NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 7 November 1997

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FORUM: SECRETARY OF STATE

The Chairman: As you will know by now, the Secretary of State has arrived. She is in my office and will join us in a few moments.

I want to make the format clear. I will introduce the Secretary of State and make a couple of brief points on your behalf. She will make an opening statement and then, I understand, will be prepared to take questions from Members. I have suggested that they be taken individually, but it may be convenient to take them in groups. I expect questions to be brief and to the point. I hope you will forgive me if, on this occasion, I am intolerant of statements disguised as questions. There will be no supplementaries. I hope we will have an interesting and productive session.

When the Secretary of State joins us we shall have a minute's silence for remembrance.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It would be far more satisfactory for questions to be taken one at a time, even if the answers were brief. I do not know how they could all be joined together. We in the Democratic Unionist Party were informed that we would be able to put three questions. We want an immediate answer to each of them. Otherwise we will not get anywhere.

May I suggest, Mr Chairman, that in your introduction you express the hope that this is the precursor of other ministerial visits to the Forum.

The Chairman: I will have another go at that.

Mr Trimble: Mr Chairman, I agree entirely with what has been said, including your comment that questions should be brief and to the point and should not be disguised speeches or statements. You will have the full support of the Forum in ensuring that questions are brief, but, from any point of view, it would be sensible to have them answered individually.

We too hope that the other Ministers will come on a regular basis to talk about the work of their Departments.

The Chairman: I have already conveyed the sentiments expressed by both of you. The Secretary of State is thinking now about the matter of grouping questions.

Remember that she is our guest. We have pushed hard to get her here, and I have no doubt that you will behave in your normal courteous manner.

The Secretary of State was escorted into the Chamber.

ACT OF REMEMBRANCE

The Chairman: Will you all please stand in remembrance of the members of our forces who gave their lives in two world wars, particularly those, of all traditions, from the North and the South of Ireland. We will have a minute's silence, which I will end with Binyon's lines

The Secretary of State and Members having stood in their places in silence —

The Chairman: "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them."

The Secretary of State and Members: We will remember them.

STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF STATE

The Chairman: I am delighted to welcome you, Secretary of State, to the Forum on this our 50th meeting. We have waited for some time for a visit from a Secretary of State. We appreciate the effort that you have made to be here despite the difficulties you have on Fridays.

Before handing over to you I should like to make two brief points. First, it would be helpful if you could confirm that you will be encouraging members of your ministerial team to follow your example and visit us.

Several Members: Hear, hear.

The Chairman: We are equally interested in hearing their views on their areas of responsibility.

Secondly, may I place firmly on record the disappointment of all the Members here that certain parties continue to stay away. We would like, in particular, to see the SDLP in the Forum to engage in dialogue about things that affect all the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of their politics. I ask you to do all you can to encourage them to return.

Several Members: Hear, hear.

The Chairman: We have a number of questions, but perhaps you would like to make a statement first.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Dr Mowlam): Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. In the course of my comments I will address one and a half of the points you have just made. The remaining half I will address now. I will cover a lot of things from the various Departments because I want to give a full picture of how what we are doing interfaces with what the Forum is doing. I am here representing all the Ministers, but I will certainly mention your request and see if they too can come. Several Forum Members are also Members of Parliament. I do not know how people who take part in the talks on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and attend the Forum on Thursday and Friday can find time to do anything else. The constraints must be phenomenal. With the proviso that it would be difficult, I am sure that my ministerial colleagues will receive the message favourably.

May I begin by thanking John Gorman for the invitation to attend today's meeting of the Forum. As he has said, it has taken me a wee while to get here, for which I apologize.

I welcome the opportunity to hear from you about the work you are doing and the issues that concern you. I do receive weekly reports of your plenary meetings and, of course, the reports produced by the Forum Committees. Also, in August, I had quite a comprehensive account from John about where you had got to. However, it is important that I should take the opportunity to hear at first hand from Members your views on the work of the Forum and its contribution to the wider political arena. Before the discussion is opened to the Floor for that purpose, I want to share with you my personal assessment of that contribution and underline my interest and that of my ministerial team in the work you do.

The Forum was established with the central objective of discussing issues relating to the promotion of dialogue and understanding between the communities in Northern Ireland. I am aware that views differ as to how well the Forum has performed in that role, but I would like to record my appreciation of the valuable work undertaken in considering a wide range of social and economic issues, important to all the people in Northern Ireland. I understand the difficulties in trying to meet the central objective of the Forum when others are absent. That is why, as I have said, I feel that the Forum could become a more positive force if all the parties entitled to seats were to take them. It would be easier to promote dialogue and understanding between the two communities if all their representatives were here. I am sure that the more the Forum indicates readiness to embrace the views of all sections of the community in Northern Ireland, the more incentive there will be for the SDLP and Sinn Fein to take their seats.

It is with that in mind that one asks what the Forum's contribution has been. I should say at the outset that your Business Committee has played an active and valuable role in managing the Forum's affairs, and I should like to express my appreciation to John Gorman and to the Chairmen of the Standing Committees for their service to the Forum and the community. The work of the Standing Committees has provided Ministers and their

Departments with fresh insight into the many practical problems facing Northern Ireland in the social and economic fields.

10.15 am

Your investigations have been both extensive and in-depth, covering subjects as wide-ranging as the Government's own priority of education and the problems facing agriculture and fisheries — the latter with particular reference to the beef industry and the current state of the Northern Ireland potato industry. Health has also been at the top of your agenda, with investigations into the fluoridization of water supplies and cancer care. And you have examined the opportunities and threats facing the future development of the Northern Ireland economy.

Since I took up office in May, Forum Committees have completed reports on pre-school education, the health service, parades and, just this week, long-term unemployment and electoral reform. Perhaps it would be appropriate for me to comment on each of these issues.

The electoral reform report has taken the Forum into the political field, and I am pleased to note that this potentially contentious issue was handled to the satisfaction of all the parties which took part in the work of the Committee. The report was completed very recently, and the Chairman has written inviting me to discuss its findings and conclusions following approval by the Forum, which I understand was given last week. I shall reply to that request shortly. I received the report in my mail this morning, and I will give it my full consideration and seek the Government's view before replying.

Of course, there has not always been agreement on other contentious issues, such as parades. A good deal of water has passed under the bridge since the summer, and we have set out how we propose to deal with this difficult issue in the form of the recently published Public Processions Bill, which was drawn up following consideration of a wide range of views. Now that we have got this far, all that I want to say at this point is that we will certainly not be one-sided. And I do not believe that the Bill is one-sided in terms of how this difficult area will be handled in the future.

Turning to economic and social matters, I am aware of the report on long-term unemployment that you submitted to Tony Worthington just last week. This issue is of particular concern to the present Government, and nowhere more so than in Northern Ireland. I understand that in your report you have called for a more co-ordinated approach to tackle long-term unemployment with the formation of a partnership comprising employers, trade unions, voluntary organizations, local authorities, colleges and training providers. Such partnerships would offer the long-term unemployed a chance to work and would encourage a more pro-active approach by employers in taking on trainees from the ranks of the long-term unemployed. Your ideas on more private-sector involvement in the consultative and job-placement processes are interesting, as is the proposal to encourage more self-employment.

You have also suggested that the Training and Employment Agency should encourage local delivery of innovative measures to improve access to training programmes and that such

programmes should understand and tackle the psychological and cultural impact of being unemployed for a long period. This is a very important aspect of unemployment and one with which our proposals on Welfare to Work will interface. Coping with the psychological and cultural problems of the unemployed is very important.

Skills development affects not just the unemployed but also employers. You have suggested that training should be provided in skills relevant to local industries and that traditional crafts and skills should be preserved and encouraged.

On the role of the IDB and LEDU in assisting the long-term unemployed you favour incentives to industry to provide sustainable employment and grant assistance to inward investors who are prepared to draw a percentage of their new work-force from the ranks of the long-term unemployed.

Having read your proposals, I think that they are very interesting and very constructive, and I know that Tony Worthington will reflect on them in the review of long-term employment initiated earlier this year and against the background of our proposals on Welfare to Work and the New Deal.

Pre-school education is another important topic, and your significant list of recommendations will also require thoughtful consideration. Some of you may have heard Tony Worthington's speech to the Association of Education and Library Boards at the beginning of October, which gels with a number of suggestions that have come from the Forum. If you did, you will at once have recognized that it is the Government's commitment to education which is central to our public-expenditure goals. I think that it contains an exciting and challenging agenda for both education and training. Next year we will be trying to make that a significant aspect of what the Government are engaged in, and we will be publishing a number of proposals in that regard.

A significant element of our commitment to education in Northern Ireland is our intention to expand pre-school education, the benefits of which your recent report indicates that you fully recognize. The Government firmly believe that investment in early education can give children, particularly those from socially disadvantaged circumstances, a head start in literacy, numeracy and social skills. By investing in pre-school education we can attack the root of educational underachievement, with ultimate benefits, in terms of the future employability of young people, for the Northern Ireland economy.

Just as important, however, is the role of pre-school education in providing, as the Forum report puts it,

"a foundation for responsible citizenship".

This will be a particularly valuable commodity as we work to achieve political progress and build a stable society. Our long-term objective is a full year of pre-school provision for every child whose parents want it, but the rate of expansion of this programme and the development of our other plans will inevitably depend on available resources.

This in turn will depend on the outcome of the comprehensive review of all public spending, and I am sure that Members of the Forum will welcome the additional £35.5 million for schools that we got from the Chancellor's budget last year. But the comprehensive spending review, to which all the parties in the room have been asked to contribute, will give us a chance to do what many Governments have not had a chance to do. In this period when we are tied into the previous Government's two-year public expenditure survey, we can go back to zero in all our budgets and say "Is this money being allocated in the way we want?" This is a chance that Governments very rarely get, and one in which I hope everybody will participate and engage with us.

The Forum's Health Committee conducted a comprehensive examination of the operation of the health service in Northern Ireland, and the report was submitted a few weeks ago. It will obviously take time to absorb those recommendations fully, but I can guarantee that we shall do so. This is an area where, if we are to deliver quality health care, there will have to be some change. But I hope we can work in consultation with the elected representatives so people may see that the changes will produce positive rather than negative outcomes for the patients.

In the meantime, I want to stress that the Government are fully committed to promoting health and well-being through policies that incorporate the values of social justice and fairness which we outlined at the election. We believe that health and personal social services should not only provide help for those who are ill or in need, but also be concerned with health and well-being of the public at large. High-quality health and social services are a key element in our strategy to achieve good health and social gain. We are committed to ensuring that services in Northern Ireland are on a par with the best in the rest of the United Kingdom.

A number of important reviews are under way at present. I want to refer briefly to three of them because it is important to give people an indication of current thinking. First, there is the review of the Royal Maternity Hospital and Belfast City's Jubilee Unit, of which many of you are aware. As you know, Tony Worthington asked for an independent review of the decision that his predecessor took in March of this year. This review has just been submitted, and my colleague told me yesterday that he will make an announcement about maternity facilities shortly.

The second review which is under way concerns cancer services — in particular, the services currently provided at Belvoir Park Hospital. A team of experts has been looking in detail at the costs and benefits of relocating the radiotherapy and chemotherapy services to a new regional cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. There has been a fair bit of speculation in the media. The team will send its report to Tony Worthington next week, and he intends to take a short time to consult interested parties before announcing his decision, which he aims to do at the beginning of January.

The third major review that I want to mention is different from the first two, which are focused on services to individual patients. This one is concerned with the abolition of the internal market created by the previous Government and the creation of a new set of organizational relationships founded on partnership and co-operation in terms of the present market's functions. Each of the four parts of the United Kingdom is considering the

implications for its own organizational structures, and each will be publishing its proposals in the fairly near future.

We will also publish shortly a strategy document which will set out the Government's vision of improved health and well-being in Northern Ireland. This will place on public record the approach that the Government will take in pursuit of their goal. This report will not get the same kind of media attention as the previous three. It will be about promoting health and well-being, which is terribly important. If fewer people are unwell we will be able to save money and thereby provide quality services for those who are unwell. This final strategy document will talk about the health-promoting services and not just the healing service. It will help to reduce health inequalities, not simply pretend that they do not exist, and it will talk about how we can provide a more efficient, modern service instead of a wasteful bureaucracy.

We recognize that many of the factors that have the greatest impact on health and well-being lie outside the direct influence of the health and social services. This is why we are committed to an approach which tackles the root cause of ill health through co-ordinated action across Government Departments. Here too Tony Worthington is working very hard. He has established another inter-departmental group, which will drive forward the Government's public-health agenda across different Departments. This approach will include consultation with the private and voluntary sectors, local communities and families. We must all work together to achieve a healthier Northern Ireland. Your report will be of value in that.

I am nearly there, Mr Chairman. Do not worry.

The Chairman: I did not say anything.

The Secretary of State: I could tell by your body language. You wanted to count the pages I had left.

The Chairman: Yes, I did.

The Secretary of State: This reminds me of those awful points at party conference when an international delegate is invited to make a contribution. You see him going up with a wad of papers, and you think that his speech — in Russian or Portuguese or whatever — will take ages.

I want to say something about matters other than the Forum. My comments ought to be quite full, but I will speed up.

The Chairman: Do not worry.

The Secretary of State: I regularly see from the weekly reports that the Forum's proceedings include exchanges of views on a wide variety of issues. I am pleased to learn that this has led to greater understanding of one another's views. As people tell me, the Forum has been capable of heated exchanges on contentious issues, but that is the nature of politics. But if people are in the business of promoting dialogue and understanding — and you are — it is clearly important that they should work together with as much basic respect

and common courtesy as possible. It is the understanding of one another's views that has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the process of developing partnership and reconciliation across Northern Ireland. It is also important to take time to reflect on the efforts you are making to promote dialogue and understanding throughout the community in respect of some of the key issues that divide the people of Northern Ireland. If the new Political Affairs Committee helps, I will welcome it very much.

Of course, the fundamental drawback, as I have already noted, remains the continued absence of the representatives of the Nationalist community. It is not for me to comment on the reasons for their absence, but it remains a regrettable impediment to the work of the Forum that they are not here. They have much to contribute.

10.30 am

Moving on to the wider political arena, I very much regret the absence of other parties from the talks at Castle Buildings. Again, it is not for me to comment on the reasons. But those parties too have much to contribute to the process, particularly as the talks have now moved to substantive matters within the three strands under discussion. It will hardly surprise you if I take this opportunity to make it clear, as I have done on other occasions, that the door remains open for them to return to Castle Buildings. That is my fervent hope and one that is shared by the other participants in the talks.

As I have said, the Forum was designed to promote dialogue. There are, of course, other examples of co-operation between the parties. For instance, cross-party delegations often visit the United States to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive industrial-investment location. In Europe — and I am pleased to have with me today a Member of the European Parliament, Mrs Christine Crawley — there are people who take a keen interest in Northern Ireland and who work for Northern Ireland and for the Labour Party. They regularly work with the Northern Ireland MEPs in the interests of the whole community here. District partnerships too — I will be going to Ballymoney today to visit the council and the district partnership there (between us, we the Ministers are trying to visit all 26 district councils and partnerships) — are a good example of how the divisions between political parties and representatives of business, labour and the voluntary sector can be overcome when people work together in the interests of all.

I often ask myself why some parties have such difficulty about engaging with others in the talks when they have no difficulty in so doing in other arenas. I find this particularly frustrating at a time when I believe the talks are making progress. Participants have started the important work of setting out their respective principles, requirements and broad views on a wide range of issues under the three strands.

This sharing of beliefs and views by participants threatens no one. Let me emphasize once again that there is nothing to fear from these talks. Consent has been accepted by the two Governments as a guiding principle for the talks and for any outcome of them, and the Governments were supported in that by all but one of the participating parties in the vote on 24 September.

The other key principle governing the talks is that any outcome will need the support of parties representing a majority of each community. It therefore follows that there can be no outcome with which representatives of a majority of Unionists or Nationalists do not agree. When the Prime Minister spoke in Belfast last May he made it clear that Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom because that is the wish of a majority of the people who live here. It will remain part of the United Kingdom for as long as that is the case. Importantly, any outcome will be submitted to a referendum, and it will not be proceeded with unless it has the support of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland voting in that referendum.

With those firm foundations in mind, perhaps this is a good point in the talks to look to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. I do not underestimate the challenges, but, equally, the opportunities are very real. I firmly believe that we can look forward with confidence in the future of Northern Ireland and its people. That is why I am so committed to achieving agreement in these talks. The issues under consideration — new arrangements embracing all the relationships that matter to people here — are of fundamental importance to everyone in Northern Ireland. Agreement where there are divisions will change the lives of us all. We know where these divisions lie, and they are being addressed at the heart of the talks.

We have the prospect of giving the people of Northern Ireland a real say in their own affairs and in their own destiny. Imposed solutions were not the answer in the past, and they will not be the answer in the future. Perhaps more than ever before, it is up to the people to decide. We will work to facilitate agreement founded on the principles of freedom, justice and equality. The people who live here are the ones whose representatives will agree the way forward and who will have to support that agreement in a referendum. The people of Scotland and Wales have already given their consent to change. They want the opportunity to take more decisions on the matters that directly affect their day-to-day lives.

The United Kingdom is changing. Europe is changing. The chance is there to have one's voice heard. The people of Northern Ireland want their voices heard. Certainly, they do not want to go back to the fear and violence of the last 25 years. It will be a missed opportunity if we do not seize this moment to create a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. But it will do more — so much more. Young people and families with children across Northern Ireland are looking to their leaders to help make the idea of a lasting peace come true.

I urge you to help grasp this opportunity that we have, both individually and collectively, to achieve what the Forum was set up to do: promote dialogue and understanding. As democrats, all of us here know that that is the only real way forward.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: Thank you, Secretary of State. You have set another record. I do not think that anyone else has been listened to for 25 minutes in such comparative silence. That says a lot about yourself and about the comprehensive way in which you have dealt with matters.

The Secretary of State: I was very impressed.

The Chairman: The parties have given me the names of those whom they would like to put questions to the Secretary of State. I remind Members that there will be no supplementary questions, and I should tell the Secretary of State — if she does not know it already — that we are very good timekeepers. Members never speak longer than is permitted. In this case they have one minute each.

The Secretary of State: I will try to answer in one minute.

The Chairman: That will be a very good example.

The Secretary of State: I might fail.

Mr Trimble: The Secretary of State will recall the assurance she gave us in July: that come September all the mechanisms would be in place for the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. Can she tell us whether this has happened? What progress has been made by the international decommissioning commission? Does that body have the full support of the Northern Ireland Office in pressing forward to achieve actual decommissioning? Can the Secretary of State assure us that she will not allow alleged splits in certain paramilitary organizations to result in a diversion from that course and in further acts of appeasement?

The Secretary of State: The Northern Ireland Office is fully behind the independent commission on decommissioning. In answer to your first point, I can say that the mechanisms are fully in place. We have just received an interim report — it has been given to the two Governments — on the first weeks of the commission. We are reading that report, and we will give it to the parties for discussion. Both Governments are committed to seeing progress on decommissioning during the process. It is an indispensable part of the process. We said all along that decommissioning should take place in parallel with the talks. There is no doubt at all about that. I think that that answers your question.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Secretary of State must know that the last part of her speech will not bring any converts from this side of the House. May I ask her to keep in mind, in all her discussions, that debate and negotiation are entirely different. We are ready to debate at any time with any elected representative, but we are not prepared to negotiate the future of our country with murdering thugs, with men who have the blood of our citizens on their hands.

Why do the Secretary of State and the Government that she represents, in alliance with the Irish Government, seek confrontation with the majority of the Unionist people, who have utterly rejected the framework document? She says that the framework document is the best bet. Indeed, that is the agreement that she has with another Government.

The Chairman: And your question, Dr Paisley?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: That is my question.

The Secretary of State: I did not think I would get a lot of converts, but I felt that I ought to say what I said because it is what many people feel and what the Government are trying to do. I would not come here and not say it. I say what I believe, whatever the audience. What I say does not change from one audience to another.

With regard to the distinction between debate and negotiation — what goes on in the talks you call debate; I call it negotiation — what is important is that we do not have violence. You may not be in the talks process, but it is moving and it is working. It is part of the reason we do not have violence, and I presume that nobody here wants to see anyone else murdered on the streets of Northern Ireland. If that is our goal, we must find a way of stopping the violence and moving the talks forward. Debating will not achieve that, but negotiation can.

On your ultimate point about the framework document, we have said that that was the best bet of the previous Government, and of the previous Irish Government, for the way forward. Having looked at the situation, we accept that it is not a dictated blueprint that everybody should agree with, but our best bet. The whole point of negotiation, the whole point of talks, is that the framework document is there as a suggestion. If the people in the talks process — with sufficient consensus — come up with alternatives, we will not stop them. You can say "We do not like the framework document." They do not like it any more than you do. They have made that absolutely clear. But what is important now is that we move towards a position that takes into account other people's points of view. That is what negotiations are about.

Mr Neeson: The Secretary of State knows of my commitment, and that of my party, to the primacy of the talks at Castle Buildings. However, my question relates to reform of the structure of local government. Rumours abound that a consultation process has begun that is concerned particularly with the number of district councils. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that any consultation about future structures of local government will involve the elected councillors and not just unelected bodies such as Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, as appears to be the case at the moment, and that democracy will be seen to be working in Northern Ireland?

The Secretary of State: I have no difficulty in giving that guarantee. I have not seen any internal papers about specific reforms of district councils that mention cutting the number of councils. I have talked to representatives of a number of councils who have voiced your views. I have had discussions with elected representatives and various parties, who have also asked "What are you going to do about district councils if there is a devolved Assembly?" As I have just said, it is not for me but for the parties in the negotiations to decide. I have not read all the papers that have come to the talks. I do not know whether any of you have submitted suggestions about this — I am just covering myself. With regard to suggestions, it is for the parties to decide. But I can assure you that I do not have a consultation process going with a view to cutting the number of district councils. I have absolutely no difficulty in giving a straight no to that.

Mr McFarland: The document 'Options for a Labour Government', which was produced some three years ago, recommended that parties here should be asked to present their proposals and should be given six months to agree a solution. The initiative was

expected to fail, and discussions with Dublin on imposed joint authority would follow. Can the Secretary of State tell me at what point on the road to Stormont Castle the Government's Pauline conversion to present policy took place? Or has it taken place?

The Secretary of State: I can assure you that that is not the present Government's policy. Tony Blair took over about three years ago, and since then we have had internal discussions. We put up proposals which were not the joint-authority proposals. You could quote from that document numerous paragraphs that are not party policy.

We made our policy clear during my two years as Opposition spokesman on Northern Ireland. We gave the then Government our full support on the basis of the framework document and on the basis that they were trying to reach agreement. Let me emphasize that this is not a document set in stone. It is our best bet, and it is there for negotiation and discussion, as I am sure your party knows.

But the position expressed in the document to which you have referred has changed. I have no trouble in saying that. When you get close to government you re-evaluate your policies. There is no shame in saying that. You have to work to implement your policies. That is exactly what we did. We prioritized and looked at what we could and what we could not achieve. That is our present position.

10.45 am

Rev William McCrea: Over the years, successive Governments have been secretly, and then openly, pandering to IRA murderers by seeking to hand out confidence-building measures to Republicans. Early release for IRA prisoners has been suggested. Can the Secretary of State tell the Forum what confidence-building measures she could offer to the people made widows and the orphans by IRA murder gangs? As she seeks to hasten the return of the Provos to their IRA murder cells, what news can she give to the thousands of innocent victims — for example, those of Enniskillen and Teebane? Does the Secretary of State appreciate the grievous insult and hurt that she inflicts on the law-abiding, innocent victims of Ulster when she embraces a notorious terrorist like Martin McGuinness?

The Secretary of State: We have not been doing anything secretly. We have published what we have done, and when we have talked to different parties the documents have been put in the public domain.

Mr Peter Robinson: The minutes?

The Secretary of State: Minutes of what?

Mr Peter Robinson: The talks. The Secretary of State refused to give them to us.

The Secretary of State: I did, because you are not at the talks. We have had this discussion, Peter.

The Chairman: This is a question-and-answer session.

The Secretary of State: I was referring specifically to the point about secret discussions. I was making it clear that the Government have not had secret discussions. We have discussed the minutes of the talks process on numerous occasions. As I have said to you, it was up to the talks participants, and they were not terribly keen for you to have them. That is no secret.

Mr Peter Robinson: The Secretary of State should not worry. We are getting them.

The Secretary of State: Well, we would like to have you in the talks, and I am sure you will get them. In Northern Ireland most people get what they want. Nothing remains secret for very long. These minutes are not secret. They belong to the participants in the talks process, and if we believed that you would use them constructively we would have no worry about giving them to you. My worry — and we are having an honest debate here, which I presume is what this is about — is that your having them would not lead to a constructive debate. Your contribution to the talks process so far has not been terribly constructive.

Mr Dodds: We are getting to the real reasons now. They do not suit the Government.

The Secretary of State: I am being very straight with you. I was asked for my view, and I have given it.

My heart goes out to the widows, orphans and other victims of both World Wars and the troubles for the suffering that they have gone through. *[Interruption]* Yes, it does. We are all allowed to have suffering; you do not have a monopoly, Sir. My father fought at Dunkirk, and my mother worked in an ammunitions factory. I care as much as you about the suffering, and I find it offensive when people claim a monopoly.

Mr McKee: Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were worried about it.

The Secretary of State: I will get to Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness. It is an individual's right to relate to the suffering in his or her country. It is my right as much as yours. As many MPs in this Chamber know, I have talked with families who lost members. I talked a fortnight ago with Mrs Restorick, who is still trying to recover from the loss of her son Stephen. I can assure you that, although I have not experienced such suffering myself, I understand it from others. A fortnight ago we set up a commission, with Ken Bloomfield, to consider what sort of commemoration of the suffering that people have experienced would be appropriate. We have made that specific commitment to recognition of the suffering of the past.

Let me make it clear that I have not embraced Mr McGuinness. I have shaken his hand, as I have shaken Mr Adams's hand, and I will do likewise in the case of anyone who has advanced the cease-fire and signed up to the Mitchell principles. As Tony Blair has said, we will treat people as human beings while they try to work for peace in the talks process.

Ms Sagar: I will not be so hard on the Secretary of State or so discourteous.

As the Secretary of State can see, there are only seven female Members here. Does she have any suggestions about how we might increase the number of women in politics or how we might teach some people some manners?

The Secretary of State: This is difficult. I cannot tell other parties how to run their business. That is not my job. However, I am pleased to see the seven female Members here. The Women's Coalition's contribution in the talks has been, in my view — and I am being honest this morning — a positive one.

In various countries, parties have adopted different methods. The Labour Party adopted a policy whereby the constituency candidate would be chosen from a short list which had to include the name of at least one woman. You could not have an all-male short list. I would not be here — many people would be pleased about that — but for that rule. The constituency in which I stood had never had a woman on the short list. The party had to search around, and they found me. Otherwise you would not be enduring the pain of having me here today.

I know that other parties in both Northern Ireland and Europe — and here today we have Christine Crawley, who used to chair the Women's Committee of the European Parliament — could share various ideas with you. The real problem is adjusting to cultural change. Democracy works better when we have fairer representation of people rather than a situation in which women can only speak for women. But their presence facilitates a more rounded approach, as we see in the case of the women representing the parties here. We have Iris as a DUP Member, which is a plus. It is very good to see you here this morning, Iris.

Mr Casey: I welcome the Secretary of State to the Forum.

The Forum has on several occasions expressed its concern about the plight of the long-term unemployed — the Secretary of State referred to this in her opening remarks — and about the important part that ACE has played in alleviating their problems. Can the Secretary of State give us an assurance that the Forum's view that ACE should be retained as a part of any further plans for dealing with long-term unemployment will be given the consideration that it is due?

The Secretary of State: Are you asking whether the Forum's specific proposals for dealing with long-term unemployment will be taken seriously and considered in our plans for the future?

Mr Casey: Yes. Will they be given due consideration? We can turn out reports *ad infinitum*, but if nobody takes any heed of them they are not worth the paper they are written on.

The Secretary of State: One of the purposes of the first half of my speech was to indicate that the Forum's reports are being read and taken account of. There is no doubt about that. We are addressing difficult areas such as long-term unemployment, health and education, and we do read and take into account the Forum's reports, as we take account of various submissions.

Mr Casey: All that I am asking for —

The Chairman: No supplementaries. Sorry.

Mr Speers: In the light of recent revelations concerning the clear misuse and waste of public money by 'Positively Belfast', will the Secretary of State take appropriate — indeed, essential — action to ensure that such abuse and waste does not happen again? Will she also ensure that responsibility for the use of such public money is placed in the hands of people with tried and tested systems of accountability, open to public scrutiny monthly? I refer to the district councils, which are elected by and are accountable to the public.

The Secretary of State: With regard to this 'Positively Belfast' information that has come to light, I can assure you that we are taking it very seriously. I have asked for an immediate report to find out exactly what is going on. I can assure you that we will apply any lessons that we learn from that. We shall audit the situation very carefully to ensure that public money is not abused. It is appalling to have such a situation, and I will do all I can to stop it.

I take the second part of the question as a request that the district councils be gatekeepers, that they be monitors and auditors of such money. That can apply to public money. The difficulty here is that money coming from Europe through the European Peace and Reconciliation Fund — and that accounts for much of the funding of community and voluntary groups — is allocated in the way that the European Peace and Reconciliation Committee decides: through the intermediatory bodies and district partnerships in an attempt to broaden the base of community participation in the allocation. I agree with you one hundred per cent that we can monitor some of the money which is handed out, but this is not fully within our ambit.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I must make it clear that no European money ever went to 'Positively Belfast'.

The Secretary of State: I was not in any way suggesting that it had. Mr Speers asked that all money go through district councils. As you know, the European money does not do that. I did not want to mislead.

Mrs I Robinson: Before putting my question I would like to point out that the Democratic Unionist Party has the largest number of women in local government in Northern Ireland and in the Forum, and that, unlike the ladies in the Women's Coalition, we were elected.

It was reported in the 'Belfast Telegraph' this week that the Secretary of State is contemplating paying cash to terrorists for illegal weapons. Can she really be serious? Or will she take this opportunity to rule this preposterous proposition out? On the other hand, if the Government are considering this proposal will the Secretary of State tell firearms dealers and gun club owners in Northern Ireland why she will not compensate them for the loss of their livelihood?

The Secretary of State: The matter referred to in the first part of the question — cash for terrorists — was the basis of a story. I do not remember what interview it was. Does anybody remember?

A Member: Own up, Mark.

The Secretary of State: Mark, probably censored.

Mr Dodds: Where's Eamonn?

The Secretary of State: I have been told that it was neither Mark nor Eamonn. It was an interview with David Frost on Sunday. He was going on about weapons, and he asked "Have you ever considered paying?" I said "No, but if the commission decides ...". I cannot decide. The commission will look at the different options. I was trying to avoid ruling out any conclusion. I do not know if the commission will so decide, but I think it very unlikely, which is why I said no for myself but that it is a question for the commission to look at. I left a slight opening, but on the understanding that I would not do this, that it was a matter for the commission. You have the usual wonderful headline — never written by the interviewer; always inserted by the editor.

The Chairman: I see them all up there.

The Secretary of State: The headline demonstrated the usual wonderful ability. None of the people who interview you ever write the headline; it is always an editor. The editor put in the headline "Mowlam pays", which, as we all know — especially those who got up early enough to watch Frost — was a complete perversion. So, in a sense, the second part of the question becomes irrelevant.

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

The Chairman: We always have 10 or 15 seconds spent on that claim.

Mr Hugh Smyth: In 1994, when the cease-fire was announced, the then Prime Minister, John Major, promised the people here that whatever money was saved from his security budget would be poured back into the economy of Northern Ireland. We know, unfortunately, that he did not get the opportunity fully to achieve that. There were several reasons — a main one being that the IRA broke the cease-fire. That commitment, incidentally, was supported by the people in the present Government, then in opposition. I am sure that I speak on behalf of the majority of all sound-thinking people who hope and pray that the cease-fire will hold. Can the Secretary of State, like John Major, give a guarantee that if it does, her Government will be prepared to plough back into the Northern Ireland economy any savings from the security budget over the next three years?

11.00 am

I have listened to her fine words this morning, and I agree with them, but this is money that we need. We have been speaking about various things. For instance, the Making Belfast Work budget has been slashed. That will have an enormous effect on the Unionist

areas that Members here represent, in particular the Donegall Road and Donegall Pass areas. Will the Secretary of State please give me and the people I represent — indeed, all the people of Northern Ireland — a guarantee that the money saved on security (savings about which she would be delighted) will be poured back into the Northern Ireland economy?

The Secretary of State: I can guarantee that I will fight to keep within the overall Northern Ireland budget every penny that we save from one part of it. I say "I" because I cannot know — here I am being absolutely straight, as I have tried to be all morning — what Gordon Brown will do in three or four years' time, and I am part of a collective Cabinet. I have no belief that the Chancellor will change the present situation, no indication that anything will alter. I am just putting that in as a footnote, which, like the question that Iris asked, will probably get blown completely out of proportion, though I hope not. I can give that guarantee.

With regard to the overall budget — again I am being direct with you — any savings that we can plough back in to make Northern Ireland a more prosperous, stable, economically growing society will be ploughed back in. As I mentioned earlier, in the comprehensive spending review we are looking at money going back to base budgets. Some will get more; some may get less. We will be applying the priorities on which we came in and the priorities given to us by the parties and set by the process of negotiation.

I do not think I would be talking out of school if I were to refer to what will happen if the peace holds and if we get the European Peace and Reconciliation money for another two years. It will stop at the end of 1999, and I do not believe we will get it again. There will be other problems in Europe; we cannot be the only ones on which they put special focus. We may get this money again, but if the funds which go into many community groups dry up we will have to look very carefully at how we can get sustainable projects going and how we can move money from one budget head to another.

I am not denying your basic point; what I am saying is that when it comes to the crunch, let us together — and we want to do it together — consider how we might move funds around. A collective decision would be best for people in Northern Ireland.

Mr John White: In strand two of the negotiations at Castle Buildings the Irish Government make no apologies for promoting the pan-Nationalist agenda, yet the British Government have stated that they are almost neutral. Do you think that the vast majority of British citizens believe that it is right for their Government to be neutral?

The Secretary of State: I think that what the vast majority of British citizens want is the same as what the majority of people in Northern Ireland want — that people should talk, get a peaceful settlement and then have a chance to live their lives and enable their children to grow up without violence. I see my position as being that of a facilitator. I am an encourager, but not for any particular outcome. I want a balanced settlement that everybody can live with. That is how I see my role in the talks process.

The Chairman: Mr Neeson asked only one question, but his party was allocated two.

The Secretary of State: Quick, or I will be late for Ballymoney.

Mr Neeson: As Chairman of the Forum's Committee on Electoral Reform, I am pleased that the Secretary of State has received our report. The Committee looks forward to meeting with her in the very near future.

Our proposals were unanimous. Democracy in Northern Ireland has been absolutely poisoned by the current electoral system. What price democracy? Can the Government assure the Forum that the bottom line is that those in Northern Ireland who are entitled to vote will be able to vote?

The Secretary of State: Yes, we will do our best. We cannot guarantee everybody a vote, and we cannot force people to vote. There will always be problems with the system, and the current review suggests that there is room for improvement. The electoral system will be discussed with the parties. It is up to them. You can keep asking us to do it, and we will continue to do it, but —

Mr Trimble: More resources for the Electoral Commission.

The Secretary of State: If you want more resources for the Electoral Commission I will certainly look at that, but you will lose elsewhere. That is a fact of life.

The Chairman: Secretary of State, I cannot let you go without thanking you very much indeed on behalf of everybody here. It would have been much easier for you to give a comprehensive response to the questions, but you decided to answer them individually. We owe you a debt of gratitude, and we respect you.

The Secretary of State: Thank you.

The Secretary of State was escorted from the Chamber.

The meeting was suspended at 11.07 am and resumed at 11.30 am.

FIREARMS

Ms McWilliams: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum calls for the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of hand-guns to be extended to Northern Ireland.

We welcome the opportunity to debate this subject in the Forum. We are aware that it has been debated and that, indeed, the legislation has been passed at Westminster, but people in Northern Ireland have not had an opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of that legislation, and it is in that spirit that we bring the motion forward today.

We are very committed to a weapon-free Northern Ireland. We have also argued for decommissioning at the negotiations in Stormont. This is not an "either or" debate. We see it as "both and". We said in that debate that we want all weapons taken out of Northern Ireland — off the streets and from the homes. We are aware that this debate does not extend to the security forces, and before we start debating we would like to make it clear that we are not talking about guns held by the Army or police officers; we are talking about guns held by civilians. Obviously, we look forward to the day when we can return to normality here and when the police no longer find it necessary to carry weapons. We would like to see the police force here act in the same way as police forces elsewhere, but that is not what this debate is about. It is not even about shotguns or long-guns held for sporting purposes. It is about small guns, guns that can be concealed, guns that pose a risk to human life.

Few would dispute that the mere presence of guns increases the risk of death or serious injury by firearms. It does, and in the debate I will show how it does. Opponents of greater gun control argue that the benefits of allowing civilians legal access to guns, provided that certain safeguards are in place, outweigh the risks. One such argument is that hand-guns can play a positive role in personal protection and can, indeed, save lives. However, we would like to draw the Forum's attention to a number of issues which challenge those arguments, and there are a number of points we would like to make.

First, it may be the case that an assailant will be deterred when faced by someone who has a licence to hold a gun — at least you would think that that would be the case. However, from the research that is available, we have found that it is rare for the person who is faced with an assailant presenting a gun with the intention of shooting him or endangering his life to be able to get to his weapon in time. American statistics suggest that victims, when faced with assailants, only get to their guns in 1% of cases. This makes sense when we remember that guns are only useful if individuals have them at the ready. Even when a victim is armed, the attacker is always the person who initiates the encounter. Therefore, it makes it very difficult, or practically impossible, for the victim to be able to use his gun.

Even among trained professionals the presence of a gun is no guarantee of safety or success. FBI figures for the 1980s show that 20% of police officers who were killed in the line of duty in the United States were actually killed by their own weapons. I repeat for those who were not present at the time that we are not talking about guns held by police officers; we are talking about guns held by civilians. Although these guns are held for personal-protection purposes, they are not, in fact, useful for personal-protection purposes.

So this is only marginal, and there is another paradox in the protection argument. Common sense tells us that having guns in the house increases the likelihood of accidental injury or death — for example, as we know in Northern Ireland, by the children who find the guns, play with them and end up using them. There are, of course, many safety measures that can be taken to prevent this, but the paradox is that if a gun is kept unloaded and the bullets stored separately from it, that defeats the purpose of having the gun in the first place. Safety measures diminish the possibility for self-protection because they increase the time and effort required to get to the gun. When an assailant comes to a house, most of these guns, which are there for immediate use, are actually unloaded, and if they are loaded, they are going to pose a huge risk to the individuals in that home.

We understand why people want to defend their families and why they want to defend themselves, particularly in the situation in which we live. However, we look forward to the day when we can live in a culture where a gun is not seen as a defensive weapon. In other societies they have technology that can raise the alarm before an assailant gets to the stage of presenting an enormous risk, and other people who have felt at risk have chosen not to have a gun but a dog for protection purposes. That is the kind of society we look forward to.

There were 17 accidental deaths in Northern Ireland between 1991 and 1996, and that is to say nothing of the non-fatal injuries. There were 17 deaths outside domestic homicide that could have been prevented and which were the result of the use of small guns. Again, with regard to the protection argument, it must be noted that a high proportion of homicides involve people known to one another. Most of the people killed by hand-guns are killed by someone known to them in their own homes.

When I was doing research on domestic violence, commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Services back in 1992, that was the kind of information that I wanted, but it was not available. I asked the RUC chief statistician how many deaths had been caused as a result of the use of guns in domestic violence and if the homicide rate was higher here than elsewhere. I took statistics from Devon and Cornwall, Yorkshire, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and I compared the homicide rates in all four places. What came out of that research was that Northern Ireland had a much higher domestic-homicide rate than elsewhere. I also realized that the availability of guns was endangering women and children and, in turn, some men whom the women ended up using the gun on as a way of protecting their own lives, and we know this from the court cases that I trawled as well. Northern Ireland has the highest domestic-homicide rate in the British Isles. In fact, it is much higher than 13 of the provinces of Canada. So we have to start asking ourselves —

Mr Poots: Could the Member clarify what types of weapons were used in these domestic killings and homicides? Was it hand-guns or knives? What weapons were used?

Ms McWilliams: I asked for details of the types of weapons used. They went through all the lists and were able to point to knives, strangulation and hand-guns, but what was creating the higher domestic-homicide rate in Northern Ireland were guns. Most of the deaths were still caused by knives and strangulation, but the figure for Northern Ireland was increased by the availability of small guns.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: In order to make sense of the point about the weapons used, I would like to know if the statistics showed whether hand-guns were personal-protection weapons or guns owned by sportsmen. It is a very important point and I am sure if the Member has read the legislation, she will understand why.

Ms McWilliams: The RUC statistician could not break down the figures like that, but both types were used. The personal-protection weapons were causing a higher risk, but hand-guns used for sporting purposes were also used.

What is also important about this is that not all those guns caused deaths. Many of them caused injuries, but, more importantly, they caused enormous mental trauma for the women. When I started this research I did not expect weapons to be a big issue. I thought that I was going to be looking at domestic violence in the same way as one would look at it anywhere else in the world and that most of what I would be confronting would be physical abuse such as beatings and pushings that caused injuries that required attention at an accident-and-emergency department or mental trauma. I did not expect to uncover, to the extent that I did, the amount of abuse caused by the use of legally-held weapons.

This is what one woman had to say "It was both mental and physical. I am just thinking of the times that he would put the gun to my head and play Russian roulette with it. I never knew whether there was a bullet in it or not. I often wished there had been; many times I wished that he had killed me." But no physical harm was done and, as a result of that, that woman had trouble making anyone believe her. When I asked refuge workers if they had problems with the use of weapons in domestic-violence incidents, they said that women often would not talk about it, that they were too frightened to talk about it in refuges, but that they could tell from the marks on their necks that guns had been used.

Over and over again, this was coming up, and it is a point that we should be aware of and raise. We do not want Northern Ireland to stand out as having one of the higher domestic-homicide rates in the United Kingdom or a higher rate than that in the Republic of Ireland. I acknowledge also that the rate in the Republic has gone up enormously in the last four years. We need to be aware too that it is in the home where there is often the most danger, not out in the streets, and that it is the presence of guns that compounds that danger.

The argument is made that personal-protection weapons are beneficial, even if they cannot be shown to be very effective, because they increase their owners' sense of security. But this increased sense of security may be at the expense of or cause insecurity in others. We need to keep asking if firearms should exist at all costs or at whose cost. We used to keep the family together at all costs. Then people started uncovering child abuse and domestic violence and asked the question "At whose cost?" I am simply posing the question: at what cost do we keep licensed, small guns in homes in Northern Ireland?

The argument will also be made that all licensed guns are tested for ballistics so that if any crime is committed the gun can be traced. However, higher rates of gun ownership in a society directly correlate with greater criminal access to guns. I have received, as many other Members may have, something from one of the lobbyists against the implementation of this legislation. This is someone who is interested in ensuring continued access to small guns in Northern Ireland — and he is aware that we are talking about small guns here. He makes the

point that they do not increase the likelihood of crime. However, most guns in our society — and it is no different in any other society — can make their way into criminal hands. They can be stolen or end up being exchanged and produced elsewhere for other purposes. That these guns can be traced is cold comfort to anyone whose family member or friend is shot.

The availability of guns is also linked to the rate of successful suicides, particularly among young people. That is not to say that the availability of lethal means is the sole determinant of a suicide bid. But the availability of such weapons makes it easier to ensure the success of a suicide bid — unlike the taking of tablets or an attempt to kill oneself with a knife. More often than not, it does ensure the success of a bid.

A 1991 study compared suicide rates in the United States and Canada, and it showed that for 15- to 24-year olds, the rate in the United States was 40% higher than that in Canada. According to the researchers, the difference was entirely attributable to the greater presence of hand-guns in the United States. In Northern Ireland, 68 suicides between 1992 and 1994 were caused by firearms, and the majority of the people who died were under 25. For young men in particular firearms are among the most common means of committing suicide, and gunshots are the second most common means. Men are 100 times more likely to commit suicide by using a gun than women are.

11.45 am

Why do men choose a gun to end their lives while women choose other means, and what does that tell us? I am not putting it to you that there is something gender-specific about this, but if you were to tease that argument out, it could be extended right across the board. Why is it that men feel more comfortable using guns than women do?

Mr Hussey: Can the Member categorize the suicides into those committed with hand-guns and those with sporting-guns such as shotguns?

Ms McWilliams: I was not looking at suicides in particular, but I went through a number of coroners' reports and found that shotguns were used in domestic homicide cases, mainly outside the home, but that in the suicide cases, a small gun was used. Shotguns and long-guns were used in some suicides, but a small gun was used in a higher proportion of them. So, the argument is that we could save lives — although not all of them. I am not proposing for one minute that by extending this legislation we will prevent all suicides — I know that other means are used — but some lives could be saved if guns were broken down into long-guns and small guns.

The reason for gun ownership may be defence, but other people may feel insecure and threatened even though the person who holds the gun is known to them. There have been as many incidents in Northern Ireland's recent history in which legally-held guns have been used and have been perceived as being threatening as there have been cases of their being used for defence purposes. Hand-guns, in particular, can seem threatening because they can be concealed — that is a problem with them — no one can begin to see the smoke signals emerging until it is too late.

We must look at the aggregate social effects of widespread gun ownership. The number of guns in society — legally or illegally held — has to be addressed. In other post-conflict situations, weapons, both legal and illegal, were moved into criminal circulation and used to support organized crime. We do not want to minimize in any way the problems caused by illegal weapons. We want illegal weapons removed, but we cannot agree with the DUP amendment. We support decommissioning; we want it to happen, but we do not see it as an "either or"; we see it as a "both and".

We also note that Northern Ireland has too many sanctioned weapons — there are 134,086 licensed firearms. Members are probably going to tell me that not all of them are small guns and that a high proportion of them could be taken away as a result of this legislation.

The gun culture and the kind of attitudes that it leads to need to be stopped. These guns must be decommissioned. The moral argument of those who call for the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons would be far stronger if they also demonstrated a willingness to give up their weapons and make a practical move towards a gun-free society. It is a complex and emotional issue, and we do not want to be seen to be manipulating it for anybody's purposes. We want to look at it dispassionately and feel able to say "Look at the costs to see if they outweigh the benefits."

Opponents of gun control say that it is not guns that kill, it is people, but guns do not die — it is people who die — and it is in that spirit that we move this motion today.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words after "Forum" and add

"believes that instead of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of legal hand-guns being extended to Northern Ireland that the Government's priority must be to insist upon immediate and actual disarmament of illegal weapons."

I welcome this debate today; it is very important. As ever, I am amazed at the mentality of the Women's Coalition in bringing such an issue to the Forum. If my party had tried to bring forward such a motion, we would have been accused of politicizing the debates here. This motion is about one thing, decommissioning, and if my party had put forward a motion on decommissioning — indeed, if you had allowed such a motion, Mr Chairman — the Women's Coalition would have protested. I welcome the fact that the Women's Coalition has opened up this debate and that it is now realizing the valuable function that the Forum can perform.

The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 which was passed in Great Britain and restricts the use and ownership of hand-guns is an example of the worst possible sort of legislation. Let us not look at the specifics of that piece of legislation, let us look at the principle upon which it was brought on to the statute-book. It is what can only be described as knee-jerk legislation. It is reactionary and emotionally based, and that is no sound basis upon which to legislate. Unfortunately, however, we had a Government and an Opposition who thought that they could make some sort of point, that they could respond to the gallery and tune in to the mood of public opinion by passing it.

I am sorry to say that this legislation will do none of the things that Ms McWilliams thinks it should. This legislation will fail, and it will fail miserably because it has nothing whatsoever to do with combating suicide and the reasons for it — that is not its aim and neither is it its aim to combat the gun culture.

Last Saturday, I was driving through Dunblane, and I took a moment to stop and look at the tributes that were laid there. What happened at Dunblane was very sad — an appalling occurrence — but this legislation will not stop another Dunblane. This legislation will never stop that happening because it is reactionary and emotionally charged. We have to be very careful if we are to propose the extension of an Act that currently applies in Great Britain to Northern Ireland and claim that it will do all manner of things when, quite clearly, it will not.

In proposing her motion, Ms McWilliams made numerous comparisons between the situation in the United States of America and that in Canada. Those comparisons are very interesting, but they mean little in Northern Ireland because the legislation governing the ownership of weapons here is completely different from that in force in the United States.

In the United States there is a gun culture; in the United States people have a fundamental human right to own a gun, but people in Northern Ireland do not. Nowhere in the United Kingdom do people have a fundamental human right to possess a lethal weapon — there is very strict legislation governing the ownership of weapons here. Ms McWilliams claimed that this legislation would help combat suicide. It may prevent someone from using a particular weapon to commit suicide, but it will not actually stop the suicide.

I asked Ms McWilliams a question and her answer was very clear. She said she could not give me a precise breakdown of the types of weapons used to commit the suicides that would show whether or not personal-protection weapons were used. The reason I asked that question is that I know that the weapons used in a lot of suicides in Northern Ireland are personal-protection weapons, and this legislation does not cover personal-protection weapons. In fact, there are something like 120,000 pieces of weaponry in Northern Ireland that this legislation would not cover — all the hand-guns in the possession of Her Majesty's Forces here. If this legislation were to be brought in tomorrow, 98% of the weapons currently owned here would not be covered by it. Those weapons would still be in the possession of people who have had to go through a very strict vetting process — who own guns only because of a very particular set of circumstances.

For instance, farmers own weapons; indeed, a lot of suicides in Northern Ireland are committed by farmers or by people who have access to a farmer's gun, but this legislation will not affect those who have access to a farmer's gun. *[Interruption]*

I know that Ms McWilliams did. That is why I cannot believe that she made the point about suicide, because the issue of suicide is so important.

There is a high suicide rate in the agricultural community, and people who have access to those weapons use them, but this legislation, sadly, will not stop that. Fewer than 2,000 weapons would be affected, and these are in the hands of people who have been vetted

by both Special Branch and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Such people have to go through a very particular vetting process, which people on the mainland do not.

This legislation was intended to deal with people who just want to own a weapon, maybe for sporting purposes, and we have seen — and we will see in the next Olympics — the implications that it will have for them. People who were once very good at using weapons to shoot at targets may not be able to enter the Olympics because they will no longer be proficient in that sport. That is one of the kickbacks.

It is also very important to note that the Act will enable people to own gas-powered air pistols and rifles without the need for a licence. The legislation will make it possible for people who have never possessed weapons before to go into a corner shop, purchase a gas-powered hand-pistol or a gas-powered rifle and use that weapon. That is a point which Ms McWilliams had before her, and I thought she would have taken the opportunity to challenge it, but she did not. She ought to have done so because in many instances this legislation opens up access that did not exist previously to the use of weapons.

Ms McWilliams raised the decommissioning of illegally-held weapons, and there is some hypocrisy there. She and her party are prepared to sit down in negotiations with people who possess illegal weapons, yet she is making this fuss about people who have a proven track record and who, if they used their weapons, would immediately be amenable to the law. It is unfortunate that Ms McWilliams does not realize the hypocrisy of that. She is saying that it is all right for terrorists to keep their guns — it is all right for terrorists in a thieves' kitchen to decide when they will, in parallel, decommission, if they ever decide to do that — but that it is not all right for people to have guns for personal protection, sporting purposes or farming. These people have to become victims, while the people who create those victims get away scot-free.

There is a political agenda behind this motion, despite the very nice way in which Ms McWilliams said there was not. There is a political agenda, and that must be recognized. It would not be right to condemn only the Women's Coalition and leave it at that; let us condemn the people who brought this legislation on to the statute-book — the Government — because they, more than anyone else, are the real hypocrites here. They are prepared to say to the people of Northern Ireland "We will shunt away the issue of decommissioning; we will move away from that debate altogether. We will not put the spotlight on the terrorists, but we will put the spotlight on legally-held weapons." You could face an enormous fine of something like £5,000 if you were found guilty of breaking this legislation in Great Britain; you could also face up to 10 years in prison.

12.00

Mrs Robinson asked the Secretary of State this morning about whether or not she was contemplating paying terrorists to give up their guns. I know the Secretary of State kicked it into touch, but the issue is still live. In fact, in South Africa they had the audacity to offer money for Kalashnikovs and other rifles, and I have no doubt that if the Secretary of State thought she could get away with it, she would pay the terrorists up front for some of their weapons in order to appease another political agenda.

I have great pleasure in moving our amendment because it says that we are opposed to the extension of this Act and that the Government's priority must be to insist upon the immediate disarmament of illegal weapons. That is the Government's duty: no more smoke-screens on issues which will not save another life; no more smoke-screens on the preservation of a right which people have had and which people should have: rather let us get to the real issue. I call on the Government to make decommissioning a priority and stop this charade of asking an international body to deal with this issue when it is quite clear that in the months that that body has been in operation it has not made one inch of progress.

In conclusion, I hope that the House will unite with my party in supporting this amendment and bringing down a foolish motion that misses the point.

Mr King: I rise to support the amendment proposed by Mr Paisley.

I do not think that the Women's Coalition has actually thought through this motion, but in light of what Ms McWilliams said this morning, it should rethink it. It is calling for the removal of all firearms from society, and the Act which it is talking about will patently fail to do that. This Act is a knee-jerk reaction which will fail to remove guns from our society just as it will fail to do so in Great Britain.

Ms McWilliams referred to some of the lobby material which we got this morning. I would like to take the opportunity to put some of that on the record. There are some 120,000 licensed firearms in Northern Ireland. The legislation which Ms McWilliams proposes extending to Northern Ireland would leave 98·4% of those weapons intact. The weapons that would affected by this legislation, as Ms McWilliams pointed out, are tested for ballistics, and the RUC can confirm that since 1971 none of the weapons that would be affected by this Act have been involved in crimes in Northern Ireland.

I have to oppose the motion. I do not want to oppose it on the grounds of our special situation in Northern Ireland, but purely because the law which they wish to extend to Northern Ireland is bad law. As Mr Paisley said, it was enacted as a knee-jerk reaction to ill-informed public opinion following the tragedy of Dunblane. Those of us in the House can cast our minds back to the events surrounding the aftermath of the Dunblane massacre. There was a real feeling in the country that something had to be done, and, quite cynically, the Government and Opposition parties latched on to this feeling, and the result was a piece of legislation that ranks with the Dangerous Dogs Act and the War Crimes Act as among the most impotent, useless and shameful pieces of legislation ever enacted by the Westminster Parliament.

It is no surprise or coincidence that the Government that introduced this legislation have a hefty proportion of Scottish members and were heavily influenced by Scottish Members of Parliament. It is no surprise that this legislation was enacted very early in the new Government's life. We note, just this week, that pledges to remove tobacco sponsorship from Formula One and fox-hunting from the countryside — pledges that were given in similar knee-jerk reactions, in a similar vain desire for popularity — have, as soon as the Government have got used to governing, been put on the back burner. It is unfortunate that Mr Blair and his Administration did not take the time to get used to Government — they might have seen the error of this legislation.

One cannot doubt or fault the prime motivation behind the Act which is to prevent future Thomas Hamiltons from killing children, but will that indeed be the effect? Hamilton was a sad, squalid figure, totally outside society's norms. Would he have handed over his weapons in fear of the prospect of a £5,000 fine or a 10-year prison sentence? Nobody in the House can seriously believe that this legislation would have prevented Dunblane.

In Northern Ireland, we have a section of the community that is armed, vetted and responsible — the sports shooters. They are a group of people who are known to the police, who are vetted by the police and who hold their firearms, not as a right but as a privilege — a privilege which they have earned because of their conduct over the years. To suddenly, at a stroke, destroy a sport and remove a people's privilege to hold firearms in order to appease the Snowdrop Campaign and embrace a piece of knee-jerk legislation strikes at principle and at the very heart of a free and fair society. That is wrong in the latter part of the 20th century, and it is wrong in principle. Who here really believes that abolishing sport shooting will prevent murder? Who here believes that abolishing the right of people to hold firearms in very strictly controlled circumstances will prevent future tragedies? Nobody can do that. We are being asked to curtail the rights of law-abiding citizens in order to appease the something-has-to-be-done brigade, and that in principle is wrong.

It is frightening just how easy it is to get hold of illegal weaponry in other parts of the United Kingdom; there is an old joke floating around parts of south-east London that an AK47 is so-called because it costs £47 to buy one. We live in western Europe where the majority of European Union countries are Schengen countries and have no frontier checks between them. It is frightening to think of the glut of former eastern-bloc weaponry that is available in western European society.

I travelled extensively in central and eastern Europe in the early 1990s, and during my travels I came across an Army-surplus-stock shop in the eastern sector of Berlin, about 500 yards from the Reichstag building. In that shop former Soviet soldiers were selling military kit per the kilo. It did not matter what you wanted: you just put the items on the scales and paid for them in Deutschmark per kilo. There are no border checks from Berlin to Calais. Once you get on the ferry at Calais for Dover, or you get on the Eurostar, there are only cursory baggage checks by border officials. The route for illegal weaponry to come into the United Kingdom is open, and this legislation will do nothing to affect that trade. It will not prevent armed robberies and it will not prevent gangs from getting their hands on illegal weaponry. This legislation will not, for one instant, reduce the rate of crimes involving firearms in the United Kingdom. It is bad legislation. It is knee-jerk legislation. It is politically motivated legislation.

I am a libertarian at heart, and I find most forms of prohibition flawed in principle. One only has to look at the attempts to prohibit previously lawful activities in other countries to see what happens — it does not work. You cannot make a lawful activity illegal by a sweep of a Secretary of State's pen without there being a movement to push that activity underground. Some sport shooters in Great Britain already want to come to Northern Ireland to use our shooting facilities and escape from the clutches of this Act, and that has to be welcomed as a boost for tourism here. But if this legislation is passed in Northern Ireland,

they will go to the Irish Republic, France or Holland, and that will do nothing to assuage gun culture, gun ownership or gun use. This legislation is bad, it is wrong, and it will fail.

While Northern Ireland is still exempt — we all know that Great Britain is unfortunately not — may I suggest that shooting clubs in Scotland get themselves a political wing. May I suggest that gun clubs across the water nurture a grievance culture. May I suggest that gun clubs across the water embark upon 30 years of terrorism against the institutions of state. That way, as Northern Ireland can show, far from being asked to decommission, they will be feted at every turn by Governments at home and abroad. They will be offered money, perhaps, to hand over their weapons — if they want to. And they certainly will not be asked to decommission in the face of the full rigour of the law.

I oppose the motion, but I am quite happy to support Mr Paisley and the DUP's amendment.

Mr Neeson: I want to intervene briefly on the motion before us. This is a very sensitive issue, and, undoubtedly, the events at Dunblane did have a major impact on those who drew up this legislation.

During my years on the Police Authority, I was very much aware of the work that Ms McWilliams was doing on domestic violence, and I am pleased that she has raised the profile of this very important issue in the Forum. She also raised the issue of suicides in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, I have walked behind the coffins of quite a number of people who committed suicide — policemen who committed suicide. But they committed suicide with their personal-protection weapons. I have walked behind funerals of others who committed suicide — but they used shotguns. That is why the issue is not as straightforward as one might imagine.

It is important that the issue of harmonizing legislation — which I suppose is part of the thrust behind this — is looked at very carefully. I see great dangers in that because many issues — for example, the one that is now raising its head is the question of the abortion legislation's being extended to Northern Ireland — are part of that process. We must be very careful, and the real solution to the matter of legislation for Northern Ireland lies with the establishment of a Northern Ireland Assembly with legislative and executive powers, and it is important to bear that in mind when dealing with issues such as this.

I am not surprised that the DUP has moved an amendment to take in decommissioning; I would have been very disappointed if it had not done so. But the reality is this: through the talks process, the decommissioning commission, under the chairmanship of General de Chastelain, has already started its work on the decommissioning process. Its first report has already been submitted to the two Governments, and the follow-on from that is to meet with the political parties to discuss it. This will be the first of a number of reports, and my party looks forward to discussing with the general and his team their main findings. If the DUP wanted to find out what is in that report, it would be in Castle Buildings as well, and I would like the Secretary of State to encourage it wholeheartedly to become involved in the process.

My party has problems, not only with the original motion from the Women's Coalition — though I appreciate its bringing it forward — but also with the DUP amendment. A process for decommissioning has already been set up, and in those circumstances we will be unable to support either the motion or the amendment.

12.15 pm

Mr Casey: I rise to speak to both the motion and the amendment, rather than to either one — I do not know whether that makes good sense or not.

The Chairman: It is unusual, but it is possible.

Mr Casey: It might become clearer as I go along.

We must be very cautious when we react to tragedies such as Dunblane; we must ensure that we do not react in a knee-jerk fashion. It is vital that we stand back and assess the facts objectively — and not politicize them — to try to protect society, as far as we can, from this sort of tragedy happening again. In saying that, we must consider those who were killed in Dunblane and in other similar incidents, and our heartfelt commiserations go out to their relatives whose lives have been devastated.

What end do we hope to achieve by restricting the use or ownership of hand-guns in Northern Ireland? That there will never be another Dunblane? Unfortunately, that could never be guaranteed through legislation — rather than flush out a very small minority, it would punish the vast majority of law-abiding citizens. Men who commit these atrocities — like Thomas Hamilton and Michael Ryan — are hell-bent on carrying out their evil deeds, and they can simply obtain weapons illegally or use substitutes.

Would it not be more sensible to introduce more vigorous and strictly regulated systems rather than punish the thousands of law-abiding citizens who hold these weapons, mostly for sporting purposes? This was one of the areas highlighted by the inquiry into Dunblane: a more vigorous investigation of Thomas Hamilton would have revealed the man's unstable background and the local people's expressed concerns about him.

Legislation restricting the use and ownership of hand-guns would not have prevented Thomas Hamilton or Michael Ryan from carrying out their actions, nor will it prevent further such atrocities. One example is the recent case of Garnett Bell who sought to perpetrate a massacre at Sullivan Upper School using means other than firearms — he used an improvised flame-thrower. On another occasion we had the machete attack on schoolchildren and teachers in England — another dastardly act by means other than guns.

The "676 Campaign" in Washington State is pushing for state legislation to provide for stricter safety measures on the use of hand-guns — over one million hand-guns are registered in Washington State. Indeed, it is contrary to the American Constitution to ban the freedom of people to hold hand-guns. Campaigners believe that restricting their use would not result in a decrease in crime. Thus, they are campaigning for a range of stricter safety and control measures to be introduced to prevent, among other things, accidental shootings.

In order to respond factually and objectively to this issue, we contacted the RUC and found that statistical information on the number of people killed by legally-held firearms — excluding suicides — over the last three years is not available. The police did recollect one instance where a member of the RIR shot dead two people and then turned the gun on himself.

These figures are in the context of the number of legally-held firearms which were in circulation during the last three years. The Chief Constable's Report (1996) said

"As at 31 December 1996, 87,017 Firearms Certificates were on issue in the Province, authorizing the possession of 134,086 firearms.

There were 2,764 new certificates issued, 8,125 variations made and 29,682 renewals granted. 514 applications were refused and 133 certificates were revoked."

Those statistics prove that the RUC does carry out investigations into the people who hold these weapons. If 133 certificates were revoked and 514 applications refused, some sort of strict control is being applied by the RUC. The report further said

"211 appeals were made to the Secretary of State regarding refusals and revocations, 20 of which were successful.

The continued existence of 46 Firearms Clubs was authorized by the Secretary of State. ... Certificates of Safety were issued in respect of 56 firing ranges."

Clearly, these figures do not suggest that restricting the use of hand-guns would necessarily save lives. It must be further emphasized that decent, law-abiding people who do hold firearms certificates and licences would be being penalized while the far more frightening illegal weapons held by terrorists were still in circulation.

The number of fatalities connected with the number of legally-held weapons is very small. Therefore, extending the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 to Northern Ireland would be of little value in attempting to save lives. There is also a case to be made for an individual's right to hold a legal weapon. As we know individual rights are important, not only in the talks process but in Europe and the United States of America as well.

Restricting the use of hand-guns would obviously have a huge impact on the existing 46 gun clubs and 56 firing ranges, the number of whose members would automatically decrease. The right to follow one's chosen sport would be severely restricted and significantly diminished. The industry would lose out financially and, as a direct result, jobs would be lost. The cost of collecting these weapons, their disposal, and the eventual compensation of individuals must also be considered. What we believe to be a spurious argument about human life must be weighed against the supposed success of extending this Amendment to Northern Ireland.

Restricting the use of hand-guns is only a first step. What would be next? A Black and Decker drill could be called a weapon — it can cause death. We could even include kitchen knives and hammers because people have been killed by them.

As the political talks progress and reach fruition — this is where I deviate from the amendment, which calls for the

"immediate and actual disarming of illegal weapons" —

there will be disarmament going hand-in-hand with the talks. *[Laughter]*

Some Members can laugh. But they have run away from the issue. The laugh might be on the other side of their faces by the time May comes.

In the light of these arguments we advocate an even stricter and more vigorous screening process for the issuing of firearms certificates and greater resources for the real issue of getting illegal weapons out of circulation.

The Chairman: I am sure that when we come to the vote you will have decided which side you are on.

Mr Peter Robinson: My starting point must be the incident at Dunblane — that was the cause of the Government's moving in this direction. Everybody in the House would accept that it was a very tragic incident, but I have to agree with Mr King: it was an incident which would have happened even if this legislation had been in force then.

There is no reason to believe that someone so sick, so mentally disturbed and so depraved would have taken any notice of the legislation and handed over his weapons. With the degree of inefficiency there was, and the firearms certificates that he had, it is abundantly clear that probably nobody would have noticed that he was still holding on to those weapons. So, there is no reason to believe that the legislation would have affected the kind of madness that we saw at Dunblane.

Nonetheless, I welcome the fact that the Women's Coalition has raised the issue. It is an important issue. There is a case for restrictions on the use of weapons: restrictions on who is entitled to have weapons, or the kinds of weapons people can have, or how many weapons they can have and or how those weapons are kept. But there should not be a blanket ban on the use of weapons — the security forces, the Government, and anyone in authority knows that, to all intents and purposes, those weapons are going to be used for perfectly proper purposes.

The Women's Coalition, when introducing the motion, called for a weapons-free Northern Ireland. It asked that all weapons be taken out of existence. But Mr Casey made a very pertinent point: weapons do not simply include guns. In our troubles in Northern Ireland weapons have included knives, breeze-blocks and baseball bats.

There is also a very long list of weapons which have been used outside of the security difficulties in Northern Ireland. It could extend down to the kitchen knife. Would that not be a nice one: the Women's Coalition calling for the banning of the kitchen knife? It seems strange to me. Shoestrings — we would not be able to have our boots laced if we were to include everything that has been used to take life in Northern Ireland. We must start from a credible position rather than suggest that we have a weapons-free Northern Ireland when

everyday things can be used as weapons. Then there is the motorcar, in which a person can be suffocated by the fumes. I could go on forever. We would end up going back to the caves, and then we would need to make sure that we did not have any spare rocks about because they might be used as weapons as well. If we are to talk about a weapons-free Northern Ireland, we need to define what that means and think a bit more about what have been used as weapons in Northern Ireland.

The legislation that presently applies to Great Britain has probably affected sportsmen and women the most. The competitiveness of our shooters is really going to suffer, and not just in Great Britain, but in Northern Ireland also. As the longest-serving member of the Northern Ireland Sports Council, I can say that Northern Ireland has a very high attainment level in shooting. However, that is already being affected. Even though the Act does not apply to Northern Ireland, the blight is already here. I do not know whether Members know this, but our gun shops are having very great difficulty getting ammunition because of the law in Great Britain. The need to carry the weapons and ammunition across means that people cannot do it in Great Britain.

Indeed, one case was brought to my attention, in which someone who was thought to require a personal-protection weapon, and was entitled to one, could not get one. It could not be brought over because of the restrictions in Great Britain. Such is the folly of the present situation.

I recently led a delegation of gun dealers and gun club owners to meet the Minister who has responsibility here for this issue. And although I do not want it, we do need to know whether the Government are going to introduce that legislation into Northern Ireland or not. The present blight has led to the worst set of circumstances for everybody. People cannot do business, and they cannot get compensation. They are in the worst of all positions.

12.30 pm

The gun club people inform me that while their counterparts in Britain are entitled to compensation, they cannot get it in Northern Ireland, even though their businesses are moving towards liquidation — indeed, some are already closing. They are closing because people are not coming to their clubs. One man on the delegation with me had been offered £200,000 for his club a week or two before the new legislation. The offer is now off the table — he could not give the club away in present circumstances — and that is his livelihood, and he has a family.

Right across the province this is affecting people from both traditions. The shooting fraternity is not a sport exclusive to the Protestant/Loyalist/Unionist tradition. It goes right across the board. Some priests have their own gun clubs and are very much to the forefront in the sport.

They also inform me that they wrote to the Prime Minister asking for this uncertainty to be lifted. They asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister, and they received a communication from 10 Downing Street, which I will paraphrase for the sake of time. It said simply that the Prime Minister was not prepared to meet them. On the very week they received that letter, the Prime Minister came to Northern Ireland to shake hands with Gerry

Adams whom he allows to be in talks while he holds on to the whole weaponry of the Provisional IRA. And the hypocrisy of that does not seem to get through to this Government — the hypocrisy that has them making no immediate requirement for those who are involved in negotiating the future of Northern Ireland actually to decommission while saying that they want the legally held guns of people throughout the United Kingdom. It is such a travesty of justice that one would think they would not have the face to put forward such a proposition.

Those people whom I took to see the Minister were asking him "When are we going to know what the position is going to be? When are you going to give us an answer?" And the Minister told them "I have made my recommendations. My report is completed and it is with the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State, of course, has the power to make changes to it before it is published." That seemed a reasonable position for the Minister to take, and it seemed that we would know the position in a very short time.

I let a week or two pass and rang the Secretary of State's office to ask whether she had reached the stage where she could allow publication of that consultative document. The answer was that she had not received it. After the Minister had told the gun club owners and the shop owners that the recommendations of his Department were with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of State's Office was saying that it had not seen it and that, in fact, more papers had been sent to the Minister on the issue. It looks as if it is not going to be decided immediately and meanwhile the livelihoods of the people who are in the trade go further and further down the plughole.

Finally, Ms McWilliams mentioned statistics, and I have to say that they were very imprecise — indeed, I cannot recall any statistic actually being given. Papers were waved in front of our noses to give us a sniff, but no actual statistics were provided about the great ills. I am now having a wee book waved at me, but it has not been opened up, and the figures have not been given to me. Perhaps in the Member's closing remarks she will provide statistics that we can peruse in detail.

If you were to look at those statistics you would find that this piece of legislation would not have stopped any of those deaths, and suicide is the greatest red herring that could have been brought into this debate. If someone's mind has reached the stage where he has decided to commit suicide, he will provide himself with the weapon that in the quickest and most painless way will give him the solution, as he sees it. A gun may well do that under present circumstances, but if the gun is not there, it does not mean that the suicide will not take place. If it is not the gun, it will be the knife, or drugs or something else. So do not simply say that we have had all these suicides as a result of guns and that these people would be alive if there had been no guns. That does not follow at all.

I will conclude by making reference to the illegal weapons. Everyone in Northern Ireland has seen the death and destruction that has been caused by the illegally-held weaponry. More people in Northern Ireland have died as a result of illegal guns than as a result of legal firearms. I am sorry that the Women's Coalition has not found the time to move a motion calling for the removal of the weapons that are causing the greatest number of deaths in Northern Ireland — the illegal terrorist weapons.

Mr McFarland: A hand-gun is a piece of metal that, using an explosive charge, sends another piece of metal a few hundred yards. It is just metal. If I had a hand-gun here and put it down, it would sit there. It is not going to do anything on its own. The point I am making is that it requires intent to turn such a piece of metal into a life-threatening weapon.

Guns have been in society since the advent of gunpowder hundreds of years ago. We are not talking about tanks or artillery or machine guns here. In Great Britain up until 1988 you could buy an assault rifle — for example, an AK 47 — and keep it at home. In that same year my wife was travelling through Hungerford and escaped, by a matter of minutes, the attentions of Michael Ryan when he went on his murderous rampage. That brings it home to you. You will all know that as a result of the Hungerford incident, assault rifles were banned, and rightly so.

There are three types of hand-guns. The first is personal-protection weapons — PPWs. They are issued to members of the security forces for protection against terrorist attack, but also as a deterrent. If a terrorist knows that you are carrying a weapon, he is less likely to attack you than if he knows you are unarmed. That is a fact.

Ms McWilliams has raised the use of such firearms in domestic disputes, and we have a fair number of those here. But it comes down to the responsibility of the individual and the police station, or whatever authority issues a weapon. I have no problem with the psychological profiling of people who want to hold PPWs. If a policeman or a soldier has a propensity to be a danger to himself or his family through mental instability or alcohol abuse, he should have the weapon removed from him. It is fairly simple. If he cannot be responsible, he does not deserve to have a PPW. Thankfully, the vast majority have no problem with this. It is only a tiny number who go off the rails and use their personal-protection weapons in such a way.

The second type of weapons are those held for sporting purposes: target and competition shooting. Since the advent of gunpowder these have been valid sports. Indeed, competitions are held at world and Olympic level in sports shooting. Traditionally there has been a debate over whether such weapons should be held at home or at the shooting range. And the debate, essentially, is that if you have them at home, there is a danger that they will be involved in domestic disputes. On the other hand, if you locate them collectively at the range, they are an easy target for terrorists or criminals to break in and steal. And that has been an ongoing debate for many years. I have no difficulty with such weapons being held in a guarded armoury at a shooting range. If folk want to take this measure as a way round the problem of the security of weapons and so remove the threat of their being stolen or removed, that is what should happen.

The appalling tragedy at Dunblane, however, has overwhelmed reasoned debate, and in Great Britain hand-guns have been banned. This move has effectively destroyed sports shooting over there, and it will do the same in Northern Ireland if the law is extended here.

Access to such weapons should involve detailed psychological and lifestyle checks. It is the intention to kill rather than the weapon that is the problem. Members will be aware — and this has been mentioned already — of a recent machete attack against school children in

England. Should we have a nationwide ban on sharp implements that might be used to harm others?

The third category are the illegal hand-guns: the terrorist and criminal arsenal. It is interesting to compare the new Great Britain legislation, under which withholding a firearm after an amnesty will incur the penalty of a 10-year goal sentence, with the Government's lack of enthusiasm for decommissioning here and the often light sentences for storing terrorist weapons. Hand-guns have become an emotive issue, and a cool head is needed when considering the introduction of legislation which will destroy the ancient sports-shooting tradition in Northern Ireland.

I support the amendment.

Mr Poots: I welcome the Women's Coalition's moving the motion today — its second in almost a year and a half.

The motion says

"This Forum calls for the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of hand-guns to be extended to Northern Ireland."

It must think that that Act has been successful. In fact, it was probably one of the worst and most ill-thought-out Acts ever passed in the history of Parliament. The reasons for bringing it forward may well be genuine reasons — one concerned domestic violence and the other suicide. Unfortunately, I do not believe that doing away with hand-guns will seriously address the problems of either domestic violence or suicide.

As we know, the greatest reason for domestic violence is alcohol, and if Ms McWilliams had looked through her reports and produced statistics on the role of alcohol in each of the cases, I guarantee she would have found that it was a bigger contributor to deaths as a result of domestic violence than handguns and what are we going to do about that?

Of course we have the problem of suicide as well and, coming from the country, I know that farmers, in particular, have committed suicide on a more regular basis than any other group. But people wishing to commit suicide have several means to do so — for example, poison or hanging — hand-guns are just one method. People's minds are insecure when they commit suicide, and it is not the hand-gun as such which is crucial, but the person who pulls the trigger.

I sat with the Women's Coalition a few months ago in a bilateral at Castle Buildings along with Gregory Campbell and Nigel Dodds to discuss decommissioning, and the Women's Coalition said that we should go into talks with the IRA/Sinn Fein without decommissioning. I think back to "bloody Friday", Tullyvallen, Greysteel, Kingsmill, Loughinisland, Mountain Lodge, Warrenpoint, Newry, Teebane, Lisburn, the Shankill and, of course, 10 years ago, Enniskillen — just some of the horrific incidents in which those weapons have been used. If we had had the same level of violence on the mainland, there would have been, pro rata, over 100,000 deaths.

The Women's Coalition is raising a problem which has perhaps caused between 100 and 500 deaths in the United Kingdom. But there is a greater problem — a problem 200 times the size of that of legal weapons — which it is not addressing and which it does not want addressed. When I think of the baby Terri White who was shot on the Donegall Road, of the 19-year-old girl Gillian Johnstone who was murdered in Fermanagh and Const Tracey Doake who was murdered in Newry, I am reminded of the death and destruction caused by terrorist weapons.

More restrictions should have been applied in the United Kingdom. Dunblane was a disaster, and that man should never have been allowed to hold four of those weapons. Hungerford was another disaster, but that could have been handled better. As Mr McFarland has said, somewhere secure could be set aside to hold these guns.

One of the gold medals that the United Kingdom won at the last Olympics — and we only won three gold medals — was for shooting. But if the Olympics were to come to the United Kingdom would we now be able to have the shooting competition? Will this legislation affect any plans there may be to hold the Olympics in the United Kingdom?

12.45 pm

The Women's Coalition has actually fallen into the Sinn Fein trap. Sinn Fein wants us to address the issue of legal weapons; it does not want to address the issue of the illegal weapons, and the Women's Coalition — whether inadvertently or not — has fallen into the Sinn Fein trap and is following its agenda. I regret the terms of the Women's Coalition's motion.

I support my party's amendment. Hand-gun shooting is a good sport, in which many people have participated over the years without causing offence to anyone, and this motion will do nothing to address what the Women's Coalition wants addressed — domestic violence.

Mr Hussey: I support the amendment and urge the Women's Coalition to drop its proposal and do likewise.

The point has been well made that one of the major problems — particularly with Dunblane — was the vetting process. If the vetting process that exists in Northern Ireland, via the good offices of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, had been in existence on the mainland, some of these tragedies might have been avoided.

Ms McWilliams made a point about the availability of weapons leading to suicide. I should like to relate the very personal case of my brother. As a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, he had access to a weapon, but he did not use it to commit suicide. It is not the availability of a weapon that puts into somebody's head the idea of taking his life.

I accept the genuine input of the Women's Coalition and its concerns about the availability of weapons. It has been pointed out that there are many weapons in this country, the vast majority of which are PPWs. But I feel certain that those of us who, because of our

politics and because of where we live, have been advised by the Royal Ulster Constabulary to carry personal-protection weapons would feel a lot easier if we did not have to do so. And therein lies my appeal to the Women's Coalition to support the amendment. If it is genuine about trying to remove as many weapons from public possession as possible, the obvious thing to do is support the amendment's demand for decommissioning. If the illegal weapons disappeared, there would be no need for personal-protection weapons. In that way the vast majority of weapons would be removed, and the Women's Coalition would achieve its aim. If it is genuine about that aim, it must support the amendment.

Mr Dodds: I am glad to have the opportunity to say a few words before lunch. I promise to be brief, and I am sure that you will keep me to that.

I fully support the amendment so ably moved by Mr Paisley, and I welcome the widespread agreement on it. I also welcome the fact that the Women's Coalition has proposed a motion on this issue. I do not accept the terms of the motion, but the issue of arms and weapons in our society is a very important one.

It is good for us to debate this issue here in the Forum, precisely where this sort of issue should be debated. I was very concerned a number of weeks ago to hear the Women's Coalition questioning the sort of issues that the Forum should debate. Today's motion shows that the Forum really is the place — the home of the elected representatives of Northern Ireland — for this sort of important issue to be discussed.

The debate has been very constructive. A lot of very important points have been made, and I hope that the Secretary of State will continue to do what she claims she has been doing and read the report before she takes any decision on whether or not to implement the legislation in Northern Ireland. If she does she will be aware of the many very sound arguments against that — it would be bad law and wrong.

I listened carefully to the points that Ms McWilliams put forward and I agree — as does every Member in the Chamber — that none of us wants to see weaponry of any kind being used to bring about death, whether suicide, homicide or whatever. But the question is this: is this legislation the way to tackle these issues? I do not believe for one moment, and I do not want to rehearse all the arguments again, that this legislation will have the effect that Ms McWilliams and all the rest of us want. If the legislation is extended to Northern Ireland, it will only cover a tiny percentage of the legally-held weapons that are in circulation. So there is the matter of practicality, never mind anything else.

Comparison has been made with the United States, and if many of us were living there, we would be calling for greater control of the availability of arms. But that is not the situation in Northern Ireland which has a very rigid and rigorous process that people have to go through if they wish to possess a personal weapon, shotgun or anything like that. The comparison is not a valid one.

Police forces elsewhere were mentioned by Ms McWilliams. I came through Heathrow airport the other day, and police officers there were carrying sub-machine guns. So it is not only in Northern Ireland that members of the law-enforcement agency have to carry weaponry; this is quite common throughout the world, and we all know that. Sadly, and

unfortunately, there are people who are prepared to take the law into their own hands, and our security forces must, at all times, be able to combat that.

I want to deal primarily with the amendment because it is important that the disarmament of illegal terrorist organizations should be a priority of the Government. I am glad that Mr Neeson — he has gone, but I am sure his Colleagues will relay this to him — has got the message that the DUP is determined to focus on this issue and not let it go. We are not running away from decommissioning, and I am glad that he is not surprised that the DUP has moved this amendment today because we will continue to highlight this. We will continue to ensure that we bring to the attention of the people of Northern Ireland just exactly what is going on with the decommissioning of illegal weaponry.

And what is going on? Nothing is going on, and the importance of dealing with that issue has been highlighted by the activities of organizations such as the Continuity IRA, so-called, and their use of Semtex and other weaponry, clearly with aid and assistance from members of the Provisional IRA. Dealing with these munitions and weaponry is absolutely vital. It has to be tackled. It is not simply a matter of saying, as Mr Neeson tried to maintain "Well, a report on it is going to be tabled next week or in two weeks' time." That will not be the end of the story. There will be another report after that and then another. Well, we will wait with bated breath for these reports from the international commission, but we know that this commission has no teeth whatsoever.

Indeed, I would rehearse the argument put by the Ulster Unionists along with ourselves: when this was first proposed, it was dismissed as being meaningless because we knew that it could talk, come up with proposals and debate the issues until it was blue in the face, but that unless actual sanctions were applied and the Provisional IRA made to decommission its weaponry, nothing would come of it. It would just be hot air. And that, unfortunately, is all we are getting on decommissioning.

The Secretary of State and others maintain that they support the argument for decommissioning illegal weaponry and say "Yes, we are for this. We are for getting the illegal weapons out of the hands of the terrorist organizations. We want to see progress on that." But then they say "There is nothing we can do. There is nothing we can do to force these people into handing over the weapons."

Let me deal with that argument very simply. The reality is that politicians (and the Secretary of State more than anybody else) do have a sanction, which I believed was going to be applied by the entire Unionist community. Sadly, one section of that community is no longer saying "Unless you give up your illegal weaponry, unless you give up your terrorist arsenal, you will not be permitted entry into political negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland. You will not be permitted to sit around the table to discuss, as democrats, and with democratic politicians, the future of Northern Ireland on that basis." That is the sanction. That is what you say to terrorists who still hold on to their weapons. You say "You can hold on to your weaponry, but you cannot have it both ways. You cannot have your weapons and expect to be treated as constitutional, democratic politicians." But what has happened is that the Government have said "Come to the table. Come to the negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland, and you can have your weapons at the same time."

Unfortunately, and regrettably, the Ulster Unionist Party which once maintained that position with us — indeed, it was the position of the previous Government, although watered down — has gone as well. It too has agreed to sit round a table with IRA/Sinn Fein, fully armed, knowing as it has admitted, and as we have said, and as everybody knows, that Sinn Fein/IRA will go back to violence when it sees that things are not going its way.

Mr Trimble, this morning, asked the Secretary of State about the mechanics of the decommissioning process. He said he wanted to see progress in that. But I remember Mr Trimble making it clear in the House of Commons, and at the talks when we were round the table, that he would not be satisfied unless the timetable for the actual handing over of weapons was in place: the actual handing over of weaponry had to begin with the beginning of talks; it had to continue during the talks; and it had to end with the end of talks. Where has all that gone now? He is reduced to asking about what progress has been made, about the reports that the international commission, anonymous and unaccountable, are bringing forward, when we all know — do we not? — that the IRA has no intention of handing over one bullet or one ounce of Semtex.

Our priority — and I close with this because I know my time has gone — must be to remain focused on decommissioning, on the handing over of illegal weaponry. And that would be far more easily achieved if all of us in the House, including those who once held it, were to return to the view that we do have a sanction. We have an effective sanction, and that is to say to the terrorists "Hold on to your weapons and you will be pursued by the full weight of the law. But you can never expect entry to the table of democracy or to sit around that table with constitutional, democratic politicians."

The meeting was suspended at 1.00 pm and resumed at 2.03 pm.

Mr Shannon: On 30 September 1997 we saw the end of what many would describe as the long-established and honourable sport of pistol shooting on the mainland. It was the victim of a weak Conservative Government, desperate to bolster their crumbling position among the populace with a populist policy that took no account of the rights or the wrongs of the matter. In light of that and in light of the Women's Coalition's motion, the Democratic Unionist Party has moved its amendment.

The amendment has been put forward for the right reasons. It addresses the real issues that we should be considering rather than backing up a piece of legislation across the water that was not thought out. The legislation passed in Great Britain is reactionary, ill-considered and undemocratic, and it should not be inflicted upon the law-abiding citizens of Northern Ireland.

If we look at those who possess hand-guns in Northern Ireland, we see that a large number of citizens hold personal-protection weapons primarily because there is a threat to their lives. This comes directly from IRA and Republican terrorists intent upon killing people with illegal weapons, unlike those who are trying to protect themselves and their families with hand-guns held with a licence.

Let us look at the legislation passed on the mainland. It surpassed the recommendations put forward by Lord Cullen in his report, which were subsequently ignored by the Government. Lord Cullen recommended changes in the legislation which he thought would be correct, would be appropriate and would help the situation. Instead of that, the Government reacted by trying to win the approval of the people — and that turned out to be a bad move for them.

In Northern Ireland we have the toughest firearms legislation in the whole of Europe. Other countries would be doing well to catch up on our firearms legislation, yet certain parties — on this occasion, the Women's Coalition — wish to disarm law-abiding citizens yet do not mention decommissioning terrorist weapons.

Central storage of arms might be suitable across the water, but in Northern Ireland it would be completely unacceptable because of the terrorist problem. Quite simply, it would be difficult or impossible to ensure adequate bulk storage. The whole thrust of the argument for banning hand-guns was based on public safety. Is this valid in Northern Ireland where the number of hand-guns held for personal protection far exceeds those held for sporting purposes? Personal weapons are carried and loaded every day. How many instances have there been of misuse? Very few. The club shooter must transport a firearm in an unloaded condition. He must store it in an RUC-approved gun safe when it is not in use. Those are conditions that we have here, and that in itself is a safeguard for the public. Holders of firearms certificates for hand-guns have safety instilled in them from the very first lesson. They adhere to a very strict discipline which ensures that they can handle firearms safely.

Target shooting has been recognized as one of the safest of the top sports in Northern Ireland — this is confirmed by publicized Government statistics. In the last two Olympics the only gold medals which came to Northern Ireland were won by club shooters. There is a tradition in our province of pistol shooting, and our success is evidence of that.

Owners of legally-held firearms are probably the most law-abiding citizens in the community. Their firearms are not the ones used in crime or terrorist activity. Further evidence shows that sport in Northern Ireland is enjoyed by people of all social backgrounds, religious persuasions and ages, including those who are physically disabled. These people are responsible members of the community, and I put it to Members that the motion from the Women's Coalition is ill-thought out and ill-conceived. Is it right that law-abiding citizens should be blamed for the horrendous actions of a madman? If that madman had lived here, he would have got nowhere near any legally-held firearm. We recall the flame-throwing incident at Holywood — that weapon was home-made but lethal. Legislation in itself cannot prevent such people from carrying out actions like that.

What about the effects on businesses? There will be job losses. Firearms dealers, security-cabinet manufacturers and so on will all lose out. What about loss of revenue through import tax, VAT and income tax? That must all be taken into account.

Any person legally holding a firearm who demonstrates any indication of violent tendencies has his or her weapon or weapons removed immediately by the RUC. That must be emphasized. That is the law in Northern Ireland. Had the police in Dunblane acted as quickly as the RUC would, it is unlikely that Dunblane would have happened.

Earlier on there was much talk about statistics. Let us look at one statistic. Each year almost 200 young people lose their lives by using and abusing solvents and butane gas. Do we say that because of that we must ban all these items — butane gas, glue, Tippex, gas-lighter fuel — which people use and which cause 200 deaths every year?

Mr King: Standing Committee C, the Health Committee, is conducting an investigation into men's health. As part of that investigation we are examining the alarming rate of suicide among young men. Over the past fortnight, witnesses giving evidence to the Committee have raised the matter of suicide by firearms in relation to members of the security forces. Every professional witness has told us that access to firearms was not a significant factor in those deaths. The sad truth is that men are more inclined to use violent means to take their lives. If they did not use firearms, they would use something else. The entire ambit of this is being looked into, and I hope that we will have the report ready for the Forum in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Some people may have congratulated themselves on having reduced the number of people killed on the roads in the United Kingdom to 3,500 per annum. We have reduced it to 3,500 per annum, and we think we have done well. But 3,500 people have died. So what are we saying? Do we take this a stage further? Do we outlaw cars? Where does it end? If we want to do something really drastic, we should do something about the 3,500 people who die on the roads. We have to look at the matter sensibly and responsibly.

Is it right that terrorist groups should hold on to their arsenals of destruction which have brought murder and destruction and led to the deaths of some 3,000 people in the province? Terrorists' weapons cannot be allowed to remain in our society. That is what people are telling us. They are an impediment to future progress and to a stable society where true peace reigns. As long as the IRA terrorists hold on to their weapons, no real settlement can be brought about. The silence from the Government and the Northern Ireland Office on the decommissioning of IRA weapons is in itself deadly.

Law-abiding citizens must be looked after by the Government. Their rights must be protected. There is no need for this legislation in Northern Ireland, but the Government must take all illegal weapons out of circulation. They have to protect their citizens. It is their duty and their responsibility. Bureaucracy and restriction for their own sake help nobody and will do nothing to prevent another Hungerford or another Dunblane.

The arguments put forward by the Member who moved the motion were spurious and incorrect — facts to back them up were very thin on the ground. We were told that legal weapons could become illegal weapons. Where is the proof of that? I would like to know. Why use statistics from Devon and Cornwall, a seaside, holiday area? Why not take statistics from the Greater London area or from the Home Counties? Could it be that those figures would not back up the arguments that the Women's Coalition was trying to make? What about the arguments put forward for suicides? Does the non-ownership of hand-guns stop suicides? The answer is no. A piece of tubing in the exhaust of a car can do the same thing adequately. In many cases that is the method that people have used. Jumping off a bridge is

another example. People will use whatever method they can and the one that is available at the time. That is a fact. It is not necessarily because the guns are there. The statistics prove conclusively that legislation alone will not stop atrocities.

The Women's Coalition would do better to get its head out of the sand and face the real issue: IRA terrorists must hand over their weapons. That is the issue that the majority of people want addressed.

I support the amendment.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: Before addressing the motion, there are two things I want to say.

The Chairman: Will they be relevant to the motion?

Rev Trevor Kirkland: They are relevant to points that have been made. Surely one is entitled, when speaking to a motion, to bring up points that have been made.

The Chairman: If they are relevant.

Mr Eric Smyth: I think the Chairman has something against the two of us because we are reverends. *[Laughter]*

The Chairman: I have not got anything against you two at all. You told me you were going to mention two points. I just wanted to be sure that they were relevant.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: I draw your attention, Mr Chairman, to remarks made by Ms Sagar a couple of weeks ago. On the basis of the rationale behind those remarks, the Women's Coalition's motion would not be possible, which is exactly the point that you made on this matter. So we can see the absurdity that we get here from some people.

I also want to draw attention to something which is not directly relevant to this, but which is, however, a valid point. A question was asked earlier of the Secretary of State about getting more women elected to Parliament. Over 100 women were elected to Parliament yet for the debate on breast cancer the other day, only seven women turned up. Of the seven who turned up, only two spoke, and one did not even address the issue.

With regard to the motion —

The Chairman: Now we are getting there.

2.15 pm

Rev Trevor Kirkland: The context of the motion is, as we are all aware, Dunblane. When unrestrained depravity shot up a primary school, the answer was to penalize the responsible. So a law was passed which says that owning guns is wrong. And what is the basis of this ideology? The basis is that if a criminal can take a gun and shoot people, the responsible and the victims should be made to pay for the deeds of that criminal. That is the

rationale behind this motion and behind this law — make the responsible and the victims pay for the deeds of the criminal.

Everybody is to be penalized because of something someone else has done. This is not a principle that Christians subscribe to, which is that every person should pay for his or her own criminal activities. The rationale underpinning this law means that the responsible and the victims pay — everybody pays for the deeds of the criminal — and it was this ideology that gave us our prison system. Capital punishment was said to be wrong, so the Government said to the responsible and the victims "We will put up your taxes in order to house, feed, guard, clothe and keep the criminal." It was the same ideology that gave us the plea of insanity in the McNaughton trial in 1843 — the Government came to the responsible and the victims and said "We are going to put up your taxes in order to feed, house and clothe all these people who are, supposedly, not responsible for their criminal activities."

Mr Hugh Smyth: Hang them all.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: There are some people to whom that, perhaps, ought to happen. This same principle suggested that we turn our prisons — those barbaric institutions — into correction facilities, so the Government came to the responsible and the victims and said "We are going to put up your taxes so that we can have an educated criminal class." It is this same principle of penalizing the responsible and the victims that is now setting about disarming the responsible and the victims just in case they turn round and say that our whole society is being corrupted by a criminal class. The state is unwilling and seems unable to apprehend the criminals and make them pay for their crimes, so what do they do? They disarm the responsible in case they want to take the law into their own hands. One historian made the point that when Stalin came to power, he disarmed the proletariat and then murdered five million to keep them in their place.

Criminals, murderers and terrorists are sitting in our council chambers; they are also part of the talks process at Stormont, discussing how to govern the responsible and the victims. That is the rationale behind this motion — disarming the responsible and the victims.

And just to make sure that the responsible and the victims know who is in charge, the Prime Minister of this kingdom was brought over here to get into the sewers to shake hands with the criminal class — that is sure to remind the responsible and the victims that the criminal class now makes the decisions.

We even had the Secretary of State telling us today that it is quite possible for the commission to give cash to the criminals in exchange for their weapons. Where is that cash going to come from? It is going to come from the taxes of the responsible and the victims — it is they who will be paying the criminals for the guns and Semtex.

I say to Ms McWilliams: look at those elected to Stormont. Would this legislation have stopped any one of those terrorists who are part of the peace process from killing our kith and kin? Would it have stopped a Belfast version of Charlie Haughey bringing in guns for terrorists? It would not.

Ms McWilliams raised the emotive issue of domestic violence. This motion will have absolutely no effect on that. The cure for domestic violence and domestic homicide is not to take the guns from the responsible and the victims but to return to the historic principles of a doctrine of humanity and life — that is the cure for that. The problem in Ulster is not guns; it is corruption and depravity. As one writer has put it, what has increased in our kingdom is crime. When a society subsidizes the criminal and taxes the injured to pay for that, that increases violence and lawlessness.

This piece of legislation does not address any issue; it panders to the popular perception and misconception of reality by penalizing the responsible and the victims because that appears to satisfy some of those who have a knee-jerk, emotional reaction to events.

There is a fundamental principle enshrined in another land, and that is the right of citizens to carry and bear arms, but in our do-gooder age, people who have a humanistic and naturalistic philosophy seem to think that to allow the responsible to have guns is a terrible thing. They seem to be telling us that this is awful. On what basis? On the basis of their own thinking — it is not based on anything else. We have also had quoted something about statistics and research. Looking at the medical field, the one thing that we learn from research is that there is innuendo, misstatement and a massaging of statistics in order to get certain pieces of research published, certain medicines approved and to make the people doing the research more popular. Research only proves the conclusions of the people doing it — nothing else.

Returning to the motion and to the absurdity of making the responsible pay for the deeds of the criminal, let us take another area that is unconnected. Take, for example, rape. Do we say "Let us ban sex because some people are getting raped."? Of course not. The rationale behind this motion is absurd.

In moving this motion, the Women's Coalition wants to penalize the responsible in society, but at no time does it take up the cause of disarming the criminal class. It expresses emotion by saying "We would love to see the criminal class disarmed", but emotion and passion will not disarm one criminal. All the laws in the land that are passed to disarm the responsible will never disarm one criminal, and that is why the DUP has, correctly, put down an amendment. The concentration of law and order and of those to whom we pay our taxes should be directed towards the criminal class, not towards the responsible and the victims who pay their taxes to have security in their lives and well-being.

I reject the absurdity of the Women's Coalition motion but support the amendment.

Mr Eric Smyth: That is a hard to act to follow, but I will do my best.

Many of those who have hand-guns use them for sport. Think about boxing: think about how two men or two women — they have now taken up the sport — can knock the brains out of each other. People have died in boxing matches; do we ban boxing because two eejits want to go into a ring and knock the brains out of each other? *[Interruption]* Right enough, they get well paid for it — that is true.

Should we stop those who take part in motor racing because of the speed at which they drive and the fact that people on motor bikes and in cars have been killed? Should we forget about all the good people who take part in these sports for their own pleasure and do no harm to anyone? It is wrong for a Government to be pressurized by people who, sad to say, have gone through a difficult time, but we can all agree that in this life we cannot stop those who crack up, go mad, or whatever, and break the law — and God's law — by killing people in different walks of life. Many more people are killed taking part in sports than are killed by hand-guns, and, as some Members have said, the statistics show that more people die by other means than by hand-guns. Stopping people using guns for pleasure and enjoyment will not solve crime or stop people committing suicide.

Can we really take the Women's Coalition seriously? Up there in the talks process it does everything it can to let gunmen and terrorists keep their guns, but when the Democratic Unionist Party raised this and fought it in the Forum, the Women's Coalition violently opposed us on every issue. Yet here it is trying to tell us that it wants to take legally-held sports guns from people who are using them for the right reasons and for enjoyment. By its silence, in many cases, it is willing to sit down with those who have murdered, maimed and taken people out and shot them. God only knows that in eternity all they have done will be revealed, and everything which the British Government have covered up will one day all come out in the wash. They may escape the judgement of man, but there is one thing they will never escape, and that is the judgement of God. On that great day, if they have not repented, they will face their Maker on this issue.

I support the DUP amendment and I endorse all that has been said in its support.

Mr Morrow: I too support the DUP amendment.

I find it novel to listen to the Women's Coalition and to read the motion. At the Forum meeting about two weeks ago, Ms Sagar stormed out of the Chamber because she said that the DUP was abusing the Forum trying to address issues here that should be addressed at Stormont. I understood that the talks at Stormont were addressing the guns issue, yet the Women's Coalition found that it would rather address it here. Maybe Ms Sagar has seen the light or has changed her attitude — she is certainly not storming out today, which is a welcome change.

I had a telephone call yesterday from someone who read in one of the daily papers that the Forum was going to be debating this issue today. This person thought that he should ring me up and give me his views on it. He is a member of a club; he has a firearm for target shooting; and he said that after reading the motion he felt as if he was being criminalized and being put into the same category as those who use illegal weapons. It is significant that the same Women's Coalition tells us that this party lacks courage by virtue of the fact that we are not prepared to sit down and talk with Gerry and Martin who, perhaps, control quite a consignment of illegal weapons. The Women's Coalition is quite happy to sit down, shake hands and talk about all the issues of the day, yet it wants to take away legally-held guns.

We have fallen into a trap in this country. Over the last 28 years, we have had to endure one of the most vicious murder campaigns that any people could ever have been asked to endure. At the height of the bombing campaign, whenever a bomb went off in a prominent

street in one of our towns and villages, what did the Secretary of State of the day do? Nine times out of ten, this is what he did: he insisted on closing off our towns to inconvenience the law-abiding — he was certainly not going to inconvenience the law-breaker. He took away liberty from those of us who sought to uphold the law — you could not get in without having your vehicle searched, and you could not leave your car unattended. It never dawned upon his benighted soul that there might have been a different way, that maybe he should have pursued the terrorist. But to do that would not have been politically-expedient, so he pursued the law-abiding citizen and inconvenienced him.

The Women's Coalition wants to do the same today. It wants to take away the legally-held guns, but it does not seem to have the same problem with the illegally-held ones. It seems to be able to endure them all right — I find that hard to balance. Perhaps the Women's Coalition will address that when winding up.

2.30 pm

The Women's Coalition has made much of the fact that guns have been used in suicide. There is no dispute about that — it is a fact. But if you ask insurance companies what the most common method used in suicides is, they will tell you that it is the motor car. That is an indisputable fact. You can put something into the exhaust, put it through the window of your car, rev up your engine and that will not be as painful as putting a gun to your head and blowing your brains out. Therefore, it is quite wrong for the Women's Coalition to come into the Forum and say that the gun is one of the most used means in suicide attempts. There is no evidence for that.

As Mr Peter Robinson asked, where do we draw the line? People are afflicted in different ways. Someone mentioned alcohol. Do we ban alcohol? I would be happy enough to ban it, but do we ban it because people suffer from alcoholism? Do we ban air flights because terrorists see them as a good way of getting their point of view over? If terrorists seize an aeroplane and blow everybody into oblivion, do we ban all flights? Do we ban the common bread knife because a wife takes it and plunges it into her husband's heart and he is no more? You could take this to ludicrous lengths.

I have no problem with the Women's Coalition's bringing this motion forward, but it should be careful when pointing the finger at the rest of us because there are three pointing back. It sits up in the Stormont talks with the greatest bunch of hoods, thugs and corner boys. Maybe sometime it will tell them to hand over their weaponry, instead of telling us all the time that we do not have the courage of our convictions. We have said that we are not going to sit down with terrorists — with those who hold illegal weapons. Therefore, I have no hesitation whatsoever in supporting the DUP amendment.

Mr Ken Maginnis: Mr Chairman, may I, first of all, apologize to you and Colleagues in the Chamber for my absence during the first part of the debate. I have listened very carefully to what has been said subsequently, and I have got some flavour of the way in which the Women's Coalition has addressed this motion. I know you will call me to order if I cover ground that has previously been covered, but I do want, very briefly, to list some of the issues that are pertinent to the matter.

It was tragic when the young children were murdered at Dunblane, and one's heart went out to the parents and to the teachers who had to try to pick up the pieces. But when one considers the knock-on effect of that and the way in which guns have been banned in Great Britain, one has to ask if that is going to ensure that the same thing cannot happen again, and the answer, quite simply, is that it is not. It does not make that sort of occurrence less likely. The demented man with the machete who ran through a school hacking people and the demented young man with an improvised flame-thrower who attempted to burn students to death are examples of what can happen.

There is certainly the possibility — and one hopes that it will never happen — of people using other firearms such as shotguns. A five-shot, automatic shotgun could do tremendous damage if someone took it into a classroom — it is a lethal weapon. But we are not going to find, I hope, that the next thing the Women's Coalition will be demanding is that shotguns be removed. They have been used from time immemorial by farmers to protect their livestock and deal with vermin. One has only to look at the reluctance of some people to use shotguns to deal with vermin on the land in the way they did 30 years ago . They do not go out as much now as they used to, quite simply because of the danger of being mistaken for a terrorist. Now we see other much less discriminating ways of dealing with vermin being used on farmland.

The point I am trying to make is that if you remove shotguns — and I know that is not being debated today — or hand-guns from responsible people, you are doing nothing to deal with irresponsible people. Moreover, there is always the difficulty of those who are demented, whether it be temporarily or over the long term. The question of suicides has been addressed. Mr Morrow dealt with it very effectively: he knows from his own business that people who use guns in suicides are a small minority.

In Northern Ireland we have the tightest and, I believe, the best regulations in the United Kingdom, Europe and probably farther afield for dealing with licensed weapons. I read recently of a young motorist in America who had $600 wheel discs on his car. Some hood came along to steal these discs, and he pulled out a gun and shot him. That is not actually permitted under the law in this country. You can use a gun which is designated as a personal-protection weapon to defend yourself or your family if you a have genuine reason to believe that your life is in danger. But you cannot shoot somebody because he wants to take part of your car. You would be guilty of a crime if you did so. If they had had as good regulation in Scotland as we have had in Northern Ireland for many years, Mr Hamilton would not have been permitted to hold the gun that he held legally at the time he committed that awful atrocity in Dunblane.

The other point that needs to be considered has already been touched on and that is the problem of legal guns being stolen and becoming illegal guns. It is part of the regulations that guns are meant to be secure, and comparatively few guns are stolen. But even if a few are stolen, compare that with the 300 tonnes of weapons that were imported illegally from the Gaddafi regime through the Irish Republic. They were landed in Wicklow, boatload after boatload, dispersed throughout the length and breadth of Ireland in dumps and used against the civilian population, the civil power and our military in Northern Ireland. Those pose a much greater danger, and those are the guns that preoccupy us.

The DUP in the amendment which this party will support has called for the immediate disarmament of illegal weapons. If nothing has succeeded so far in the talks process, at least General de Chastelain, Ambassador Johnson and Brigadier Nieminen have done a very good job in putting together, for the world to understand the importance to us of the issue, a scheme that has been presented to the Governments. I hope that we will soon see this scheme and that it will address the issue of terrorist weapons. Everyone should welcome that and concentrate on trying to ensure that the world knows what is going on and where the real danger lies in Northern Ireland and understands our situation, so that every possible pressure is brought to bear on those who insist that they will never decommission a single bullet.

There is no comparison between legal and illegal weapons. Let me personalize this. Many of us, over the years, have been threatened by illegal weapons, and the one thing that has reassured us is the knowledge that if we found ourselves in a sticky situation, we would at least have some ability to retaliate. Is the Women's Coalition suggesting that we, while we have no certainty of an end to terrorist violence, should be stripped of our means of defending ourselves and our families? If that is what it is suggesting, the Forum will reject the motion.

As far as sporting activity and traditional field activity — the farmers' need for weapons — is concerned, a greater understanding will be shown than has been indicated by the motion today.

Ms McWilliams: I can see that we have a great deal of support for the motion.

The Chairman: I do not think that that ever seems to worry you.

Ms McWilliams: Historical precedent.

We believe in bringing motions to the Forum, particularly when the subject matter has been debated in Westminster. We like to see them debated here because that is one of the functions of the Forum. We did take a different view, because of the legislation, in relation to the negotiations and the Forum. That is why we said what we said a few weeks ago. We felt that it was a violation of the spirit of the legislation, rather than of the legislation *per se.*

2.45 pm

I am glad we have had the opportunity to debate this today, but there is one question I would like to ask: why do we feel it necessary to introduce the legislation in the first place? There are a variety of reasons and one of them is policy. The Government decide that changes in policy are needed, so they introduce legislation accordingly. Secondly, in spite of what Mr Kirkland had to say, it can also be as a result of good, sound, empirical research — if people do not believe in such a thing, we should close all universities today. It can also be as a result of campaigns. It can be through the will of the people that things happen. The country decides and Parliament takes the view that they have to reflect the mood of the people — that is why this legislation was introduced.

The Conservative Government probably realized that they — pardon the pun — had shot themselves in the foot. They did not support the spirit behind the legislation, whereas the Labour Government was quite clear about it, and not, I think as a knee-jerk reaction. They

took soundings; they listened to people; they had focus groups; and they heard, not just from the Dunblane Snowdrop Campaign, but from many others.

The gun lobby is a very strong one. We know that from the United States, where the extent of the availability of firearms for personal use and personal protection, as well as for many other purposes, is because of the weight that is behind that lobby. It has a lot of money and a lot of influence, and we do not want to see that happening in this country. Not enough restrictions have been applied in the United States. This is why everyone walks around wondering if someone is going to pull a gun on him if he says something. We never want that to happen here, and legislation is one of the reasons we do not have that here.

Mr Peter Robinson made the point that he believes in restrictions. He does not think that some people should have so many guns, or guns of a particular type. Well, if he were to follow Robinson's law through to its conclusions, he would support the motion. This motion does not call for exclusion or banning, it calls for restrictions. And the reason we call for restrictions is that people in this country do not want to end up like those in other countries who have a gun culture.

We are used to having guns in Northern Ireland, and I look forward to the day when we do not have them. I mean that; but I know I might not get that. However, we are allowed to wish for and dream of a gun-free culture. I want all illegal weapons taken out of this society, and decommissioning does have to happen. I also believe that the RUC should prosecute every single person who has an illegal weapon. It does not have to wait while de Chastelain's committee continues with its decommissioning reports; it should proceed now to prosecute those who carry illegal weapons. However, that does not stop me from still wanting to extend the restrictions on hand-guns.

Mr King's point about the Dangerous Dogs Act is a perfect example. That legislation came about because of dangerous dogs. We needed that legislation. Mr Eric Smyth and others asked "What do I want restricted?" Members know that people cannot drink and drive any more. Members know that there was a time when people got into their cars, having taken drink, and felt at liberty to drive around the country. Members know that the people — particularly as a result of fatalities on our roads — had the spirit and the will to have legislation introduced that banned drinking and driving. It still does not stop drunkards getting into cars, driving dangerously and killing others. But because of it there is a new generation growing up today that believes that one does not drink and drive, and I love that.

I love to see my young sons coming home and telling me that they had a lesson on drinking and driving. I love to hear teenagers saying that they have no intention of taking cars with them with they go out. There is a different culture now, and the reason that culture developed was that people decided that it was no longer acceptable to drink and drive. Members know that this will not stop a criminal, murderous act from taking place, but it will put legislation in place which says that what was once acceptable is now unacceptable.

It was once permissible to hit a woman with a stick no thicker than a thumb — hence "the rule of thumb". That legislation was introduced 100 years ago. One hundred years later, what was once acceptable was unacceptable. We have legislation restricting people's actions, telling them that such behaviour is unacceptable.

Domestic violence is not a joke and it is not humorous; it is a serious crime. Someone in the Forum referred to domestic disputes. Disputes do not kill people, but when guns are used in disputes, they do. I have also said that strangulations occur; knives are also used; and there are carbon monoxide fumes as well. But are some Members simply saying that they want everything to continue as it is? Or are they saying that if we could introduce something that could stop a number of lives being taken, we should not do it? Every life is precious to me. If domestic homicides — and suicides — can be prevented, let us do something about it. To me that is the voice of a libertarian, not the voice of someone who was right-wing, restrictive arguments.

We once talked about these being ordinary, decent murders. What kind of society were we living in when these murders —

Some Members: We did not.

Ms McWilliams: The press referred to them in this society.

Some Members: We did not.

Ms McWilliams: I am including myself in this, OK.

Some Members: Shame on you.

Ms McWilliams: Let me finish. I have never for one minute thought of these as ordinary, decent murders. But when the press start using that language, people start internalizing it. They are not ordinary, decent murderers; they are criminals and they have been prosecuted. Members say that firearms have never been used in crimes in Northern Ireland, but either the death of a woman, man or child is a crime in the context of domestic homicide, or it is not. And they have been used. The evidence is there, and the RUC can provide it.

I saw a poster in the States a couple of weeks ago when I was doing work on domestic violence. The poster was in a refuge, and it had a large fist on it with the slogan "Not all weapons are imported". That struck me very strongly — not all weapons are imported. I cannot stop people from using their fists or knives, but we can argue that those things are wrong. We have already introduced legislation telling people that they cannot continue to do what they once did, in the way that they once did it. That is why we need to have legislation restricting the use of hand-guns.

I say to Mr Maginnis that I am the daughter of a farmer. I accompanied my father when he went out at night to try to see the dogs that were worrying and killing his sheep. That is a childhood memory of mine. But I am not talking about shotguns; I am not talking about farmers' weapons; and I am not talking about those that have been used in sports. We are talking about this legislation, and it only refers to hand-guns.

Mr Peter Robinson: Ms McWilliam's speech referred to a weapon-free Northern Ireland.

Ms McWilliams: Mr Chairman, are you going to rule a point of order here or do I have to —

The Chairman: The Member is doing very well. Do not worry, keep going.

Ms McWilliams: If I referred to a weapon-free society, I would be surprised if Mr Robinson found that objectionable. Surely, we all desire that.

But I am a realist, and all my life I have lobbied for legislative change. The Member is saying that if this legislation comes across the water and is accepted in its present form, it will be a disaster. This is how I respond to the point that was made about parts of that legislation: we have the Office of Law Reform and each and every time legislation is introduced, it looks at it and makes amendments. That is why we have some of the best pieces of legislation. Our legislation generally comes in two years, four years or six years later than that in Great Britain, but it is often much better than what Scotland, Wales or England have. I have been party to the introduction of such legislation, and I am glad to say that that is the case, particularly in the case of the new Family Law Act.

I have no idea why people think we do not support decommissioning. We have argued that we want decommissioning. But the Secretary of State's point about buying illegal weapons actually came from Ambassador Johnson who sits on the decommissioning committee. I was shocked by that because I do not believe for one minute that that should even be a proposal. He suggested that when he was ambassador in Bolivia, and he argues that it works. We absolutely do not want to see anything like that happening with weapons. We want to see legislation introduced that will restrict these weapons from ever being used again. That is why we are saying that not just illegal weapons should be removed, but legal weapons also.

I have heard a great deal of talk about personal-protection weapons, but this legislation does not refer to them. Some day, I hope, we will not need personal-protection weapons, and I hope everyone agrees with that. But there are problems with personal-protection weapons, and there is a problem with vetting. There was such a problem with this that when we were working with the RUC on domestic violence, they agreed that it was necessary to put on the pro forma used to collect statistics on each incident they attend whether a weapon was used. They use the words firearms/weapon because they themselves want to know to what extent licensed weapons are used in domestic violence. They would not be doing that if all the people who had personal-protection weapons were perfectly responsible human beings. That is not the way the world works, and that is why they have introduced that. This is the only country currently using a pro forma to collect information on domestic violence.

Mr Peter Robinson made the point that as a libertarian he does not want to restrict the rights of sportsmen and women, though it has to be said that there are many more men interested in the sport of shooting than women, and the same applies to boxing. But it may be that we will have to introduce restrictions if we are to save lives, and that is why the legislation was introduced. If we are talking about making Northern Ireland more attractive

because its legislation is different — this legislation has not been introduced here — I despair at the thought of Northern Ireland's being more attractive because more people can use guns.

Finally, I asked the RUC what the age limit is for someone to use a small hand-gun. I was told that a person of 16 years can apply for a hand-gun. They cannot get a full licence until they reach 18 years of age, but they can have a hand-gun loaned to them until they reach that age. That is what we are talking about: having restrictions applied to hand-guns.

Mr Maginnis: I am grateful to Ms McWilliams for giving way. I find it difficult to recollect a murder where a gun was used before we had terrorist violence. Can Ms McWilliams cite such a case; and if she can cite one, can she cite a second one? She will have memories going back to some time before the start of the troubles, as I do — although perhaps not as long. But I challenge her to cite a list of violent offences that were committed with guns prior to terrorism.

Ms McWilliams: I assume Mr Maginnis is talking about legally-held weapons. I asked the RUC's chief statistician to provide statistics, but the data only go back to the mid-1970s. However, if we were to trawl the criminal records — prosecutions made by the DPP — we would find that legally-held weapons were used in domestic homicides. There is no doubt about that. Why should Northern Ireland be different from any other country?

The Chairman: We are coming to the end of this debate.

Ms McWilliams: These weapons are used in the same way in Northern Ireland, in peace as well as in conflict, as they are elsewhere. I am simply making the point that the availability of these weapons has increased domestic homicide. Members have mentioned that suicide will happen anyway, and I take Mr Brewster's point on this. All I am saying is that the availability of a small hand-gun ensures that an attempt to take one's life succeeds, and the same is true with domestic homicide. This is not about what we want, it is about what we need. For the Women's Coalition, this is about restriction; it is not about banning or about exclusion — it is about restriction, and any sensible, civilized society should want that for itself and its children.

Question put: That the amendment be made.

The Forum divided: Ayes 39; Noes 4, Abstention 1.

Ayes: *Antony Alcock, May Beattie, Thomas Benson, Robert Bolton, David Brewster, David Browne, Cecil Calvert, David Campbell, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, James Clarke, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Nigel Dodds, Joseph Gaston, Oliver Gibson, John Hunter, Derek Hussey, John Junkin, Peter King, Trevor Kirkland, St Clair McAlister, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Joan Parkes, Iris Robinson, Peter Robinson, James Shannon, Eric Smyth, Hugh Smyth, James Speers, May Steele, Robert Stoker, John Taylor, Peter Weir, Robert John White, Sammy Wilson.*

Noes: *Eileen Bell, Kieran McCarthy, Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar.*

Abstention: *Hugh Casey.*

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum believes that instead of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 passed in Great Britain restricting the use and ownership of legal hand-guns being extended to Northern Ireland the Government's priority must be to insist upon immediate and actual disarmament of illegal weapons.

The Chairman: I declare the amended motion to be carried by the necessary percentage, but I must also consider my decision under Rule 13(1). While some traditions might not support the resolution, it would seem perverse to strike it down when it is calling reasonably for the disarmament of illegal weapons. Therefore I am not going to strike it down.

COATS VIYELLA EMPLOYEES (POPPIES)

Mr Brewster: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum deplores the action of the Coats Viyella company upon their workers who wore poppies and calls on senior management to cease discrimination, either financial or otherwise, against those employees.

I shall be very brief because the facts are well-known, and Mr Gregory Campbell will be able to fill the Forum in with the details. What we all know is that up to 20 employees in Coats Viyella, a factory in Londonderry, have been penalized by their employer because they chose to wear a poppy.

There are occasions when words sometimes fail me. One recalls the Enniskillen bombing 10 years ago, when to have said anything might have seemed like being on automatic pilot; words would have been cheap beside the outrage we all felt. Now I am loathe to say anything which could be interpreted as bringing political controversy to the Royal British Legion.

But the fact that we are somewhat reticent and occasionally think that silence is more appropriate is no excuse for the deafening silence of the Member of Parliament for Foyle, Mr John Hume, not least since, as I understand it, he is entitled to belong to the Royal British Legion by virtue of his father's having served with the Royal Irish Rifles. Perhaps if he were interested in bridge-building, he would join that organization.

We well know that the Royal British Legion is a charity which does work for widows, orphans and the injured, and it supports people without reference to their creed, colour or class. This is what makes what has happened this past week so disturbing and so offensive. Those employees were punished because they supported a charity. That is the difference

between people who wear a poppy and people who wear a black ribbon, or a green ribbon or some other symbol of their political views. Those are not charitable organizations. They are not subject to the scrutiny of the charity commissioners because they are overtly political, and the charity commissioners were to scrutinize their funds, some of those bodies might turn out to have some very interesting backers indeed.

This is an attack on a charity presumably because some people are obsessed not with political correctness — we have had enough of that in Northern Ireland — but worse, with sectarian correctness. People who have a sectarian-correct attitude believe that others may take offence. What other charities are going to follow on from this? Obviously, if anyone chooses to support the Ulster Defence Regiment or the RUC benevolent funds they too will find themselves suspended. But what about charities like the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, even the Imperial Cancer Fund? And, of course, this sort of thing cuts both ways: what about people who give to the Society of St Vincent de Paul? Are we really living in a society where people cannot support a charity without facing sanctions? One remembers Pastor Niemöller, who said "When the Nazis came for the Jews I did nothing because I was not a Jew; when they came for the trade unionists I did nothing because I was not a trade unionist; and then when they came for me, there was no one left to speak for me."

This Forum speaks today for people who support charity, who give to help others less fortunate than themselves, and we are not going to concede the idea that the Royal British Legion is in any way a Unionist or triumphalist organization. Mr Chairman, you know that better than any of us. We believe that it is a charity and should be respected as such. That is why the decision by Coats Viyella management is so much to be regretted.

There are several people who have to take the blame for what has happened in the last few days. The management has to bear some of that blame by reason of its arbitrary and ill-thought decision, which has introduced dissension to a work-place where none previously existed. But I am not going to be too hard on the management of Coats Viyella because it was placed in a dilemma. I do not believe the denials of the Fair Employment Commission. I do not believe that the management of any company would have taken such an arbitrary decision without first being thoroughly briefed by the Fair Employment Commission. Much of the blame must rest with that organization, that grievance factory.

3.15 pm

We have made the point before in the Forum that, on average, something like five successful cases of discrimination are brought every year. While it is to be welcomed that people have their grievances redressed, that is hardly indicative of major, widespread discrimination — certainly not enough to justify the high-spending, self-perpetuating Mr Cooper and his friends in the Fair Employment Commission. Pressure has been put on Coats Viyella and other factories in an attempt to create a value-neutral environment.

Of course we support the removal of any sectarian or terrorist-related graffiti or anything like that which makes people feel uncomfortable, but I defy anyone to feel uncomfortable at the wearing of a poppy. I am reading, at present, a book entitled 'The Military History of Ireland', and it is full of the fine achievements of regiments such as the

Royal Irish Fusiliers, whose tie I am wearing today, the Connaught Rangers, the Inniskillings and your own regiment, Sir, the Guards. The vast majority of soldiers who served were probably not of my religious or political persuasion. That did not matter, and it is right that we should remember them.

The third set of people whom we cannot allow to escape censure are those people in Northern Ireland who have such a mindset that they are prepared to try to exploit the sectarianism that is latent in so many people and are prepared to try to push even a charitable organization like the British Legion into the sphere of politics to become a political football. Those are the sort of people who are going to attempt to disrupt people going to church to commemorate the dead next Sunday in Bellaghy. That is the mindset of bigots who would probably rejoice in the epithet "Fascist" because it was people from preceding generations who shared that outlook that steered the German bombers to Belfast so that they could kill Protestants and Catholics, Unionists and Nationalists. They are the type of people who would probably justify the bombing of Enniskillen and the attempted bombing of Tullyhommon by saying that they were trying to kill the uniform, not the man inside it, the type of people who would try to justify a mindset that does not permit a president-elect to wear a poppy.

I do not intend to waste the Forum's time further. It is self-evident that Coats Viyella has made a bad mistake. I do not entirely blame it. It is an indictment of our society that anyone could seriously believe that what it did would in any way ease sectarianism.

I commend the motion to the Forum.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Brewster. I commend you for the brevity with which you introduced it.

Mr Gregory Campbell: May I thank Mr Brewster for moving the motion. I intend to confine my remarks to a very brief description of what happened so that people may be fully aware of the facts surrounding the case.

On Friday, 24 October, the Poppy Appeal was launched in Londonderry by a Nationalist mayor. The comments that he made at the time make very interesting reading, in light of the subsequent actions by the management at Coats Viyella. He said that the poppy should be above party politics. I agree with him, and I said publicly that I agreed with him. I think virtually everybody would agree with those sentiments.

After the launch on Friday, 24 October, members of the public were able to get poppies and make donations to the Poppy Appeal, which some people who worked in Coats Viyella did. On Monday, the first day back at work after the appeal had been launched, a number of them wore their poppy with pride to work, as they had done in previous years. They did not wear it as a symbol of political division or to be triumphalist in any way. They wore it in the way that they have always done: to remember the dead of two world wars and subsequent conflicts.

The interesting thing is that they wore their poppies when work commenced on the Monday at about 8.30 am. During the day in many interviews, some of which were with Mr Bob Cooper and a group called Counteract, a trade union-affiliated body, I understand,

inferences were made. Mr Cooper was quite explicit when he said that people who went into the factory wearing poppies were in direct contravention of company policy. Now that is not correct. When they went to work on the Monday wearing their poppies they were unaware of any such policy. As I said, they have worn poppies in previous years as soon as the Poppy Appeal was launched, and no comment was passed nor was any attempt made to get them to remove their poppies.

Mr Cooper and the Counteract spokesman in a BBC Radio Ulster interview the following day alleged that these people were in defiance of existing company policy. Proof that no company policy had been made known to employees can be found in the fact that it was not until 5.00 pm on Monday that workers were made aware of any policy. They arrived in at 8.30 am wearing their poppies, they were at work all day and it was only at 5.00 pm — eight hours later — that they were told about this policy. The reality is that at 11.00 am a very small section of the work-force, noted for its sympathies for Sinn Fein and the IRA, made it known to the management that if poppies were not removed they would organize a walk-out. The management responded by devising a policy which was made known to the employees at 5.00 pm.

That policy was three-fold: first, people should not wear poppies before a specified date — six days before Armistice Day; secondly, poppies would not be on sale in the factory as they had been in previous years; and, thirdly, an organized two minutes' silence in the canteen which had occurred before would not be permitted. So not only were they not to be allowed to wear poppies, they were not to be allowed to purchase them on the premises or have a two minutes' silence either. All three things had occurred on previous occasions. Now they were being told that they would not happen this year. Quite rightly, the workers took umbrage. They said "We are not accepting this."

On the Tuesday morning a number of them came into work wearing poppies, again purely and solely as an act of remembrance. I know each one of those people personally. They are from ex-service families and either their fathers or their brothers served in the Second World War. They wore them for no other reason than to commemorate the dead. On Tuesday they were taken to one side by the management and told that if they persisted they would be suspended, which they promptly were. Four people in total were suspended as of that Tuesday evening.

On the Wednesday the situation escalated. A number of us were contacted on the Tuesday night and Wednesday morning and asked to give support to the workers. We subsequently launched an appeal fund because people were losing pay — and they are still losing pay. They went back to work only yesterday as a result of the edict from the company.

Over the weekend the situation was exacerbated. The company's management, at every stage of this dispute, refused to comment. Unfortunately, it took a comment from the Prime Minister — a comment with which I hope we all concur — to the effect that people ought not to be penalized for wearing a poppy. That is a self-evident truth and something that should not have had to be said in the House of Commons, let alone on a factory floor. It is something that is absolutely fundamental in our society: people should not be penalized for wearing a poppy. But it took that to embarrass the management of Coats Viyella. I hope that the company will be sufficiently embarrassed to reimburse all the employees who were

suspended without pay for wearing a poppy. They should not suffer any financial loss as a result of having worn the poppy.

Last week I circulated to each of the party rooms details of the fund that we had established to help the workers. May I thank each of the Members who made donations. I have passed them on, and the workers are extremely grateful and thankful for the support of Forum Members.

Ms Bell: I wear and have always worn a poppy as a sign of remembrance and respect for all those from all over the world and from my own family who paid the ultimate price in the two world wars and since. I have also had the privilege of visiting both the Somme and Gallipoli. As I made my sombre way around those thousands of graves, I saw not only the names of the brave men from our province but also the names of those from the South of Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, India and Canada, as well as the names of Muslims and Jews. I also remember, and will remember this Sunday, and every year on Remembrance Sunday, the sacrifice that they made. I admire the resolve and the efforts of the Royal British Legion in maintaining, under very difficult circumstances this year, the non-political stance which it hopes will encourage veterans of all traditions to come to it for help as they have done before.

With regard to the motion, I would like to point out some facts that I have been given. They are at variance with Mr Gregory Campell's but, nonetheless, to make it a balanced debate, they should be pointed out. I have been given them on good authority. The policy that Mr Campbell is talking about was, as I understand it, discussed in detail by the management of Coats Viyella and the work-force. A policy was agreed some time ago to allow a poppy to be worn on the six calendar days before Armistice Day. The general work-force was informed, and there was no dissension. There was no disagreement. Mr Campbell has graphically outlined what happened, so there is no point in my doing that.

Mr Gregory Campbell: This issue has been raised before. If it happened as Ms Bell has said, why did it take all of the Monday from 8.30 am until 5.00 pm for that policy to be enunciated to the work-force?

Ms Bell: Our facts are coming from, perhaps, two different sources. I was told that there were discussions throughout the day about it. Now, obviously, that is a change, but I do not want to get into that discussion. The facts that I have come from my own sources, and I see no reason for naming them.

The point that I want to make is that this should not have been turned into a political football. Mr Brewster said that, and I agree with him wholeheartedly. In fact, I agree with a lot of what he said. But we should allow Coats Viyella to deal with the matter in private so that the Royal British Legion is spared any further embarrassment. Remembrance Sunday and the poppies should be given due reverence, and perhaps this matter is best dealt with in the factory itself.

We can all learn lessons from this. The Fair Employment Commission, Coats Viyella and all of us must look at this and consider whether there was bad communication and bad feelings and how the situation can be handled better next year. I have also been told that the

company is looking at claims for compensation for the lost time, that it is going to discuss the matter again so there is not the same problem next year and that employees will be permitted to observe a two minutes' silence on Armistice Day. That is being said, and that is something that we must bear in mind. Therefore —

3.30 pm

Mr Alcock: Why did the company decide on this six-day policy when in practically every institution of the United Kingdom, including the House of Commons, poppies can be worn from the first day of the month? Why did the company go against the national mores?

Ms Bell: Perhaps Prof Alcock should ask Coats Viyella. I have worn my poppy for the last fortnight. I have no problem about wearing a poppy, but it apparently agreed on this policy of six calendar days. Mr Campbell says that is wrong, but that is what I was told. In conclusion —

Mr Peter Robinson: Is the Member's source the company?

Ms Bell: I said before, Mr Robinson, that I do not see any reason for naming the source.

The Chairman: Please address the Chair.

Ms Bell: People stand here every week and quote instances of things and though I have asked them time and time again to give me facts, I might as well talk to the wall. So I do not see why I should now give in to the Member's request.

I will finish by applauding the Royal British Legion for maintaining a very tolerant stance, in very difficult times, with all its veterans. I hope that it will be allowed to continue to do that. One of the lessons that the Forum should learn from this business is that it is best kept out of debate between political parties. That does no service whatsoever to the poppy and to all that it represents.

Finally, Members may have gathered from my remarks that my party cannot support the motion.

Mr Weir: I rise to address the motion with mixed emotions, though I am very glad to be seconding it. However, I am saddened that there is a need for it at all and that the Alliance Party feels incapable of supporting it.

I would like to express concern and disappointment at the attitude of some Nationalists in Northern Ireland. I say some because many Nationalists have a great deal of respect for Remembrance Sunday, and, indeed, some participate in Remembrance Services. So I do not want to blow it out of proportion.

I grew up in an area in Bangor in which there was a great deal of respect for Remembrance Sunday. Indeed, in my naïvety in childhood, I naturally assumed that everyone would respect the sacrifice that was made in the two world wars. I had my eyes

opened though when I went to Queen's and found that, because of the Republican control there, they refused to lay a poppy wreath on Remembrance Sunday. To that extent,, there was no opportunity for ordinary students to vent their feelings. In fact the present Remembrance Service for students was actually started by Mr Paisley and me to give ordinary students such an opportunity.

Fortunately, the attitude of the students' union at Queen's has changed a little over the years. It moved, first of all, unfortunately, to the disgraceful laying of a white poppy wreath; then to the laying of a poppy wreath by some of the officials of the union; and, eventually, in the last few years to the main officers of the union laying a poppy wreath. And while this is, at least, an expression of some degree of respect for the wishes of the Unionist community, that is the wrong reason for laying the poppy wreath. The reason the students' union, and indeed Nationalists, should participate in the Remembrance Service is that — and this been stated before — in the First and Second World Wars, Unionists and Nationalists alike, Protestant and Catholic, Northerner and Southerner, fought for the armed forces and gave their lives so that we could have freedom. That may be a cliché, but that does not make it any less true. We should remember for a moment the sacrifices made by some Nationalists and Southerners in both the First and Second World Wars.

For example, it should be remembered that while a minority of the Irish Volunteers, an organization which was set up to fight for Home Rule, stayed at home during the First World War and were part of the Easter Rising, large numbers of them fought for King and country and sacrificed their lives at Gallipoli, Flanders and further afield. It should be remembered — I read this somewhere though I cannot vouch for its accuracy — that in 1920 or 1921 more poppies were actually sold in Dublin than in Belfast. It is a great shame that there is not that remembrance today in the Nationalist community, particularly in the Republic of Ireland. We should also remember that in the Second World War Protestants and Catholics alike from Northern Ireland fought against Fascism and that while the Republic of Ireland itself was neutral, many of its citizens did volunteer to fight.

While it saddens me that some Nationalists feel that they cannot participate in Remembrance Services, I am deeply angered by a small minority who are so intolerant of Remembrance Day that they will not even allow others to wear poppies. We have seen in Coats Viyella, and also in the Bellaghy situation, how a small number of agitators have created a spirit of intolerance and an agenda of division.

Secondly, I am concerned about the attitude of Coats Viyella itself. And here I do not wish to add to the remarks of Mr Gregory Campbell, who is much more aware of the situation. Suffice it to say that its behaviour over the last couple of weeks has been disgraceful.

But thirdly, and of most importance in many ways, is the attitude of Her Majesty's Government. Reference has been made to Tony Blair's statement. Welcome while that is, we should remember that it came under pressure, to some extent, from Labour back-benchers.

Earlier, when asked to comment on the situation, the Secretary of State said "I am not about to go in and dictate how companies run their businesses." If that really was a statement of Government philosophy, and the Government did allow the free market and give

companies a free hand, we would largely welcome that. But that is simply not the case. For the last 20 years we have had the fair employment legislation behind which lies a culture of political correctness, which is all-pervasive and threatening to employers in Northern Ireland. It is the Mafia, the Star Chamber; it is a system in which quotas, though officially illegal, have, in effect, been enforced, and that has led to discrimination. I know from friends in the job market that in many ways it impossible to be seen as a Unionist and obtain work. For example, when completing CVs for job applications they feel it impossible to include any political involvement on the Unionist side — and this, we should remember, is a respectable activity; it is not involvement with gunmen. They are often told that if they appear on television, they will lose their jobs.

We see as well the kind of paranoia that the issue of fair employment has created — for example, the witch hunt against Graham Gudgeon when he raised the issue. I realize that fair employment is not directly related to the motion, but the problem is that the Government and the FEC have created a culture in which paranoia reigns supreme and where something which should be utterly non-political, like the poppy, is used as a badge to beat a section of the community. So, when the Government give indications that they are going to wash their hands of individual decisions, they should take a step back and realize the kind of culture that they have created. Indeed, the suggestion was made by the mover of the motion that there may even have been some direct interference from the FEC on this issue.

I do welcome the remarks of the Prime Minister, but if we are to create an environment in which companies and workers alike are all tolerant of Remembrance Day — and that is what we have to achieve — the rhetoric of the Government must be matched by deeds. This has been a disgraceful incident, but if it can bring the matter to public attention, perhaps some good will emerge from it.

I urge people to support the motion.

Mr Sammy Wilson: As other Members have said, it is regrettable that a non-political emblem has been dragged into the political arena over the last week as a result of the decision by Coats Viyella.

My earliest recollections of Remembrance Day centre around school where we had an assembly to remember the 20 pupils who had left school to join the Army and had gone to fight in the First World War where they were killed. I always remember Remembrance Day assemblies as fairly emotional occasions, and the significant thing was this: my history teacher who read out the names of the dead was a Roman Catholic. He had fought in the Second World War; he was an ex-serviceman; and he took great pride in reading out the role of honour of our past pupils who had given their lives for their country.

I will always remember it as an emotional experience, not a political experience. It had nothing to do with party politics or with Nationalism. It was simply remembrance of people who had given their lives for their country. They had felt that their role as a citizen was to defend the country in which they had been brought up. Yet over the last number of days we have had this bizarre situation in which workers have been put out of work simply for simply paying their respects, for wearing a symbol to show that they supported a charity.

We even had the head of a quango going on record and saying that there is no automatic civil right for people to wear this. People died in their fight against Fascism, and we do not now even have the civil right to remember them. And then we have a craven Secretary of State who, as on many other things, cannot make up her mind. No wonder she is called Mo — eeny, meeny, miny, mo. She cannot make up her mind about whether we should be part of the United Kingdom, whether she should be allowed to wear a poppy, or whether guns should be given up. She cannot make her mind up, and she was not even prepared to make a definitive statement on this.

We are quite entitled to ask why this situation has arisen. It has arisen for three reasons. First of all, it started with the basic intolerance of Nationalists. The words "Royal" and "British" suddenly loomed up, and there is so much hatred for those words that the matter was immediately turned into a political issue. Indeed, the British Legion Housing Association even had to change its name because of the PAFT rules and everything else. It is regrettable that it bowed to that kind of pressure. But that is the level of intolerance there is: for some reason or other, people would not apply for housing because the housing association was run by the British Legion. It is now the Clanmil Housing.

Nationalists have started to snipe at target after target. If it is not parades, it is flags or pictures of the Queen, and now it is the poppy. In spite of what has been said I do not believe — and this is the unfortunate thing — that it is a small minority of Nationalists who are doing this. I happen to work in a place where there are quite a number of Nationalists working, and this week not one of them wore a poppy. The Lord Mayor of this city would not launch the poppy appeal. His Nationalist credentials are coming out again. We have the great bridge-builder down South, who will not wear a poppy. Because she is a Nationalist she has equated it with a British symbol, and it is with that degree of intolerance, and that manifestation of intolerance, that Nationalist people talk about wanting to free themselves from sectarianism while every week they scratch around for something else to call sectarian.

3.45 pm

Brid Rodgers was on television with my Colleague last night, and she said that hers was not an emblemist party — that is a new word to me; I have not heard that word before — yet, she was equally vehement about the emblem. John Hume used to say that he did not get het up about flags because you could not eat them. I do not think that you can eat poppies either — you can smoke them, or whatever, but people get het up about that as well. That is the first reason this is happening. Nationalists have sought out things which they can make into sectarian symbols — we have not made this issue sectarian.

My earliest recollection of Remembrance Day is that it was always a very sombre and solemn occasion, and I identified it with people who had simply done their duty and paid the ultimate price.

The second reason is that we have a culture of what has been called "sectarian correctness" — it is inbred — and there are people who wish to sustain that sectarian correctness, sometimes for their own, selfish ends. I am not surprised that the Alliance Party will not be supporting this motion because one of the people who has kept this sectarian

correctness going is a former member of that party — someone who has had 20 years good employment out of scratching around and digging divisions in society.

A Member: That is the source.

Mr Sammy Wilson: I suspect that might well be the source of Ms Bell's information. These professional whingers search around for ways of bringing divisions into our society because that is a good way of keeping a job. At £45,000 a year, or whatever Bob "Snooper" earns, he has good reason for doing so.

The last reason is that it has been kept going, to a certain extent, by the statements of the Secretary of State and others. She actually added some political weight to what should have been a sordid little piece of intolerance on the part of some. One of the reasons this has continued is that we have now got political masters who are intent on bending over backwards to placate a certain section of the community — the rampant and aggressive Nationalists. The Secretary of State is almost afraid to open her mouth and say anything that might offend them — if anything, she seeks to ensure that whatever she says pleases them and, by doing so, she has added political weight to something which should have been dismissed out of hand. Any decent Secretary of State would have simply brushed them aside and told them to behave themselves and stop acting like bigots. Instead, she does not want to get involved. As Mr Weir quite rightly pointed out, for any Labour Party member to say that he or she does not wish to get involved in the day-to-day business of the management of companies when the Government are involved at all kinds of other levels is rather shallow.

I hope that we will get back to the situation that I experienced as a youngster in school, when, on 11 November every year, we remembered people who died; we remembered them solemnly and regardless of their religion or background. I hope we will be able to get back to the way things were rather than have this division.

Ms Sagar: Sometimes silence speaks louder than words. I agree with most people that this is not a political issue, and, having listened to Members who decided to start slamming other people, I feel ashamed. I ask Members to take time to reflect on what the poppy means. Like most people throughout the United Kingdom, I was brought up to believe that the poppy was a symbol of remembrance of those who died in both world wars and other conflicts. I thought that that was what the poppy was all about. However, some Members who say they do not wish this to become a political issue or a religious debate are managing to turn it into just that. I am absolutely ashamed of the comments made by some Members today. It is disgraceful that the memory of all these people is being brought into disrepute by the shouting that is going on.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: It has been said that this is not a political issue, but unless we have a definition of a political issue I am not so sure that we can say whether it is or is not one. The origin of the word "political" is the Greek *politikos*, meaning issues of citizenship; and this is an issue of citizenship so it may be a political issue in spite of what Ms Sagar says.

The source of the problem is surely the fair employment legislation, which has poisoned the whole atmosphere in the work-place and made it more divided than it ever was. We must not forget that the fair employment legislation came into being as a result of

wholesale propaganda about discrimination in Northern Ireland, which led to the belief that there should be legislation to create neutrality in the work-place. Neutrality is for cowards — for those who refuse to say which side they are on. Every social order institutes its own programme of separation, but fair employment legislation is designed to reduce society to its lowest common-denominator and then outlaw and criminalize the existing order. That is its whole purpose: to make the existing order unpalatable, even within the work-place, so that the work-place, in pursuit of this euphemistic goal called neutrality, has to be divested of the symbols of the society in which people live. The result, of course, is that British symbolism is discriminated against. This was not unforeseen; when the debate about fair employment legislation arose, it was pointed out then that it would poison the whole atmosphere.

Let us look across the sheugh to America where there are laws designed to increase the employment of Negroes. Having had those laws for decades, people there have now decided that it is wrong to have them and that those laws are actually working against the very people whom they were designed to help, and so Article 209, which is currently doing the rounds in America, is attempting to abolish all this kind of legislation.

And we must not forget the Chairman of the Fair Employment Commission — a man who is in a job that was never advertised and who stands guilty of breaking his own rules.

This issue also involves the politics of guilt. How does that work? It is quite simple. You blame the majority for the ills of the minority; by establishing a guilt mentality, you enslave the majority and by using guilt and the politics of guilt, you force the majority to do what the minority wants. The majority will have a guilt complex and, therefore, must atone for the evil — or supposed evil — that has been put upon them. That is why the fair employment legislation was introduced — it was a down payment on the process of atonement for all this supposed guilt. That is what has happened in Northern Ireland; the Unionists are blamed for all the Nationalists' problems — they must live in a climate of guilt so they can atone for all their sins. The tragedy is that this issue has provoked so much bitterness that ordinary Roman Catholics whose family members were sacrificed in two world wars have also been made to feel ashamed of wearing a poppy. So Nationalists are doing more harm to their own people.

There has been another effect, and that is an attempt to intimidate those who are British — to make them feel so guilty that they are reduced to not wearing a poppy either. In the rest of the United Kingdom everybody wears a poppy from the day the Poppy Appeal is launched, whereas here, because of the politics of guilt, because of the propaganda of discrimination and because of fair employment legislation, everything becomes shackled and chained to placate those who are vociferously antagonistic to Britishness, and so we have this silly rule in Coats Viyella — six days or else.

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that nobody should be penalized for wearing a poppy, and given that statement I hope that Coats Viyella will be suitably embarrassed and abolish this rule which was brought in to placate some people.

I support the Ulster Unionist Party motion.

The Chairman: I notice that Ms Bell is leaving. Is there any significance in that?

Ms Bell: I am leaving because I do not want to vote on this issue.

The Chairman: Perhaps we can dispense with the summing-up or do you want an extension?

Mr Weir: I was just about to move that the sitting be extended.

Only one Member has yet to speak and his summing-up will be brief. We should not be delayed for more than five minutes.

Debate suspended.

Resolved:

That the sitting be extended by five minutes. — *[Mr Weir]*

Debate resumed.

Mr McFarland: I thank Members for their indulgence. This will be short but, I hope, pithy.

Over recent days we have had to listen to a most confused debate on the wearing of the poppy. A surprising number of Nationalist commentators have clearly experienced collective amnesia over a key element in Irish history. It is said that in a conflict, the victor writes its history, and after the partition of Ireland, the Irish Free State set about removing from its history books the contribution of nearly half a million men of Irish descent to the First World War. Wearing the poppy was actively, sometimes violently, discouraged.

Around 50,000 Irishmen from North and South died in the Great War; they were predominately Nationalists in politics and Roman Catholic in religion. Indeed, I understand that John Hume's father fought with the 16th Irish Division. These men went to war to take a stand against German imperialism and to redress the wrongs suffered as a result of the brutal invasion of Belgium and France. It is iniquitous that the contribution of these men is not fully honoured and that their place in Irish history has not been properly restored.

The poppy is a non-sectarian, non-political sign that the sacrifice of those who fought in the First World War, the Second World War and since is remembered. For some constitutional Nationalists to revile the poppy, claiming it to be a Unionist symbol, is to ignore a key part in their own tradition's history and to fail to honour the sacrifice of their fathers and grandfathers in defence of world peace.

The black tentacles of political correctness must be challenged. The original decision at Coats Viyella smacked of political correctness while under the influence of Republican propaganda, and the company has failed to acquaint itself with the part played by those from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in defence of world peace during two world wars and since. We must take issue with those who seek to misrepresent the poppy. I commend this motion to the Forum.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum deplores the action of the Coats Viyella company upon their workers who wore poppies and calls on senior management to cease discrimination, either financial or otherwise, against those employees.

The Forum was adjourned at 4.02 pm.