register. Also the registrar of deaths, births and marriages should be required to inform the electoral office of the deaths of individuals so that the names of those people could be taken off the list immediately and the presiding officers be informed that they had died. The dead have performed a very useful service to some candidates in the past in Northern Ireland, and there is a responsibility on us to ensure that they are allowed to rest in peace.

Apart from the computer checks that can be done by cross-referencing, there is a need for random checks by the Chief Electoral Officer on the electoral register — random checks on applications for postal and proxy votes to ensure that there is some monitoring. If people put in last minute applications for postal votes or whatever, it may be that they are going to get off with it, but the possibility should be there that their applications will be taken out and checked. All those things will tighten it down.

The Chairman said that there is need for proper identification. I want to make very clear the caveat that I hold. I do not want the removal of medical cards from the list of items for identification unless there is a suitable alternative for ordinary people who do not go on two holidays a year and do not have a passport and do not have a Porsche and, therefore, a driving licence — the people who rely on their benefit book or medical card as a means of identification. If there is ID for everybody, they will be included in that, but do not take out the most used item of identification without replacing it with something that the electoral

office can easily provide for everybody who is on the electoral register and it would be the electoral office's responsibility to make such provision.

Finally, the aim, so far as the Committee and all other democrats are concerned, is to ensure that everybody who is entitled to vote and who wishes to cast a vote at an election in Northern Ireland should be able to do so — no one should be robbed of that entitlement by another.

The Chairman: I take it you will be there to light the fuse on Gunpowder Plot day on 5 November along with Mr Donaldson — two good men for the job.

Mr Casey: Labour welcomes the report, and we congratulate the Chairman, and Vice-Chairman and the Committee. I think a special word of thanks is due to the administrative staff for what was a fairly onerous job. They did a very good job not only with all the correspondence and investigation that had to be entered into but also in compiling quite a sizeable report.

There is no doubt that there is serious abuse of the voting system in Northern Ireland and that personation is wholesale. There is very serious abuse, especially in applications for postal and proxy votes. The present method of identification is inadequate and it has contributed to the serious abuse of the system, as the evidence in recent elections has shown in particular areas.

The Committee had a very difficult task to perform, and it was made all the more difficult by the refusal of the Chief Electoral Officer to provide any information or to come to give evidence. This was further compounded when the deputy officers and the returning officers were also discouraged — that might be the mildest word — from giving evidence.

I do not want to reiterate what has already been said; I think Mr Peter Robinson went into it very fully. I would like to congratulate the Committee on the report. We hope it will go some way towards convincing the Government that something serious has to be done to counteract this abuse of the voting system.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I will, of course, be brief.

My party's representative on the Electoral Forum Committee, Ms Dawn Purvis, wanted me to say a few words about the work of the Committee and the report. It was a complete and comprehensive report, and I commend the Chairman, Mr Neeson, the Vice-Chairman, Mr Gardiner, the other members of the Committee and the very hard working secretary, Gail McKibbin.

It was not the purpose of the Committee to make voting inaccessible to those who have the democratic right to vote. Indeed, the Committee's recommendations, taken collectively, should, if they were implemented, ensure that all those people who are entitled to vote are able to do so. That includes the able-bodied with a disability — for example, those with learning problems and those who have difficulty hearing or seeing.

12.00

The report also makes provision for the security forces who, because of the threat to their lives, cannot put their names and addresses on published electoral registers. This provision also takes account of men — and more especially women — who, for whatever reason, may be at risk from an ex-partner, something which some people are inclined to forget at times.

The Secretary of State should take serious consideration of the Committee's report, especially those recommendations that deal with cracking down on the abuse of the postal and proxy-voting systems.

Finally, may I say that the failure of the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Pat Bradley, to address the Committee either orally or in writing does not in any way detract from the report. In fact, I wonder if the gentleman's evidence could have added to its quality.

Mr Stoker: My colleagues on the Committee have already covered a number of issues regarding the electoral process. I would like to highlight two aspects of the report: they are the location of polling stations and the problems of access to polling stations for people with disabilities.

Everybody would like to have a polling station on his own doorstep, but that is often not possible because of local geography and the lack of facilities available. We believe that it is possible to have a system where people could vote at a station close to hand instead of having to drive past two or three polling stations to vote at one several miles away. I know of people from the Lisburn Road area who live just 30 yards from one polling station but who have to travel about a mile to vote at another station. It should not be too difficult for someone in the electoral office to sit down with a map of a ward and pinpoint a suitable location for a polling station. If there is not a suitable one there, a temporary station should be provided. Polling stations should be suitable for and accessible to all voters.

We heard evidence of instances of schools being used where the voting room was located up a flight of stairs. Now what chance is there of someone with a disability managing to cast a vote in such conditions? That is not an isolated incident; that sort of thing happens right across Northern Ireland. I reiterate that all polling stations should be accessible to people with disabilities, and if that means more financial expenditure, then so be it. People with disabilities are not second-class citizens. In this day and age it is unbelievable that some people have to be carried into polling stations to cast their vote. People with disabilities reject the idea that voting by post is an acceptable substitute for voting along with the rest of the population.

If the recommendations in this report are to be carried out, finance will have to be made available. The Government will always say there is not enough money to go round, but what price do we put on democracy? It does not matter what system of voting is in place: every voter should be allowed to cast his vote in his own way.

I commend the report.

Rev William McCrea: When the Forum originally discussed the electoral irregularities on 13 June 1997, it was agreed by all that many such irregularities did take place at the recent parliamentary and local-government elections. The machinery of voting is the foundation of a democracy, and if this machinery is not accurate, the voting is not honest.

I thank the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Neeson, for the manner in which he chaired the Electoral Reform Committee, ably assisted by Mr Gardiner, and on behalf of my DUP colleagues on the Committee I would also like to express our tremendous gratitude to Gail McKibbin for all the hard work that she put into this excellent report.

Members will find that the report is comprehensive. It deals with all the issues that were outlined in the DUP amendment to the original motion that was accepted by the Forum. I also want Members to understand that not only were the report's recommendations given most earnest consideration by the Committee but the conclusions that we reached were reached unanimously.

Along with the other members, I regret the lack of interest shown by Mr Bradley, the Chief Electoral Officer, and his refusal to meet the Committee is worthy of mention yet again today. The Committee, the Forum, the general public and Mr Bradley in particular ought all to have concerns in common about electoral irregularities, and we ought to be working to a common agenda, with the aim of achieving the honourable goal of getting rid of electoral irregularities once and for all.

I am delighted, however, that Mr Bradley will have to appear before the Northern Ireland Select Committee, and I trust that those Forum Members who will be scrutinizing his presentation will do so with the clear backing and authority of the Forum today. I am sure that dissecting what will be Mr Bradley's useful contribution to that Committee will exercise our minds on this matter further.

The Electoral Reform Committee may wish to make a further presentation to the Forum on the matter. We have identified issues which are very serious indeed. We mentioned the removal of multiple entries from the electoral register, and we firmly believe that the Chief Electoral Officer has an important duty here to compile an accurate electoral register. And he also has a duty to ensure that when the electoral registration forms are being collected there is a full investigation into all cases where a house type and the number of entries show a clear discrepancy. The time has also come for there to be a meaningful penalty imposed on those people who fail to supply the required information or supply false information. But there is no use having a penalty unless that penalty is enforced.

It should also be the duty of the Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that the electoral registration forms reach every individual voter and that they are collected. In many areas of Mid Ulster, whether the post office did not send the forms or for whatever reason, the forms did not arrive at the homes. And, in some instances, nobody from the electoral office arrived to collect the forms either. It ought to be the Chief Electoral Officer's duty to ensure that the registration voting forms are sent to all homes and collected by his officials. The situation at present is intolerable.

I want briefly to mention two other issues which are important because they were relevant to both the local-government and the parliamentary election results: postal- and proxy-vote abuse. It is absolutely disgusting that people fraudulently claim postal and proxy votes. The problems here have been acknowledged by Mr Bradley. It is interesting to note that while this abuse has been going on and fraudulent claims have been made, no action has really been taken; persons are not finding themselves in the courts. And it will only be when they do find themselves in the courts and have penalties imposed that this abuse will stop. You can talk until you are blue in the face, but unless action is taken, nothing will change.

I believe that Mr Bradley contributed to some of the problems himself, because in the last elections he brought all the postal and proxy votes to his central office. He did not allow the local electoral officers — who know many of the people who were claiming fraudulently — to deal with the matter. He brought them centrally to people who had no knowledge of what was going on.

My final point relates to the absurdity and the weakness in the present system, as evidenced during the last election, when some people arrived at the polling stations and presented the part of their driving licence with the photograph as evidence of identity. Because they had not got the piece of paper on which endorsements are recorded, they were refused their vote. People could walk in with a medical card — many of which were manufactured outside the polling station on the boot of a Sinn Féin supporter's car — and they did not have to produce any other identification to show that they were actually the person named on that card. In one station, the presiding officer witnessed a person returning nine times — and yet he could do nothing about it. He challenged the person, of course, on the final time, but he realized that even in doing so he was overstepping the mark because the presiding officer has no right to challenge on this matter.

This brings our democracy into disrepute and contempt. Therefore it is important not only that this report is taken seriously by the Government, but that action is taken urgently. It is a realistic report; it is a comprehensive report; and it is an objective report. It is important that the Government take it and act upon it because we need immediate action.

Mr Coulter: Most of the major points have been covered. Suffice it to say that this report exemplifies the importance of the Forum; it would have been extremely difficult for any body to have produced a report of this magnitude. Yet when we read the report we realize that we are dealing with the very heart of democracy, and the abuses which have been mentioned in it strike a dagger at that very heart. This report is therefore of immense importance not only to those of us who are involved in politics, but to the entire population who want to see these abuses rectified so that we can have a fair and equitable system which will punish those people who abuse or attempt to abuse it.

There is only one other point that I want to raise — there is no point in going over everything else. It relates to the difficulties experienced by the security forces in registration and voting. We all know that the security forces play a vital role, not only in the defence of the polling stations and of those who go to vote but in enforcing the law in the matter of voting. Yet they themselves are experiencing extreme difficulties. This particular recommendation is one that must be taken on board by the Government so that those who play a vital role in the security of the election process are themselves allowed to vote with

ease and comfort. I have great pleasure in concurring with all the congratulations given and commending the report.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Before endorsing this report I would like to associate myself with the numerous comments that have been made right across the Chamber today and congratulate the Committee Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, its members and, of course, the great work by the secretariat, in particular, Miss McKibbin. We genuinely appreciate those efforts.

When you get to this point in a debate which has been so harmonious there is very little left of the carcass to pick over. But I will try to select one or two points which may have a little bit of substance in them and pick some meat off those bones.

12.15 pm

Much comment has been made about the activity of the Committee, and, of course, I agree that this is a very focused report. It has not tried to go into areas which did not concern it. It stayed on the rails upon which it was placed, and it has focused on those matters which are of greatest concern with regard to electoral reform. The Committee has to be congratulated for not being waylaid, for keeping the blinkers on and for concentrating on the issues which lie at the heart of this debate. It is important that we reiterate the point that has been made about Mr Bradley.

Mr Bradley has been able to run from the Forum and the Committee, but he will not be able to hide. Next week he is due to appear in front of the Westminster Select Committee, and I hope that the questions that we wished to ask will be put to him there. And Mr Bradley will have to answer those questions then.

It also proper that we reflect on the attitude of the SDLP. They are very good at pointing out in television debates that there has been electoral fraud — indeed, they genuinely refer to prima facie evidence of a breakdown in the electoral process. The SDLP had an opportunity to make this report even more important and credible by adding to it, but they failed to do so, and their failure must be put on the record.

A number of important matters were examined, and, ideally, we would like to see each of our recommendations implemented. But I want to associate myself with the two key issues which go to the heart of this. My Colleague Mr Peter Robinson spoke about the need for an adequate and accurate register and the issue which other Members, including Mr Gardiner, also mentioned, that of identity.

Identity really does go to the heart of this. We are confronting a major, corrosive problem which contaminates democracy itself. People who act in a military fashion and steal a fundamental civil liberty — and that is essentially what they are doing through voter personation — are taking a fundamental liberty from others. When they do that we have to stand up and take notice; we have to do something to address the problem. If it happened in any other country, efforts would be made to foster and encourage a democratic process so that these abuses did not take place. But here in the United Kingdom those abuses are taking place. There is evidence to show that they have taken place in a number of elections, yet very

little has been done to address the problem. I endorse the comments that have been made on page 53 about having an adequate identity system. The options that are available have been outlined, and one of those should be adopted. My personal preference is for photographic identity cards backed up with a signature. I would like to see that mechanism brought into place, but there are other, equally efficient, means which could be deployed.

All our recommendations would, of course, be expensive, but such expenditure would be an investment in the protection of a fundamental liberty. I want to draw your attention to paragraph 9.2 of the report, which indicates quite clearly that we have considered the issue of expense and recommend that the Chief Electoral Officer should be provided with the necessary finance, staff and equipment to enable him to carry out our recommendations. That is a very important caveat because we did not make these proposals without calculating the cost. We recognize that there is a cost; we recognize that money is going to have to be redirected from another part of the Northern Ireland budget. But if we are truly committed to investing in the protection of such a fundamental civil liberty, we must recommend that that money should be spent, and we will encourage the Government to find it.

There are those who have fundamental objections to an identity-card system, but the Committee has gone some way towards addressing those objections. And I say to detractors that identity cards will threaten no one. People who claim to feel threatened by the idea or who say that it is an infringement of their civil liberties should stand back and look at the big picture. They should realize that the right to vote is a fundamental liberty, and the removal of such a right is a greater threat to our liberties. Mr McCrea spoke about policing the system, and I agree that if we get an accurate register with adequate identity systems, it will be important to have it properly policed. Policing the system must start at all levels. It must start when the register is being compiled — if there is fraud at that point, there should be adequate penalties to deal with it. On this point, a recurring theme of the report has been to insist on meaningful penalties which would be carried out. Some of those penalties are referred to on page 45, and I draw them to Members' attention.

I agree with the points that Mr Stoker made about people with disabilities. We must ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote is able to do so, even if they have physical or sensory disabilities. Such people must be provided with the same liberty as the able-bodied, and they must have access to the democratic process so that their voice can be heard. They must be able to make their mark and to make it well.

In conclusion, I want to point out that the Committee has considered the international context. Appendices H and I detail where personation has occurred across the world. They relate how those countries have tried to deal with personation by way of an adequate identity-card system.

There is evidence that what is happening in Northern Ireland is a very deliberate attack on the democratic process. There is no excuse for that attack, but there is evidence that the Chief Electoral Officer is ignoring that attack and failing to deal with it adequately.

I support the motion.

Mr Neeson: This is a very sensitive issue, but it is very apparent from what Members have said this morning and in the Committee that the Forum is taking a very constructive approach towards the problems. There is no doubt in my mind that if the SDLP had been here, there would still have been unanimity.

This is a very important matter, and some of the key issues have been raised in this debate — for example, the importance of the local electoral office, particularly when dealing with postal and proxy votes, which have been abused so much. And the other thing which became very clear from the evidence that was given to us, particularly by those from outside Northern Ireland, is the importance of the multi-agency approach. This is of particular importance with regard to registration. It is important that we use modern technology to create a system whereby this multi-agency approach can be developed in a meaningful way.

Penalties are also important, and a number of Members referred to that this morning. The penalty must fit the crime, and electoral fraud is a crime — it is a major crime against democracy to be involved in such fraudulent and corrupt activities.

But the bottom line — and this goes to the very core of the report and to the very core of democracy in Northern Ireland — is that everyone who is entitled to vote in Northern Ireland must be able to vote.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

The Forum adopts the report by the Committee on Electoral Reform and agrees to forward it to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for consideration within the Government's elections review.

Mr Peter Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I know that it would put additional pressure on the staff, but since the House of Commons Select Committee is to deal with this issue next Wednesday it would be helpful if a copy of our report were in the hands of the members of the Select Committee and their adviser, Sidney Elliott, before that date.

The Chairman: They will get on with that today.

BEEF INDUSTRY CRISIS (BSE)

The Chairman: Just before we break for lunch the Chairman of Standing Committee D, Mr Campbell, will give us the latest news on the BSE crisis.

Mr David Campbell: On Wednesday I represented the Forum's Agriculture Committee at a meeting with Dr Jack Cunningham, the Agriculture Minister. In view of the impending meetings of the European Standing Veterinary Committee and the Council of Foreign Ministers, I had asked my party Leader to facilitate such a meeting, and I thank him for doing so. The Northern Ireland Minister, Lord Dubs, was also present.

We had a good meeting, but it has left us feeling nervous. Dr Cunningham assured us that the Government were fully committed to Northern Ireland's position and that the internal, regional problems of the United Kingdom have now been overcome. The main obstacle remaining is the attitude being adopted by Germany. Their Minister has publicly indicated that Germany will do everything possible to ensure that the ban on British beef exports is not lifted. The United Kingdom requires the votes of seven other nations to achieve a majority at the Farm Council. The daily effort of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is being deployed to ensure, through lobbying, that we have a total of eight votes.

Dr Cunningham advised us that European inspectors will be visiting farms and processors in Northern Ireland at random in the next week or so. They will be verifying our claims of traceability and high standards, and, through the Forum, I appeal to farmers and all those in the industry to co-operate fully with this inspection.

I reminded Dr Cunningham that this time last year the Conservative Government offered £60 million for special assistance to farmers throughout the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland we received some £9 million, and I asked what position his Government were adopting this year. Regrettably, the Labour Government have made no provision, and I asked him to reconsider this, particularly for farmers whose holdings are flagged and who are under the severest pressure.

Other matters were discussed about which I have fully briefed Committee D. I also took the opportunity to invite Dr Cunningham to visit Northern Ireland. He said that he has plans to do so in the not-too-distant future, so I took the liberty of asking that the Forum be included in his programme.

The Chairman: Would Mr Poots like to add anything to that?

12.30 pm

Mr Poots: I want to thank Mr Campbell for the work that he has been doing for the Committee in trying to alleviate farmers' problems caused by the BSE crisis.

We are concerned that many European nations are not supporting us at the minute. The Germans, in particular, are going out and out against us, and a lot of work needs to be done before the meeting at the start of December. We need to work to get the necessary votes

on board to have the beef ban lifted so that trading can resume on the world market once again. This ban has not been lifted yet, and we cannot be too optimistic. We can be hopeful, but we cannot be too optimistic at this stage — a lot of work has to be done.

The Chairman: The quality of the reports which we have dealt with today has been really high. Anyone who questions the activities or the usefulness of the Forum should consider these reports and bear in mind that they have the unanimous support of Members.

The meeting was suspended at 12.31 pm and resumed at 1.33 pm.

PUBLIC PROCESSIONS BILL

Motion made and Question proposed:

This Forum takes note of the proposals contained in the draft Public Processions, etc (Northern Ireland) Bill. — *[The Chairman]*

Mr Donaldson: My party welcomes the opportunity to discuss this draft legislation in the Forum.

We are gathered here to look at this very important issue, and yet only a percentage of the parties that were elected are present — the SDLP is missing. Mr Chairman, I ask you to forgive me for raising this again, but I think it ought to be raised in every debate. The SDLP's absence from the Forum gives the lie to the notion that they believe that dialogue is central to resolving the issues. Here is an issue which is very important to the people of Northern Ireland. It is not one that we discuss in the talks process. How else is the SDLP going to discuss this with us and have an input into the process if their representatives are not in this democratically elected Forum to air their views?

There are those who will accuse me of taking a partisan approach to parades, but to do that is to misunderstand the deeply held convictions of the people whom I represent. Those people believe in civil and religious liberty; they believe in civil rights; they believe that the people of Northern Ireland should enjoy the same rights and freedoms as others throughout the United Kingdom and, indeed, throughout the European Community. They ask to be treated in a fair manner; they ask only for the right to exercise their liberties free from the threat of violence, to enjoy lawfully and unhindered the fulfilment of their culture. The legislation that is in draft form will inhibit those civil rights.

It is a sad reflection upon the Government that they have chosen now to introduce legislation to inhibit the civil rights of Northern Ireland people in such a manner. Yet the Government say that their approach to Northern Ireland is to be fair and even-handed. I do not believe that this Government is being fair and even-handed. Maybe I am being charitable; perhaps they do misunderstand the true nature of this particular issue. If that is so, let me remind them of it. The reality is that this is about the Republican campaign to undermine and diminish the culture of the British-Unionist people of Northern Ireland. That

campaign has manifested itself in a number of ways. Confrontation of parades is one, and the attacks that have taken place on Orange halls is another.

I have lists here — two A4 sheets now — filled with the names of Orange halls that have been destroyed in Republican attacks. There have been attacks on parades and attacks on the culture of the Unionist people of Northern Ireland, because that culture does not fit in with the narrow vision that Irish Republicans have of the people who live here. The whole basis of Irish Republicanism is the belief that the people who live here belong to the Irish nation and, because Irish Republicans have a narrow view of the Irish nation, they determine that the culture of that nation should be the Gaelic culture — that our culture is alien to their culture and, therefore, has to be undermined. That is what this is about; that is why Republicans are opposing parades.

And so the Government are going to legislate — legislate to facilitate the people who want to undermine and diminish the culture of the British people of Northern Ireland. When the North Commission issued its report and proposed the idea of a Parades Commission, I said at that time that such a commission would lead to the creation of a factory of grievances for Irish Republicanism. Look at what is happening. Look at Bellaghy and see what is happening. The one thing that the Government in London misunderstand about Irish Republicanism is this: give them an inch, and they want to take a mile. By giving legitimacy to their campaign, they fuel that campaign to expand its attacks on our culture.

I am not for one moment claiming that the Royal British Legion is exclusive to the Unionist culture. The Royal British Legion is about commemorating and remembering all the people who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. I acknowledge that many of those people came from the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland, and I, for one, admire the sacrifice they made. Yet such is the narrow vision of Irish Republicanism that it is now focusing on the Royal British Legion. The opposition to the Royal British Legion's parade in Bellaghy does not surprise any of us who understand the true nature of Irish Republicanism, for it is manifesting itself in so many ways these days. While we here can wear our poppies with pride, there are places in Northern Ireland where people cannot wear their poppies. Why? Because it might offend — give offence to Irish Republicans. That totally distorts the whole idea behind the Poppy Appeal which is about helping those people who sacrificed so much, and yet the Chairman of the Fair Employment Commission, Mr Cooper, believes that people should be denied the right to wear a poppy in their place of work.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Does the Member agree that the disgrace to which he refers was compounded in the Coats Viyella factory in Londonderry yesterday when not only were people suspended without pay for wearing poppies but Marks and Spencer executives, who had flown in from England, came into the factory wearing poppies, which were removed by the time they left? Is that not the height of hypocrisy?

Mr Donaldson: Indeed it is. And yet it does not surprise us; there are those around today who do not have the backbone to stand up to Republican bully-boys.

Yet much as we see our culture and anything that is remotely connected with the British identity of the people of Northern Ireland being challenged, the Gaelic-Irish-Nationalist culture is flourishing. The Irish language, Gaelic sports —

Mr Trimble: Subsidized.

Mr Donaldson: Yes, subsidized by the Exchequer — paid for by the people of Northern Ireland through their taxes.

In many parts of Northern Ireland today we see the Irish Tricolour being flaunted — unchallenged by those in authority. It seems that parity of esteem — this notion created by the SDLP — means elevating the Gaelic-Irish-Nationalist culture while diminishing and undermining the British-Unionist culture. That is why I support the view that if the Government are to impose this commission then, at the very least, it should have other expressions of cultural identity included in its remit. That view has been put to the Government by some of the Loyal Orders. In his letter dated 2 September Mr Paul Murphy said

“The Parades’ Bill, which we shall introduce this autumn, will implement the North Report in a fair and balanced manner, neither curbing basic civil rights unnecessarily, nor targeting legislation at one side or the other of the community.”

When we read that and then look at the detail of this draft legislation, all we can say is that Mr Murphy is writing absolute bunkum.

The reality is that this legislation is unbalanced; it is unfair; it curbs basic civil rights; and it is unnecessarily targeted at one side of the community. Why else then would the Secretary of State not fully implement Clause 3 of the draft Bill, which makes some provision for extending the remit of the commission but only gives it responsibility for considering matters relating to the expression of cultural identity and making recommendations. Even this provision does not give the commission any executive power in respect of other expressions of cultural identity, and it has had placed upon it the requirement for a commencement order. It is, therefore, up to the Secretary of State to decide when she will extend this remit and, based on her past performance, I am not confident that she will ever do that. Even if she were to, what confidence could we have that members of this commission will carry out this function?

I suggest that this commission does not enjoy the confidence of many people in Northern Ireland. Many of its members are, undoubtedly, biased in their approach. Mr Hume’s election agent, Berna McIvor, is a member. I wonder what she will consider appropriate expressions of cultural identity. David Hewitt is on public record as saying

“All contentious parades should be re-routed.”

I wonder what view he will take when we come to discuss contentious parades. Nothing in the legislation convinces me that this commission is capable of resolving the parades issue.

Let us look briefly at some of the content of the Bill that points to inequality and the lack of even-handedness in the Government’s approach. Take, for one example, the penalties which are proposed under the legislation and firstly, the penalties to be imposed on a person who knowingly fails to comply with the conditions imposed on a parade. That person, if found guilty of an offence under the relevant subsection, shall be liable

- “(a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum, or to both; or
- (b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years or to a fine, or to both.”

Yet when we look at the penalties which will be imposed on someone who prevents or hinders a lawful public procession, we find that that person, if found guilty of such an offence,

“shall be liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, or to both.”

So there is inequality here. If you are an Orangeman and, by your actions, you somehow defy the ruling of this commission, the penalty that will be imposed on you will be much greater than that which will be imposed on someone who impedes or prevents a lawful procession.

This week saw the publication of the draft code of conduct as well as the guidelines and procedural rules for the commission — and many of the Loyal Orders already have their own codes of conduct. Section G, appendix A, says that flags should not depict any scene or display any inscription which could reasonably be perceived as being provocative, threatening, abusive or insulting. What does that mean? Does that mean Orange banners that depict the Battle of the Boyne? We know that many Nationalists and Republicans deem those to be offensive because they do not portray their culture and their identity. Are these banners now going to be banned by this commission? I wonder what Berna McIvor will think of that. I wonder what her recommendation will be on flags. This is all about diminishing and undermining the culture of the British-Unionist people in Northern Ireland.

1.45 pm

I want to conclude by reminding Members again what this is really about. Here is something that has been quoted in the House before:

“Ask any activist in the North ‘Did Drumcree happen by accident?’ They will tell you ‘No.’ Three years of work on the lower Ormeau Road, in Portadown, parts of Fermanagh, Newry, Armagh and Bellaghy went into creating that situation, and fair play to those people who put the work in. These are the types of scene changes that we have to focus in on, develop and exploit.”

Those are the words of Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin. That is what this is really about. This commission, in my opinion, will not get to the heart of that issue.

This commission, if it continues in the form proposed in this legislation, will become a factory of grievances for Irish Republicans, and that is what we are seeing happening today. Whether you are an Orangeman, an Apprentice Boy, a Black Man, a member of the Royal British Legion or simply a British citizen, you are a legitimate target for Republicans. Nothing in this Bill will change that.

Mr Gibson: We are people who have the duty, as elected representatives, to represent honestly the communities that elected us. But this Bill is, in fact, denying those

very people who are represented in this Chamber the right to some of the basic precepts that they hold dear. This Bill is a reaction to summers of orchestrated violence. They have been orchestrated, as has already been pointed out, against the Loyal Institutions and against the Unionist community. It is part, unfortunately, of a conditioning process that has been ongoing since 1985 when it was decided through the Public Order Order and various other pieces of legislation that the people of Northern Ireland should be conditioned, reconditioned, recycled and somehow or other injected with various doses of an alien culture. It is becoming almost an obsession throughout the community that those of us who regard ourselves as British must be inculcated to become extrovert Irish.

I was very surprised that Mo Mowlam was not wearing a poppy during her recent appearances. That indicated very clearly, in a very simple way, that she, in her own thinking and in her own precepts, does not have regard for the legitimacy of a charity that is known and respected internationally. I would consider that almost an insult not just to the people of Northern Ireland but to every person who like you, Mr Chairman, and me has served as a commissioned officer in the forces of Northern Ireland and outside. A Minister of Her Majesty's Government sitting on the Front Benches of Parliament without a poppy, I thought, spoke volumes.

This is not just simply a piece of legislation foisted to do another piece of work. It is a reaction and a response to the demands of Republicans. They have been physical in their violence, tactical in their strategies and political, and this is now part of the manipulation. Mr Donaldson quite rightly quoted the extract which referred to this very tactic that has been manufactured and implanted in "concerned" groups throughout Northern Ireland.

The Government have abandoned their responsibility. It is the Government's responsibility through their agencies to ensure good government. When the Government abandon that responsibility and pass it over to someone else, they take a step — and the Bill is evidence of this — towards taking good order and good government out of their own hands and leaving it to the free interpretation of some group of six whose only credentials for appointment are that they agree that Northern Ireland should be made greener day by day. I can assure the Members on this side of the House that they need have no fear that any of them will ever be asked or invited to join the commission. So far, the Secretary of State and her Ministers have failed to appoint one single member of the DUP to a quango or any other body. If any of you have ambitions about becoming a commissioner, forget it. What is more, if you want to be part of the great and good on that, then I regard you as good-for-nothing.

We are going to be forced to talk to those who have murdered our kith and kin. We have seen it in village after village in the west of the province. Other Members will have discovered on the Ormeau Road or the Garvaghy Road that those who have been part of the murder machines are sitting somewhere, not necessarily as chairmen, on the flanks of those representing the "concerned" citizens. These people have never hidden their agenda. It is pathetic to think that we in the Forum are sitting here reacting to those who have deliberately committed murder.

Of course, we will also be forced to apologize — as we are being asked to apologize now — for remembering the Glorious Revolution of 1688. We have even been asked to apologize for being British. We have even been asked to apologize for being Unionists. We

are in an era where it will not only be necessary to imbibe the Irish culture but we will also have to apologize for having previously thought differently. This is the manipulative process that has been going on. This Bill should be disposed of where most waste paper goes.

I would rather not discuss the Bill. I regard it as an abandonment of responsibility and a means of creating greater mayhem, summer by summer.

Mr McBride: If I may I will start by referring to Mr Donaldson's comments about the SDLP, which, in one sense, I very much agree with. I wish the SDLP were here fighting their corner and speaking on relevant issues like this. They are letting their own electorate down by not being here. But it does help to remember that they left because of the row over Drumcree two years ago and the terrible tensions that existed in the community at that time. It might help if people reflected on that fact.

This question of parades is a huge problem in this society, and that is a very valuable place to start. Let us admit that there is a difficulty here and ask ourselves how we can solve it. After the consequences of the last few years, who can possibly say that there is not a problem here, and who can possibly want to see those events repeated? We certainly do not.

The Alliance Party has tried to come up with ideas to find some way of striking a balance so that the fundamental right to march is protected but these confrontational situations are avoided and a fair balance struck. We pressed a lot of things on the Government, and eventually they set up the North Commission. The North Commission produced a thoroughly well-researched and sound report. It is a model of clarity and good study. It is a fine example of a Government report that is very clear about why it has reached its recommendations and about all the efforts it went into in making them. We supported that report, and we are glad that the Government have now gone ahead and implemented some parts of it.

One particularly important element contained in the report and in the new Bill is the fact that the basic dealing with parades will be handed on to an independent commission. Up to now the problem has been that the police have had to make those decisions on the spot, at short notice and on very limited public order regulations. That has led to confrontation. It has led to crowds building up and to people seeking to bully their way to one resolution or another. There are faults on both sides. We support the idea of an independent commission. We support the idea that that commission should be encouraged, first and foremost, to seek local mediation and a local resolution of disputes. That is far and away the best way to do it. If people can agree on how to do things that is much the best way forward. The commission's first duty should be to try and make sure that local agreement is reached. But, if a decision has to be made, if people will not be reasonable, it is right that that decision should be made by an independent body, and that is the model that is set out in the Bill which we are discussing here today.

There are a couple of things about the Bill which are not satisfactory and which are extremely important. First, the North Commission strongly recommended that the Parades Commission should be able to draw up some form of plan for particular areas over a period of time, setting one thing against another to strike a compromise. There are a number of areas in which there are, perhaps, many parades where it is possible to say "Well, you cannot have so

many parades, but you can have a lesser number of parades.” That is fair to everybody — at least there is something in it for everybody. It is a situation where there is a possibility of compromise. It preserves the right of those who want to march on some occasion, and it preserves the right of residents who do not want a march every other weekend. That is a positive recommendation, and it is one that people ought to be able to endorse because it is fair to everybody. Otherwise, if you deal with marches one at a time, every time there is a winner and a loser, and every time the pressure builds up as you come to that point.

North recommended that the commission should be able to draw up a plan to cover a specific period. We very much regret that that is not clearly embodied in the Bill. It ought to be. The commission talks about it in its guidelines, in its procedural rules, but the power is not in the Bill as it stands at the moment. It is extremely important that it should be possible to do that. It should be possible to address these issues at an early stage and to say that this is how we are going to deal with parades in this area over a period. Then people can stand back and say “Well, we did not get everything we wanted, but maybe we got something.” That is an important point. I do not see why anybody in this Chamber should not support us on that.

Mr Carrick: Can the Member explain to the House how in practical terms he would see the enforcement of such a policy? Does he envisage members of the RUC being used to enforce such a policy or does he envisage other elements enforcing such a policy?

Mr McBride: Under the proposals in the Bill it would, of course, be the RUC. I do not know who else would do it. Preferably, it should be by agreement on a long-term plan. That is much the best way to do things.

I want to move on to the second area where the Bill has gone completely wrong. In leaving out the possibility of schemes or plans, they have left out something that is in the North Commission, but they have also added something which is not in the North Commission, and Mr Donaldson mentioned it. It is clause 3 — about cultural identity. I am told that this is a concession to Unionists, that they asked for it. I have to say that if that is the case, they are mad.

Mr Donaldson: Why?

Mr McBride: It is making a stick to beat yourself with. The Member talked today about these cultural issues, about this question of cultural identity. Those things should not be politicized. They should not be dragged into the arena.

Mr Donaldson: Who is politicizing them?

Mr McBride: Unionists are politicizing them at this stage.

Mr Donaldson: It is Sinn Féin who are.

Mr McBride: Of course they are.

2.00 pm

But what Unionists are doing by incorporating that is creating a situation in which the commission could be asked to deal with things like kerbstone paintings, Orange arches, buntings and all the expressions of Unionist cultural identity. Unionists will have made a stick to beat themselves with because they have a lot more of those things than the other side. There is an area in which those should be dealt with.

A Member: Do you support all those expressions of cultural identity?

The Chairman: Could you keep to the simple rule that all questions be addressed through me? We really have to stop this tendency to have little dialogues out of the hearing of most Members.

Mr McBride: I believe that many expressions of cultural identity are legitimate, and others are not. But we have to be very careful about making a political issue of all these things; I object very much to what is happening in Bellaghy and the attacks on the Remembrance Day service, but I also object to the stunts at Coats Viyella. So I agree with Members that those things should not be allowed to be politicized. They are matters which, perhaps, the Community Relations Council or some other Government body should be looking at, but the Parades Commission should not be dealing with them.

The Parades Commission was set up to deal with parades. That is an important issue, and it should not be burdened by being dragged into every single political issue that anybody may wish to raise. Cultural identity could mean anything. Unionists are therefore making a serious mistake if they think that this is something that is going to support them. In fact, it may expose many of the things that they hold dear to criticism and attack, and it could create a legal basis on which the commission would be obliged to report on those matters.

The Alliance Party has moved amendments to this Bill in the House of Lords to take out that clause and incorporate clearly the right of the commission to make a ruling or a plan over a certain time. And I hope that we will have the support of Members in dealing with those matters, because they are important. The basic matter is this: there is a huge problem.

Mr Brewster: Will the Member give way?

Mr McBride: No.

There is a huge problem here which must be resolved. We want to see it resolved. We have debated it, as have others. This is the scheme that has come forward. We believe that it is a proper scheme which should be given a good chance. We want to see this problem solved. Those who oppose this Bill need to offer us their alternative, and if that alternative is to do nothing but have more of the same year in, year out, over and over again, they will deserve little sympathy from the decent people of this society.

Mr Robert John White: When it gets to this stage a lot has been said, and one could say "Thank goodness for that". I will not go over it again. Mr Donaldson went into a lot of

detail in explaining the position that we hold dearly, and if the Secretary of State reads what he has said, she will certainly not need to read what I am going to say.

In her preamble to the draft Bill, the Secretary of State says that nothing in it will come as a surprise. Well, you could say to that "Surprise, Surprise". She had told us about it often enough. She says that the commission's prime responsibility is to facilitate local agreement — there is the rub — which they believe is the best way of ensuring that future marching seasons pass off peacefully. I am sure that could include — as Mr Donaldson has said — re-routeing and banning. And then she said that if local agreements were not possible, the Bill provides for the commission to

"take over from the police the power to issue determinations"

on contentious parades, including re-routeing. Surprise, surprise — again. These will include the existing public-order-based factors as well as the new factor; and the new factor, of course, is the impact of a parade on relationships in the community, and that has been talked about already.

But then we go further round the circle and see the commission is now to take over when local agreement fails, but if the Chief Constable is concerned about a decision taken by the Parades Commission, the Bill will empower him to appeal to the Secretary of State who will then re-examine the facts of the case and either confirm, amend or set aside the commission's ruling. The police retain the common-law powers, and they can deal with or prevent anything which might cause a breach of the peace. So we have gone the full circle: they talk publicly; they talk in the local scene; the commission takes over and there is still no agreement; and so the problem ends up again with the police. And if the parade goes wrong and something happens which the police have not quite anticipated, they can be caught with a lack of manpower on the ground and no ability to control the problem. We should short-circuit this and leave the responsibility with the Secretary of State and the police.

She makes another point when she says

"I hope we will also see developing parity of respect for the other's sensitivities and traditions."

We would also like to see the same parity of respect for the cultures and traditions that are being challenged in the Bill from start to finish. She adds

"and a growing acceptance that cultural identity should not be celebrated in ways which may potentially offend others."

I would accept that that point could apply both ways. She commends the statesmanlike way in which people acted over the summer and adds

"I hope their contribution will not be forgotten by either side."

We could reiterate that.

The explanatory note to the Bill mentions the subject of cost:

"The total annual cost of the Commission is estimated at £1.2 million"

Then — surprise, surprise — it adds

"There are no cost implications for business. However, the Bill will have cost implications for some voluntary or charitable organizations."

So the poor people who were expecting some voluntary hand-outs will find that those hand-outs have gone to run this commission, which is probably totally superfluous anyway.

We then take a look at the Bill itself, which states in paragraph 11(5)

"Wherever practicable the Secretary of State shall before making an order under this section consult —

- (a) the Commission;
- (b) the Chief Constable; and
- (c) the committee of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland".

God forbid that she should decide to take one of those decisions on her own. We have seen where some of those have got us.

The Forum's Parades Committee was charged with attending three operations — two parades and a celebration. Some of my colleagues and I attended the parade on the Sunday morning on the Drumcree-Garvaghy Road-Portadown circuit and we certainly witnessed a display of might that none of us had ever experienced before. The circuit was quite complete with security personnel, and one could quote Wellington who, when looking at his troops, said

"I do not know what they do to the enemy but they scare the hell out of me."

We could all voice that opinion. It was enormous. It was unbelievable that this scale of operation was needed for the want of people going indoors and, if they did not have double-glazing, closing their ears. It was all past in a matter of minutes. Other people will say that there is another side to that. Of course there is.

When we came away, I said to one or two of my colleagues that the decision to let the parade proceed was the correct one. But looking back on it one would have to say it was a Pyrrhic victory. I may be questioned and challenged on this, but I cannot see the use of so much fire-power, manpower, weaponry and field ambulances ever being repeated.

There was an excellent night — which, again, some of my colleagues attended — in Londonderry held by the Apprentice Boys of Derry. Now that takes a wee bit of swallowing, but it was the Apprentice Boys — of Derry — who had a celebration, a commemoration, in their headquarters in the city of Londonderry. The Mayor of Londonderry was there, a member of the SDLP, and I believe — others will correct me if I am wrong — he may have enjoyed it. And I am certain that he learnt quite a bit because he had never been exposed to anything like that before. I would hazard a guess that when he went home he decided that

there was not one decent pair of horns among the people whom he saw there. I saw none, and I doubt if he did.

The other event that we attended was the church parade to Dunloy — which turned out to be a non-church parade to Dunloy. The parade was stopped at a place on the road where there is a bollard to prevent people from driving into a nearby stream when they come off the main road on to a side road. That was picked as a conveniently narrow spot to stop the parade. Unfortunately the police decided to do that. There was no massive presence, and I think that the decision had been accepted before the parade started. But the young man who was taking the service did his job extremely well and did not slacken on his Gospel message to the gentlemen assembled. It was a very sensible parade. They handed in their objection to the police and went back to begin their service, which they went right through with.

The decision to stop the parade was wrong. Dunloy is a village with a small population, and the present unfortunate circumstances were not created by the Orange Order. They built their hall in good faith, and the church was standing a long time before that. It is only now, at a much later stage, that they find themselves caught up in the difficulties that we have heard about. But this problem, which now seems insurmountable, is of the locals' making.

Mr Hussey: The question which really needs to be asked is whether the protestors in Dunloy are locals?

Mr Robert John White: I agree. That is for the police to determine, but I imagine that there was some degree of infiltration by outsiders. But it did seem rather unfortunate that that small parade could not have been let through, and if it had been, other community problems which we know of might well have disappeared further down the road. It was an excellent opportunity to clear up two problems at the same time: There is frequent reference to "the two communities". Of course there are two communities in Northern Ireland — those who obey the law and the criminals — and I hope that we will always have the former.

Mr Shannon: Many of the points have been very well addressed by Mr Donaldson and other Members. I am also very concerned about this draft Bill, its implications and how it will work. I do not believe that the legislation has addressed all the relevant issues.

There were indications in Mo Mowlam's long-winded address on the Government's policy that this legislation is directed towards one community. She, of course, will say that that is not what she was about and that she tried to illustrate that through her speech. But when you examine the content of her speech it becomes very obvious that the issue of parades has not been addressed at any stage to the satisfaction of those who have held traditional parades over many years, particularly in the last three to five years.

There are a number of points in the Secretary of State's speech on the Public Processions Bill that give me good cause for concern. She stated that the Loyal Orders have nothing to fear, but the contrary is the case. We in the Loyal Orders believe that this new legislation has been drafted with the exclusive purpose of denying us our traditional right to parade on routes that have been used for hundreds of years. She said that the fact that a parade was of long standing would be one point to consider. Let her prove it, if IRA/Sinn

Fein, who seem to be calling the shots at present, will allow her to do so. This legislation is another sop to them; it is an attempt to address some of the issues that they want taken on board.

2.15 pm

Mr Junkin: Would the Member consider it significant that Dr Mowlam told me and some of my former colleagues that she never felt any particular pride in being British, that indeed she never felt British at all when representing the Labour Party at inter-Governmental conferences? Does the Member believe that her lack of pride in her own country suits perfectly for her responsibility to diminish our British culture in Northern Ireland?

Mr Shannon: Any Unionist worth his salt here would concur with the Member's comments. Quite simply, she is not fit to hold the position of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Government are wrong to be impartial — they should be as pro-Union and as British as we are.

The last three years of parades have encouraged neither us nor many of our constituents. Ask the Loyal Orders in Bellaghy. We are not talking about the Orange and the Black, rather we are talking about members of the Royal British Legion and what is happening to them. Ballynafeigh, Dunloy, Roslea, Keady, Newtownbutler, Pomeroy, Armagh and Newry — the list is endless. Let them convince us that there will be real recognition of our traditions and culture.

Let us look at some examples from the last few summers. Where was the spirit of compromise from Nationalists and concerned residents' groups towards parades that have been banned by a weak Government and policed by the security forces? To put it in cold, factual terms: local Nationalists, spurred on by their anti-Protestant and anti-Unionist fervour, do not want any parades or walks at all. So how will this legislation enable the parades and services to continue? What role will the legislation have in ensuring that traditional parades and services continue? Will the commission try to find middle ground? I doubt it.

During the last two summers the Loyal Orders tried to achieve a compromise solution. In many cases — and the Ormeau Road and Dunloy are just two examples — the lodges first of all agreed to a shorter parade; they agreed to march without music; and they agreed that only local members should march. Yet the Orders' spirit of compromise was to no avail because the Nationalist groups wanted no parades at all, ever. How is the commission going to address the banning of parades at many venues throughout the province? What about church parades and services? Dunloy is the best example. The local lodge cannot even attend its place of worship. Where is the spirit of compromise there? Can it be addressed in the legislation? I suspect not. It will not be addressed, at least not to the satisfaction of the Loyal Orders. I strongly disagree with the denial of the right to parade. Once the parades are stopped, it will be very difficult for them to take place again under the present legislation.

The legislation also talks about a code of conduct for marchers and protesters and says that past conduct will be taken into account. I hope that the past conduct of Nationalist objectors all over the province will be taken into account. If it is, the traditional parades that

were stopped this year will be allowed next year. Nationalists have been physically and, on occasions, verbally downright obstructive and unhelpful. Their actions have led to many physical attacks on and abuse of the security forces and marchers.

I am concerned that the commission will not be looking at open-air sporting events which may have an adverse impact on relationships in a community. Consideration of sporting events would enable the loathsome rules of the GAA, which many of our people find both offensive and disgraceful, to be addressed. There are GAA games that coincide with church services. And the fact that followers of this organization travel through the areas of a different tradition to get to their games must be considered as well.

Will the legislation address the issue? The answer seems to be no. And will traditional parades and services be allowed to continue? Again, there is nothing in the legislation which gives us hope. The make-up of the commission does not reflect any credible opinion in the Unionist community. There can be no confidence-building in the community with this present make-up. Can the behind-the-scenes string-pulling by Government Ministers be hidden? Can the influence of the secretariat at Maryfield be curtailed? Not with this legislation and commission.

The commission and the legislation will not seek compromise, as Mo Mowlam has tried to tell us, rather they will continue to stop traditional parades. Nationalists are hell-bent on doing away with every vestige of Unionism and Protestantism — our culture and our heritage. Be prepared for a long, hot summer of discontent as Unionists and members of the Loyal Orders assert their traditional right to parade. The legislation has not addressed the activities of Nationalists and residents' groups, and that has shown that this legislation is one-sided. It favours Nationalists and is, therefore, unfair to Unionists.

Mr Brewster: I had not intended to speak, but when you hear fateful remarks like these in the Forum you quite often get a ramble.

The Chairman: I am sure we will not get one from you. It must be a short ramble because I do not want this debate to end up with no quorum. That is not the message that Members would want to send from the Forum.

Mr Brewster: Absolutely not.

I heard Mr McBride's extraordinary remarks, and I could not fathom them. He seemed to be saying that some cultural expression was good and some cultural expression was bad. Bad appears to merit some kind of inspection and regulation, but good should be left alone. He would not be drawn, but I got the impression that it was bad for a commission to be able to look at such things as gable-wall murals and painted kerbstones. I did not understand until I realized that Mr McBride was thinking of me and the other lawyers here. He sees this Bill as a lawyers' paradise, and that is what it is going to be. I know that that is a very encouraging prospect for some of my friends, but it is the only encouraging prospect in this Bill.

Let me use my own humble legal skills to analyse clause 8. It is significant that clause 8 cites as one of the considerations that the commission will have to take into account

“any public disorder or damage to property which may result from the procession.”

That is a very revealing phrase. It does not say “that may result from opposition to the procession”. It implies from the outset that it is the parade that will cause the disruption. It refers to

“disruption to the life of the community which the procession may cause” —

not opposition to the procession. But even if those ill-thought-out and badly drafted lines become law, I am certain that there will be an explosion in the number of judicial reviews of decisions taken by the commission. Even the news that Dr Dunlop was a member of a Loyalist band when he was still in short trousers is hardly sufficient to enable any of us, on this side of the House, to have confidence either in him or in any of his friends.

Mr Morrow: He has apologized since.

Mr Brewster: He has obviously done quite a penance since.

The difficulty is that this Bill is a wrecker's charter. In effect, it says that if there would be widespread disruption or widespread inconvenience a procession can be banned. We all know where the widespread disruption comes from, and we have seen quite clearly what is going to happen with this Bill. It will accelerate the process — once there was one so-called residents' group; then there were three; then there were 13; and by next summer there will probably be dozens.

I have to say, on behalf of this party, that we deplore the need for any such Bill, never mind one like this. By and large we are libertarians in Ulster. We are quite happy for people to express their views and do their own things, as long as it is not blatantly offensive or provocative. I am certain that any of the parades that have been referred to in the past few years could not be described as blatantly offensive or provocative. What we have sought — and it is true that we have sought to have the remit of the commission widened — is simply sauce for the goose as well as sauce for the gander.

The Orange Institution takes great care — and I declare an interest as a member, of course — to provide proper stewarding, to pay for public toilets and to co-operate with the police when they arrange a procession. But there are other expressions of culture which I find exceptionally offensive. I think, for instance, of the West Belfast Festival which, unlike the Orange Institution, has a large amount of public money pumped into it. This year the festival featured a play which portrayed the IRA murdering British soldiers. This produced applause from the delighted audience. I find it most offensive that taxpayer's money should be used to sponsor incitement to hatred.

This party has always said that part of the problem is not that there is opposition to parades but that those who, for mischievous reasons, decide to exploit the differences in our society are not prosecuted. Last year I represented some of the people in Londonderry who were charged with various offences. I have to say that I strongly believe that there were political decisions behind the prosecution of some of those who took part. The press have

come across evidence that shows that the Director of Public Prosecutions overruled the views of local police officers. What concerns us is that, once again, the flagrant law-breakers will not be punished. It is a fact that the 1987 Public Order Order resulted in, up to last year, fewer than five prosecutions a year. It has not even resulted in five convictions, and that in itself is an astonishing indictment of our law-enforcement service.

One of this party's core principles is that we believe it is wrong to interfere with the right of individuals to freedom of expression. This Bill is a bad way to do that, and it is about time that the Government returned to the duty that we expect of all Governments — to ensure freedom of expression and law and order. This Bill is not the way to do that.

Mr Gibson: This Bill can affect a parade in a small rural village, but it does not deal with those who throw 2,700 petrol bombs in Londonderry. What is the relevance of this Bill to that parade?

Mr Brewster: I am very reluctant to give free legal advice, but on this occasion — and with the usual disclaimers — it is quite clear that this is another problem with the Bill: it is putting the cart before the horse. If you have a quiet little village where there is little opposition, then a parade might be allowed. But you then have people bussed in. That happened in Dunloy, and the following year the parade, which had been perfectly acceptable under these conditions, became illegal. It is a wrecker's charter, and it does not in any way address the bussing in of people from all around. Last year Mr Rice travelled from his base on the Ormeau Road to Dunloy, Londonderry and Bellaghy. He travelled so far and put so much petrol in his tank that he probably has air miles now. This Bill does not deal with that sort of thing at all.

Mr Dodds: May I apologize for not being here for the beginning of the debate. However, I want to say that I agree with most of what has been said by Members since I entered the Chamber.

This one-sided Bill is designed to attack the freedoms and liberties not only of Orangemen but of every citizen in Northern Ireland. It is ironic that at a time when the Government are introducing the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law they are, at the same time, bringing forward a Bill which runs contrary to the spirit of that Convention, if not to the letter. Clearly, this legislation is aimed at curtailing the right of free assembly and procession along the Queen's highway and the right of free speech. Those are fundamental rights which are enshrined not only in the European Convention of Human Rights but in many basic laws, constitutions and conventions the world over. Indeed, when the Public Order Committee — Standing Committee A — looked at this subject it examined the provisions in other countries and was surprised to note the extent to which the right of free assembly and free speech is protected in other countries and the lengths to which British Governments have been prepared to go to curtail those freedoms in Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

This Bill attacks the Unionist identity and Unionist heritage. The provisions in Clause 3 are designed to allow the commission, as proposed, to keep under review and make recommendations about law and practice relating to expressions of cultural identity, even

though in a recent meeting that we had with the Secretary of State, she made it very clear that she was loathe to bring that particular provision into effect. She compared it to having the provision relating to internment on the statute-book. It would be on the statute-book, but it would not be implemented. This provision was being held up by some as some sort of concession, some sort of confidence-building measure aimed at the Unionist community, but it is clear that it is nothing of the sort. It pays lip-service to Unionist concerns whereas, on the other hand, Nationalists, Republicans and all sorts of community and residents' groups, so-called, have got everything they demanded in the provisions of this Bill.

We now have a Parades Commission. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the United Kingdom; it is totally unaccountable; it is unelected. Its members — and I am sure this has already been referred to — have, in some instances, already made their position very clear: they do not believe in the right of traditional, lawful parades to proceed where there is any opposition to them. Indeed, one member of that commission is a leading member of the SDLP in John Hume's constituency. Can you imagine the outrage there would have been had a leading Unionist been appointed to such a commission designed to deal with a Nationalist grievance? The thing is simply outrageous.

Under the guidelines that have been proposed, each of the members of the commission is to be given responsibility for certain parades in certain geographical areas, so we are going to have the ludicrous situation of a leading member of the SDLP sitting on her own, taking evidence, hearing representations and making recommendations to the full commission on whether or not Orange and other Loyal Order parades should take place in certain areas. That does not square with any form of democracy or natural justice whatsoever.

The reality is that the fundamental flaw in the Public Order legislation, as identified by members of the North Commission, has not been addressed in any of the legislative provisions that have been brought forward by the Government. The fundamental flaw identified by the North Report is that it was designed to ensure that otherwise lawful and traditional parades could be stopped and prevented from processing along the highway if there was a threat of or actual violence, and the police were given the power to prevent such a parade taking place or to re-route it.

The same flaw has been repeated in this legislation, in which once again offers are being given to the law-breakers, to those who would disrupt, to the wreckers and to those who want to prevent peaceful parades from taking place. They are being given the opportunity to prevent parades from taking place and get their way. How? By threatening violence or by using violence. That is the fundamental flaw in the Public Order legislation, and it is a fundamental flaw in this legislation as well. It was identified by the North Commission itself, and nothing was done about it. I fear that this legislation will do nothing to prevent trouble or tensions in the future and that it will, indeed, add to them.

There is a suggestion that the commission will bring forward provisional recommendations as early as March or April of each year. Can you imagine the difficulties that that is going to give rise to? We are going to have a whole series of grievances being raised — many of them without any substance whatsoever — and, from very early on in the year, we are going to have this unaccountable, unelected commission making judgements and

provisional recommendations, and that will undoubtedly add to the tension that will be felt throughout the community.

The Northern Ireland Forum has spent a great deal of time on this issue, Mr Chairman, as you well know. We produced a report after widespread consultation with many people who are directly affected by these issues. We presented that report to the Secretary of State and to Ministers. I very much regret that, once again, we see the Government deciding to proceed with provisions and legislation without taking into account the democratically expressed views and wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. It is outrageous that the Government have decided to proceed with this legislation in the teeth of opposition from the Forum and in the knowledge that its provisions will make things worse.

I want to draw Members' attention to another issue which the previous Government recognized to some extent and on which they therefore decided to go for further consultation. They decided that there would be a commission with a mediating role and an educative role. But is it right to give such a body the power to decide whether certain parades should go ahead or on what conditions? This commission has been given a dual role in which there is a clear conflict of interest. A body that is intended to mediate and educate cannot be expected to make decisions about banning or re-routeing parades. The previous Government recognized the flaws in the recommendation, which is why they delayed acting on it. Unfortunately, Mo Mowlam has decided to proceed even though she knows that it will not improve the situation but actually make things worse.

I hope that there will be widespread agreement here today that this is a piece of legislation which deserves to be rejected. It does not do anything to help the situation with parades. The fundamental flaws contained within it, which were identified by a body set up by the Government itself, have not been addressed. Those flaws remain. If you provide law-breakers and those who want to disrupt parades with the legal means to do so, you are inviting them to do just that by way of threats of and actual acts of violence. I am sure that for many in the House — and certainly for those on this side — that is what needs to be addressed. The traditional rights of those who are engaged in lawful and dignified parades should be protected and upheld, not attacked and run down.

The Chairman: We have managed to debate this matter in quite good time. If anyone has not been able to speak, I regret that, but we do not want to find that owing to a lack of a quorum we do not get this matter resolved.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum takes note of the proposals contained in the draft Public Processions, etc (Northern Ireland) Bill.

The Forum was adjourned at 2.42 pm.