

# NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 5 December 1997

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ELECTORAL REFORM

**The Chairman:** The Business Committee agreed yesterday to recommend that the Committee on Electoral Reform continue its excellent work by monitoring the Government's review of electoral reform and their review of electoral systems in the United Kingdom.

*Resolved:*

That the terms of reference agreed on 27 June 1997 for the Committee on Electoral Reform shall be extended to incorporate the following final sentence:

"The Committee will further monitor the Government's own review on electoral reform in Northern Ireland, together with the Government's review of electoral systems in the United Kingdom." — *[The Chairman]*

## EDUCATION: PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

**Mr Gibson:** I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum adopts the report 'The Implications of Public/Private Partnerships for Education Services in Northern Ireland' prepared by Standing Committee B and decides to forward it to the Ministers responsible for Education and for Finance, with the request that they give serious consideration to its recommendations.

There are several minor errors in the report because of the rush in getting it to the printer. These are being corrected.

I wish to thank the Committee members, particularly Mr Peter Weir, the Vice-Chairman, who did an excellent job. Members did about 400 hours' intensive work. We received 27 written submissions from interested groups and a further 10 documents, seven of them from the Treasury — and Treasury documents tend to be rather difficult to understand. In addition, a large number of people made oral presentations — people knowledgeable in the area of the private finance initiative (PFI) (now known as public/private partnerships). We discovered that it will take £500 million to deal with the schools rebuilding and refurbishment backlog. Indeed, that will only take care of the priority list; perhaps another £500 million will be needed urgently.



There is no quick-fix solution, though people in the Department of Education — in particular, Dr McCormick and Dr Livingstone — are willing to explore quickly any funding possibilities. In addition, Mr Quinn, Mr Fitzsimons and Mr Flynn of the Department of Finance and Personnel are anxious to ensure that public/private partnerships will work.

In Northern Ireland 30 projects have been identified as being suitable for public/private-partnership treatment, but only six of these are in the field of education. Despite two years' agonizing work by those representing the Department and those from the boards, and despite the efforts of the teams working for the private sector — about 12 personnel on each side — the process is slow and cumbersome. It involves securing a 25-year contract to provide, service and maintain buildings. Only one of these will be agreed by the end of this year or early in 1988. Thus it will be the year 2000 before the first "pathfinder" site is in operation.

I want to thank all those who gave oral evidence. They made an important contribution. The Committee was impressed by their expertise and their sensitivity. We are also grateful to those who sent written submissions, some of which were copious. Some of the material was quite difficult to interpret. We on the Committee became aware that private-sector involvement of this type is not quite as new as the Government would have us believe. The old county councils often used private finance for construction. But it is now cumbersome to do so because there are 12 players in the game of agreeing a contract.

I do not wish to steal the thunder of others who want to speak in this debate. Committee members will concentrate on various areas. I must, however, point out that Malcolm Bates was authorized by the new Administration to consider whether PFI could be speeded up and made more workable. Bates made 29 recommendations, most of them very sensible and very applicable to Northern Ireland. We have included some of them, but it is obvious that we need people who are able to cut a deal with the private sector. Northern Ireland should have a central procurement system. Boards should not have to operate individually; there should be someone representing the public sector, working on their behalf.

The Committee has made 20 recommendations. The last of these deals with help and encouragement for local people involved in construction — engineers, surveyors, and so on. There is a tendency to bring people from Great Britain. Local professionals in quantity surveying, civil engineering and buildings maintenance and management should be given training opportunities. Contractors and professionals in Northern Ireland are very keen to get into this field. At present there is not much prosperity in the construction industry. There has been a reduction of 50% in public-sector building, and that is expected to worsen in the coming financial year. Construction is an important part of commercial activity. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Education are keen to use the "pathfinder" projects, not only for their own benefit but also to help the private sector.

I am grateful to you, Mr Chairman, for your encouragement and to the Secretariat, especially the Committee Secretary. We appreciate her diligence and courtesy. She has certainly earned the respect of the Committee, and she deserves the respect of the entire Forum.



I recommend the report to the Forum, in the hope that it can be presented to the Minister in the near future.

**The Chairman:** The Minister will undoubtedly read it with interest. The standard is typical of Forum reports, which I know get attention in the places that matter.

**Mr Weir:** I should like to begin by echoing the Committee Chairman's remarks about the Committee Secretary. She deserves a great deal of credit for the speed and accuracy with which the report was produced. Secondly, on behalf of the other members of the Committee, I congratulate its Chairman. Once again, Mr Gibson steered us towards a very thoughtful report. He has the knack of facilitating debate and at the same time ensuring that the discussion remains focused.

Taking account of the difficulty with the private finance initiative (PFI), this report is as comprehensive as it could be. Politicians in Northern Ireland are often accused of falling into two traps, and sometimes they are guilty. First, they tend to react to events, rather than look ahead. One advantage of this report is that it deals with a ground-breaking area, and not something from the dim and distant past. As the Committee Chairman has said, we are involved in the first "pathfinder" project. This is a very innovative report. It deals with what is going to be a crucial area of public-sector finance. The other trap that politicians in Northern Ireland sometimes fall into is the notion that the solution to every problem is to throw more money at it. The report recognizes the economic environment in which we live.

10.15 am

PFI — like it or not — is going to play a much more significant role in public-sector financing, whether in education, in health care or in road transport. As Mr Gibson has said, we have a priority capital spend of about £500 million. As the capital budget is currently just £23 million, it is clear that PFI will have to be used fairly extensively.

There are some fine ideas behind PFI. It is about not just the provision of buildings but also their management. Headmasters would be freed from responsibility for areas — catering and cleaning, for example — in which they are not experts and could concentrate on the important business of education.

Some of the Committee's important recommendations take the line that we are moving towards PFI and that the system should be as efficient and streamlined as possible. We appreciate that the Department is on a steep learning curve, but we were concerned at the length of time and the amount of money involved in setting up many PFI projects. In the case of the principal "pathfinder" project, the Londonderry Institute, it took 15 months to find a preferred bidder, and I understand that it will be about another year before a contract can be signed. In addition, the Western Board had to identify a specific project manager and set up a project team.

We were struck by the initial costs — in particular, the exorbitant amounts paid to consultants. This led to the fourth recommendation: that, in line with the Bates Report, the Department of Education should strengthen its private-finance unit by the addition of deal-making and project-management expertise. The pooling of resources — I refer not just



to talent and expertise but also to the standardization of projects and to learning from experience — is vitally important. If expertise were more centralized, Departments could evaluate many projects without the exorbitant cost of outside consultants.

We are also concerned at the level of bidding costs. The figure given by one witness was about £200,000. We need to reduce the likelihood of costly failed bids. Many local entrepreneurs could be put off getting involved in PFI projects. There was important evidence to the effect that the tendering process should be made much simpler. It was suggested that the design information given to the Department at the initial stages did not need to be so detailed, and the point was made that a library of PFI information could be built up and made available to the various sectors.

I do not want to go into any more detail. The report is cautious and intelligent. At this stage it is very difficult to be definitive as to the effects of PFI down the years. These are 25-year projects. We may well look back and say that this was one of the great contributors to the salvation of education. On the other hand, we may conclude that it was an absolute disaster. At this stage it would be premature to judge. The report is valuable in that it highlights some of the potential benefits and some of the concerns, and it gives the Department of Education and the Department of Finance advice about some of the pitfalls.

There are many further aspects, but I will leave those to other members of the Committee.

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party I welcome the report and urge that it be adopted.

**Sir Oliver Napier:** In the absence of the Alliance Party's representative on the Committee, Ms Eileen Bell, I support this report.

I should like, first, to congratulate the Committee Chairman on a very well-thought-out and professional document. I congratulate also the other members of the Committee and, not least, the Secretary.

In referring specifically to recommendation 18, I am not denigrating any of the other recommendations. I want to emphasize that consultation is a key issue for the future. The pilot schemes were set up with no information or training for those in the education sector directly affected. I understand that about a month ago the trade-union witnesses indicated that they had asked the Minister for an assurance that they would be consulted and that such an assurance was given but that there was no consultation. In such areas, things will have to be improved.

Anybody with an interest in education must welcome the plans to improve school buildings and equipment. But improvements must not be made at the expense of pupils and students.

This is an excellent report, and it will have the full support of my party.



**Ms Sagar:** The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is pleased to support Standing Committee B's report on the implications of public/private partnerships for the education service in Northern Ireland.

The Committee worked very hard, as has been pointed out, and it was extremely well served by the Secretariat, particularly the Secretary. Like other Members, I thank all those who took part in the Committee's work — not least Chris Moffat for giving up her time freely on our behalf.

The private finance initiative (PFI) was introduced by the Conservative Government as a means of reducing public expenditure. The new Labour Government adopted it in the hope that it would be a means of financing the backlog of public-expenditure commitments left by the Conservative Government while maintaining the Conservatives' public-expenditure limits. Now Labour are arguing that all future public expenditure should be considered for PFI treatment because of the value-for-money potential. PFI — now called PPPs (public/private partnerships) — is seen as involving not just assessment but also the procurement of services from the private sector.

In the field of education, Northern Ireland has a backlog of capital projects amounting to £500 million — and that is a conservative estimate — but the Department has been told that it will not get Treasury money to deal with the backlog and that, in any case, all future projects must first be market-tested for PPP.

There are seven "pathfinder" projects — new or refurbished schools or further education colleges — each valued at between £3 million and £7 million, but none of these is at a sufficiently advanced stage to tell us anything of significance. Schools are not like motorways, water-treatment plants, prisons or renal units: they belong to real communities. They may be used for only 200 days a year, but many children spend more waking hours in them than even at home. The sense of communal ownership is important, not least educationally. Can the Treasury official who sends his son or daughter to a private school put his hand on his heart and say that ownership does not matter? Whom does he think he is kidding?

After a 25-year PPP contract has expired, who will own the plant? Who will negotiate financing of the partnership for the next 25 years and for the period after that? From no witness did the Committee get satisfactory answers to these questions. That is worrying, but we must be open-minded: "Suppose that the public finance theory is sound"; "Suppose that this is a more efficient and effective way of delivering education services"; "We have to think about how to ensure that important educational values and principles are safeguarded".

The Women's Coalition supports the whole report. It may have come just in time for the democratic process to exert some influence over Treasury whiz-kids. We want to highlight several key recommendations.

With regard to the first recommendation, we are very concerned that PPP policy should be set within a clear statutory structure which guarantees the delivery of specific educational objectives in all projects and contracts. This means having a much clearer



strategic view of educational policy, of how specific projects may or may not fit into policy and of how educational benefits and outcomes are to be measured.

There are several recommendations that follow from this — in particular, the second and the fourteenth. We agree with the Government that the priorities are education, education and education. The question is whether it can be delivered by PPPs. We are particularly worried about the lack of accountability in the process. To whom will the public-sector deal-makers be accountable? In what way will the public be involved? “Public/private partnership” has a nice sound. Are we to be consulted? Will teachers and parents be consulted when design, construction, operation or ownership contracts are being drawn up? Or will it be “Pay for, occupy, agonize, and regret”? Who will decide what playing-field should be sold off and whether the proceeds should be used to pay for a language laboratory or a remedial unit? Ownership and control of education is much more complex than even the Treasury supposes.

With regard to recommendation 19, let me make it clear that the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition is not against change. We accept that new ways of financing public services must be found. We will watch the results of the Department’s “pathfinder” projects with interest, but we will not be persuaded that all possibilities, Government and other, have been properly assessed.

**Mr McMichael:** I too want to thank and congratulate the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and other members of the Committee and, in particular, to express appreciation to the Committee Secretary for her very hard work. She churns out rain forests of paper every week.

Among the reports that the Forum has considered, this one is uniquely innovative. As Mr Weir has said, we are not reacting to circumstances but are operating at the cutting edge of a new debate, which has implications for the education system. Public/private partnerships are embryonic. There are only four “pathfinder” projects. It will take a long time to establish whether PPP is a positive or negative development, but this report is an intelligent response to a very difficult issue. Many people who were asked to comment were unable to do so as they had not formulated policy. The report will probably set the standard for debate.

One hopes that the introduction of PPP will be a positive step. There is not enough Government money to meet the ever-increasing cost of construction and refurbishment. The funds will have to come from somewhere.

*10.30 am*

I agree that PPP in the context of educational facilities is very different from PPP in the structural-project context of the past. Pupils, unlike motorways, are human. Let us hope that this will be a positive way forward, but it would be premature to assume that it will.

Two issues give me some concern about how the system will operate. First, there is the question of community consultation with regard to preferred bidders — usually three — for contracts to provide facilities. The aim of these people is, of course, to make a profit. I am worried about the targeting of schools which have surplus land that could be used for



other purposes. Such land should be put to positive community use. In many areas schools are the only community facility. In the case of one of the "pathfinder" projects in Belfast, I do not want to see land turned into a housing development site. When it comes to the motives of people in the private sector, the alarm bells should be ringing.

Ordinarily, schools are open about 175 days a year. The people involved in these projects will want to have much greater use made of their facilities. I hope that this will mean additional opportunities for locals to get involved in recreation and community activities. There is a danger that a profit-driven system could result in the opposite — perhaps even private gyms.

If PPP catches on, the most attractive prospects will be schools that have the greatest potential for exploitation. What about those that cater for the children in greatest educational need? Schools that do not meet the PPP criteria may be forced to close. The Committee raised this question with Mr Rea, a senior education officer with the Belfast Board. He said that he could best respond to the pertinent comments about valid concerns by saying that a collective eye would have to be kept on them. Such a comment from such a person about such a fundamental matter is not good enough. This whole question must be thought through and safeguards put in place. We must not allow education to be sucked into a process that is driven by profiteers, to the detriment of children. We must, indeed, keep an collective eye on PFI to ensure that it will not have a negative impact. It has serious implications for the entire community.

**Mr Benson:** It is with pleasure that I express support for this report.

I should like to pay tribute to the Committee's Chairman, Vice-Chairman and other members for all their hard work, and I endorse the compliments to the Committee Secretary for her excellent contribution. Of course, I would not expect anything else from a person called Benson!

Some members may not fully understand how education capital expenditure is determined. When education became compulsory in the nineteenth century, responsibility for it was assumed largely by the churches, with a few factories making provision for the children of their workers. That remained the situation until the 1930s, when the Northern Ireland Government offered to take over. The Protestant churches — mainly the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Ireland — and most of the factory owners transferred their schools to the Ministry of Education, retaining certain rights. The Roman Catholic Church — perhaps wisely in view of the way education has been treated — decided to hold on to its schools, and they were run under a parish system.

That system continued until seven or eight years ago, when the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) was set up. The Protestant schools (those in the controlled sector) are run by the five education and library boards — the North Eastern, the Western, the Southern, the South Eastern and the Belfast. I would described the CCMS as another board. Then there are the bodies that govern the independent grammar schools, such as Campbell College, Methody, Bloomfield Collegiate and Strathearn, which might be seen as a seventh board. And the integrated schools have what I would describe as a board of their own.



Thus, to all intents and purposes, there are eight boards, all vying for funds. Each body has to prepare a list of capital-expenditure priorities — refurbishment, extensions, and so on — and send it to the Department in November. The Department — civil servants, of course — briefs the Minister, who makes the announcement. The amount provided for capital work over the years has been nothing like enough. It is estimated that it would take about £500 million to get rid of the dire conditions in schools.

Over the past three or four years — the evidence is there to be seen — two thirds or three quarters of the capital provided has been awarded to one board: the CCMS. I do not think that the needs of the CCMS are any greater than those of some other boards. My constituency of North Down, which is in the area of my own board — the South Eastern — is littered with wooden huts. They are called temporary accommodation. Regent House in Newtownards, which is the largest grammar school in the entire board system — it has 1,600-plus pupils — has been waiting quite a while for an extension. A third of all pupils and teachers are accommodated in 33 huts. It is deplorable. I hope that the Minister and, indeed, Mr Blair, who talks about “education, education and education”, will do something about it. Otherwise such words will be meaningless.

We believe that the Conservatives were using the private finance initiative — now public/private partnerships — as a means of avoiding immediate capital expenditure. Introducing a PPP system takes at least two years. A great deal of processing is required before the tender stage. Indeed, getting bricks and mortar on the ground could take three or four years. I hope that that will not be used as an excuse for delay. If there is to be PPP, the expenditure should be additional.

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education revise its strategic plan to take account of the proposed commitment to PPPs and to clarify the long-term expenditure implications. It recommends also that there should be a public-sector capital budget for priority education projects which are not appropriate for PPP. Then there is the recommendation concerning the bundling concept — bundling, not bungling. Several very small projects would be combined for one contract. But individual projects are important and must not be lost sight of.

The most important recommendation is that the Department of Education and other bodies have mechanisms for meaningful consultation about PPP proposals. As quite a number of boards and people do not fully understand all the concepts, the Department, which has experts, must provide information and instruction about the implications.

My final point is that PPP repayments should not in any way jeopardize the budgets for local management of schools. The Department must take this matter seriously. Much greater capital expenditure is needed. An immediate injection of £500 million is required to deal with the dire conditions in some schools.

**Mr Eric Smyth:** It has been a great privilege to serve under the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Committee. There is a good relationship between all the members, and the staff have been helpful in every way. It is only right that we should acknowledge all the hard work that went into this report.



*10.45 am*

Like other Members, I am concerned about the possibility of reluctance to invest in poor areas where there is a good deal of vandalism. Would my Belfast constituency, for instance, be attractive for a public/private partnership (PPP)? I am concerned about falling roll numbers. In some places the future does not look very good. Investment may be put on the long finger, as Mr McMichael has pointed out. An area that was excluded would be stigmatized, and its children could be deprived of a good education in good conditions.

Some of those who gave evidence to the Committee shied away from this point. Apparently the Belfast Education and Library Board has the answer. We will keep an eye on it. I am afraid that, no matter what happens, the schools I have referred to will suffer when it comes to the question of ground for new buildings.

I commend this report to the Forum. Let us hope that the Government will pay attention to those on the ground who know what is going on.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** As Mr Eric Smyth has expressed clearly the views that I intended to put forward, I will be brief. However, I want to congratulate the Committee's Chairman, Vice-Chairman and staff for an excellent report.

Like Mr Eric Smyth, I am concerned about the question of private funding. If a teacher were offered jobs in South Belfast, East Belfast and West Belfast, he certainly would not take the one in West Belfast. We have been urging Ministers, right back to Richard Needham, to look into this matter. The Belfast Education and Library Board, as the employer, should decide where to place teachers. That would give working-class areas better opportunities. This suggestion is a criticism not of the teachers but of the system.

Glencairn, for instance, is a run-down area, but through no fault of the people who live there. The same can be said of Highfield and many other estates where schools are under threat. Indeed, one is to be closed. There is no chance that private funders will do anything for such areas. Unfortunately, it would in their interests in some cases to encourage closure and replacement somewhere more attractive. Ultimately this is about profit. As we said last week in respect of libraries, it is a wrong turn. We must keep reminding the Government of their promise: "Education, education and education."

I support what has been proposed, but I shall keep a very close watch. I am determined that people from all sections of the community — all sections financially as well as in terms of religion — should have the same opportunity.

**Mr Bolton:** As other Members have said, the Committee is not under the illusion that public/private partnerships (PPPs) are a panacea for the drastic under-funding of education. This applies to both capital and revenue expenditure. In its submission, the Department readily admitted that it will take a minimum of £350 million to bring schools up to standard. The Committee's Chairman and Vice-Chairman have said that the amount could be £500 million, and I will not disagree. Indeed, the figure could be doubled if services and sundry items were included.



Private finance could make a contribution. The Committee believes that it could have a very important role, but it should not be regarded as a replacement for Government funding. Recommendation 16 makes that very clear. Not every project would be attractive or appropriate for private finance. Here I am thinking in particular of small rural schools. The Committee could not approve the use of a consortium to amalgamate several small schools for purely financial reasons. And public money will be necessary in many other situations. One thinks of secondary schools and libraries in small towns or rural areas. Important strategic services that would not be attractive to people whose only interest is profit are often under threat.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** I endorse other Members' thanks to the Committee's Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary.

Everyone is interested in education, but it can be one of the most boring subjects to debate, and the expression "PPP" (public/private partnership) does not help. It reminds one of a record-player needle that is stuck. "PFI" (private finance initiative) at least has some variety.

The purpose of PFI is to secure additional funds to deal with the capital-expenditure backlog. Multitudes like myself do not want a vast increase in taxes to provide the necessary 25% increase in the annual budget. That is where PFI comes in.

Others have made suggestions as to the real reason for introducing it. Some have talked about the public-sector borrowing requirement; some have said that this may be the first step towards privatizing education. Anyway, finance lies at the heart of this whole issue. The Committee, in its wisdom, reserves judgement on the principle, but it has set out the advantages and disadvantages. These are worth studying.

A particular concern of mine is dealt with in recommendation 13. I refer to public-sector comparators — a notoriously difficult area. It will be recalled that comparators were at the heart of the proposal to abolish one or two of the education and library boards. Comparators, of course, depend on the values of those who draw them up. Results depend also on what is left out, whether deliberately or inadvertently. "Value for money" is a catch-phrase. You cannot have value for money if like is not being compared with like. This recommendation draws attention to the fact that it is crucial for the public-sector comparator to have everything built into it.

Recommendation 20 deals with employment and business. It is important that the bidding criteria should not exclude local participation, as that would mean exporting jobs. Many decisions are taken by civil servants, who are neither accountable nor, in one sense, interested in local affairs. Paragraph 4.23 draws attention to this matter.

The absence of a regional Government in Northern Ireland means that decisions about education policy and services are not taken by local elected representatives. This is a very important matter, which has been mentioned in every report of the Committee. We need local accountability and a local input into decisions about education. It is not acceptable to have policy determined by civil servants. That may be a boring notion, but it is crucial for the welfare of our children. People who live, work and send their children to schools in



Northern Ireland must have a means of ensuring that decisions about education have a local input.

I commend this report to Members.

**Mr Gibson:** This debate can be summed up in a few sentences.

The report, which contains 20 recommendations, highlights some positive attitudes and some matters that give rise to very serious concern. Though it does not suggest a quick-fix solution to the problem of the £500 million that is needed urgently, I commend it to the Forum.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

This Forum adopts the report 'The Implications of Public/Private Partnerships for Education Services in Northern Ireland' prepared by Standing Committee B and decides to forward it to the Ministers responsible for Education and for Finance, with the request that they give serious consideration to its recommendations.

*The meeting was suspended at 11.00 am and resumed at 11.13 am.*

### BEEF INDUSTRY CRISIS (BSE)

**The Chairman:** The Chairman of Standing Committee D has suggested that the crisis in the beef industry be the subject of an emergency debate. I call him to move the motion on the Order Paper.

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

The Forum, recognizing the severe depression and despair facing Northern Ireland farmers at this time, calls on Her Majesty's Government to provide urgent assistance to compensate for the effects of the strength of sterling and the continuing BSE crisis, and calls on the European Commission to award Northern Ireland beef intervention tenders in full.

Standing Committee D is grateful to the Business Committee for granting time for this emergency debate and to the Democratic Unionist Party for allowing its motion to be deferred. I intend to refer to the situation in general and to the crisis affecting the beef and dairy industry specifically. My Committee colleagues will comment on the problems that face virtually every other sector.

It is unfortunate but appropriate that this emergency debate should be taking place. As every Member, I am sure, has gathered from the news reports this week, Northern Ireland farmers, in common with their mainland colleagues, are facing depression and despair on an unprecedented scale — depression due to the continuing BSE crisis and the strength of sterling, which has destroyed export markets and reduced prices in all sectors, resulting in a drop in real farm incomes (an average of 37% so far this year, and still falling); despair at the



failure of their Government to alleviate their distress; despair at the fact that Euro-politicking continues to prevent the export of beef despite all our efforts and optimism over the months; and despair at the prospect of Christmas and the New Year with no help and no future.

The further Government erosion of public confidence in beef this week and the refusal by the European Beef Management Committee to award intervention tenders to Northern Ireland have turned despair to anger throughout the United Kingdom. I cannot condone the action of farmers protesting at ports — indeed, such action may well prove to be counter-productive and particularly harmful to Northern Ireland — but as a beef producer myself I well understand their frustration.

I cannot begin to describe the anger I felt last night when, on the basis of one day's protest by British farmers, the European Commissioner for the single market, Mr Mario Monti, threatened Britain with legal action. What action has been taken or threatened against France, which only a month ago prevented the movement of all produce throughout France? What action was taken over the years when British lorry drivers were intimidated and British lamb and other produce seized and destroyed by French farmers and French protesters? How dare this Commissioner threaten us on the basis of one day's action. My anger rose when all that the Agriculture Secretary, Jack Cunningham, could offer farmers in their moment of despair was a lecture to the effect that they were not above the law.

Members of the Forum have been kept well briefed on developments in the BSE crisis over the past year. Just over a year ago we debated it at length and approved the recommendations in Standing Committee D's report. Ironically, the last Government — I say this in fairness to the Conservatives — took swift action to remove the backlog of cattle awaiting slaughter and to ensure that intervention tenders were accepted to provide a market for more than 40% of the beef that we traditionally exported out of the United Kingdom. Prices to producers retreated, and weight restrictions were imposed — those things in themselves caused problems — but the last Government provided £60 million in special compensation, of which some £10 million came to Northern Ireland.

Since then, however, the value of sterling has increased dramatically — by some 30%. In all agriculture sectors this has resulted in a decrease in the real value of European subsidies. Exports have become 30% more expensive and therefore less competitive, while imports have become much cheaper and therefore much more attractive to retailers. For example, over the past year the dairy sector, which is traditionally the most stable in Northern Ireland, has seen a reduction of more than 20% in the milk price paid to farmers, and there has been a reduction of 50% in the price of milk quota, yet interest rates have increased by some 30%. To an average dairy farmer producing 500,000 litres of milk per annum this has resulted in a gross-income reduction of some £25,000 in one year and a quota-asset reduction of more than £150,000. How many family businesses in other industries could sustain that level of depreciation?

Europe has a mechanism for protecting member states against currency fluctuations. Green-pound compensation, partly financed by Europe to help offset losses, is available, and approval has been granted for it to be applied to the United Kingdom. Other European countries, including the Irish Republic, have already benefited. The current Government have refused to implement it owing to the cost to the British Exchequer. They have also



refused to provide any compensation to beef farmers suffering from the continuing BSE crisis. Indeed, it has come to Committee D's attention this week that the latest intervention tenders have not been awarded to Northern Ireland because, we have been advised, an official of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food may have led the Beef Management Committee to believe that intervention is not required at present. If this is true — and we are seeking to establish whether it is — we will expect a full admission of error from the Ministry, the resignation of the official concerned and the immediate restitution of tenders that have been scaled down or refused over the past month.

This week the Committee took evidence from, among others, the Association of Livestock Auctioneers — an organization representing all livestock marts in the province and therefore, arguably, the closest to farmers on the ground. The Committee was told that Northern Ireland agriculture has never been so depressed nor so fearful for the future as it is at present. We must demand that the Government provide support and sympathy, and we must demand action from Europe to end the export ban on beef and provide intervention support until such time as the markets can be regularized.

It is therefore with a heavy heart that I move this motion and ask that, if it is approved, the resolution be sent to the Prime Minister with a request that he meet a deputation from the Forum and the Northern Ireland industry for an urgent discussion of what is to be done to rescue the Northern Ireland farmer, who is the guardian of the countryside and our rural heritage and the backbone of the economy.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** I support the motion.

Every sector of the agriculture industry — not just beef — is in a state of tremendous crisis. As the Committee Chairman has said, farm incomes have decreased by 37% and are still falling. Such a situation in any other industry would cause uproar, but the Government are deaf to the farmers in their plight.

There is a crisis in the pig industry, where prices are at an all-time low and untenable level. Added to this, legislation that is not applicable elsewhere in the United Kingdom will hit Northern Ireland like a bombshell. There will be vast expenditure by pig producers. There is also a crisis with regard to lamb, which was being sold in yesterday's markets for pennies — the lowest-ever prices. Potato growers too are in difficulty, and we have the beef crisis.

I want to put the blame where it belongs — not in Europe but in Whitehall and with the Government. The Government have power to deal with such an emergency. First, they can use fluctuations in the green-pound rate. Why did they not do so? Because they would have had to put their hand in their own pocket. Alternatively, they could have used HLCA payments, but they have said that they will not do so. Why? Again because they would have to put their hand in their own pocket.

When Mr Hogg was in charge they roasted him and gave us roast pork in the House of Commons restaurants every day. They need to deal with the present Minister of Agriculture, who has done nothing to help Northern Ireland out of this crisis. There is no application in Europe for a special position for Northern Ireland farmers. We are being tied into a



proposition for the whole United Kingdom. We all know that Europe will not suddenly wake up and lift the ban from the entire kingdom. Now we have had the disastrous announcement that meat on the bone is to be banned, the Government having accepted the findings — findings that have not been fully vindicated — about the transmission of this disease to humans. Yesterday's papers described the parts of a carcass that may not be sold and the few parts that are left.

Where are the Government taking the agriculture industry? To disaster. People will ask what the politicians are doing. Well, the Leaders of the three main parties have requested a meeting with the Prime Minister. I am afraid that he is being very dilatory about whether there will be a meeting of the sort that we want. My Colleagues in Europe have asked for an immediate meeting with the Secretary of State. That meeting will take place today after the presidency announcement. Unfortunately, the Leader of the SDLP is in the United States. However, Mr Nicholson and I will be quite able, without Mr Hume, to put the case to the Secretary of State.

The people in Whitehall must put on their running shoes. It is amazing that only when farmers come out and protest vigorously do they need an emergency Cabinet meeting about these matters. The Northern Ireland Office has failed. It should have representatives at the Scottish ports to give guidance with regard to our meat. When I asked for that I was told that it certainly could not be done as it would amount to condoning violence. A Prime Minister who can shake the bloody hand of Adams and the bloody hand of McGuinness need not read us any lessons about condoning violence. It would be in the interests of meat producers to have officials at the ports so that their meat could get through. Producers in Britain have their home market, but we have no market other than for the 17% of meat needed for Ulster. Where is the rest to go? We were told that the intervention door would be kept open, but it is now closed and 1,000 of the beasts produced in Northern Ireland every week are surplus.

I call on the Government to do something quickly. Otherwise this industry, which is the foundation of Northern Ireland's economy, will go to the wall.

**Mr McCarthy:** The Chairman of Standing Committee D, Mr David Campbell, has covered all the ground regarding the farmers' current problems, and the Alliance Party supports the motion fully.

This crisis has dragged on for almost two years, and the situation is getting worse. As debts build up, prices drop and producers come to the end of their tether — if they are not already there. Action is needed on two fronts. First, there is the European front, and secondly the United Kingdom front — or perhaps that order should be reversed. Some European countries are obviously dragging their feet and resisting British beef for political rather than scientific reasons. Alliance recognizes that Dr Cunningham's actions represent a slight improvement on those of Mr Hogg. But that is not much of a tribute. A great deal more must be done, and done now.

On Wednesday of this week Lord Dubs assured Alliance that the Government were continuing to put pressure on Brussels to grant intervention for British beef. That is welcome, but it is not enough. Last night Lord Dubs and the Secretary of State had meetings



with the farmers' representatives, so they can be in no doubt about the situation. It is bizarre that, although the incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland is low and falling, our beef still cannot be exported, whereas other countries in Europe, where the incidence is rising, can export to us. It is time we had the same standards for imports as for exports.

The British Government must do two things without waiting for any moves by Brussels. The steady-drip reduction of HLCAs for both beef and sheep must be reversed. This would provide some hope for the suckler producers in particular. Even more important is the fact that every exporter, every importer and, indeed, every holiday traveller knows how the value of the pound has risen recently. Decisions about revaluation of the green pound rest entirely with the British Government. Why is the British taxpayer paying for revaluation in other states when the Government will not revalue for their own farmers?

We must put pressure on Brussels, but we have a right to demand immediate action by our own Government.

11.30 am

**Ms Sagar:** I support the motion, but there are some important issues that I want to raise.

We have sympathy for the farmers, but concern must be balanced against food safety. And BSE is not the only important issue here; we are also concerned about salmonella, E.coli, the use of pesticides on fruit and vegetables, hormones, irradiation, genetic engineering and other matters. It is perfectly understandable if consumers have lost confidence in the safety of food, particularly when they think about the effects on their children's health.

To protect public health and restore consumer confidence, several measures should be taken. The Department of Health and Social Services should have priority over the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment in respect of food safety; there should be effective interdepartmental mechanisms; and an independent Northern Ireland food safety agency should be set up to monitor and advise on food policy from a safety point of view. A food safety agency could monitor and advise on farming practices as well as food manufacturing and processing. It could monitor and advise on food-safety legislation; indeed, it could regulate and enforce the law. It could also handle public concerns and complaints.

Setting up such an agency might go a long way towards making sure that we are not in the same situation in five or 10 years' time. It has been pointed out that this has been going on for two years, yet nothing has been done. We share the concern of Northern Ireland farmers but believe that it cannot be allowed to overshadow the pressing issue of public safety.

**Mr John White:** Last night the Government announced that they would initiate an inquiry into all aspects of the BSE crisis. I urge them to do so with haste because Ulster farmers are facing their worst-ever crisis. Indeed, many are in danger of bankruptcy and ruin. It is forecast that farmers' incomes will drop by between 37% and 40% this year alone.



Immediate action is needed to prevent people from going out of business or suffering undue hardship.

The present Government appear to be as unsympathetic to the farming industry in its plight as the Tories were. Farmers need as much help as possible to pressurize the Government into action. They did not deserve a ban on exports, which accounted for 80% of their beef output. The problem was not of their making. The Government need to pursue this matter with vigour in Europe.

An additional blow came last Friday when farmers were told that there was to be no intervention purchasing of surplus beef. Intervention was an important aid. It is gone now, and across the province there are almost 5,000 cattle with nowhere to go. With the sale of Northern Ireland beef to the mainland facing problems, intervention purchasing of surplus beef is even more important.

Another problem to hit farmers has been the strength of sterling. The increase of 18.7% in the value of the pound has knocked almost 5p off the price of milk. This too has had a devastating effect on producers. Eight European Union states that experienced a similar problem received compensation, but the Government refuse to pursue it for British farmers. We are talking about approximately £36 million over the last three years. A considerable amount has been taken out of the pockets of Ulster farmers. Mr David Campbell raised the matter with the Minister, Jack Cunningham, a few weeks ago, but because the United Kingdom would lose the rebate that Mrs Thatcher negotiated under the Fontainebleau Agreement, compensation is not being sought. It is grossly unfair that our farmers should suffer.

Our farming industry is in crisis and needs help. Removal of the export ban, reintroduction of intervention for Northern Ireland farmers and grant aid would go some way towards alleviating the hardship in such an important part of the economy.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** My comments will be brief because my expertise extends only to eating beef.

First, I want to congratulate Mr David Campbell and Dr Paisley, who said everything that needs to be said. That, of course, is not to take away from the other Members who have spoken.

It is all very well to point the finger at Europe, but at this stage we must point clearly at the British Government. It should be a lesson to us to see how easy it is for Oppositions to talk about what they would do. Let us remember what Labour said about the beef crisis before they came to power. They talked about what the Tories should do, yet here they are with the worst situation farmers have ever been in. Labour has failed agriculture miserably.

But there are others who will have to play their part. The banks have a big responsibility to the farming community. I know, from the few farming people who have come to me, that the banks are not supporting the farmers. While we must call on the Government and Europe to lift the ban, we must also demand that bankers do whatever they can to ensure that these people do not go under.



I support the motion and wish the farming community every success.

**Mr Speers:** I support this motion, which we are debating just when the farming industry in Northern Ireland has been going through a crisis.

This crisis is somewhat different from those of the past, which tended to be in one sector or another. This time the difficulty affects the entire agriculture industry, with possibly one or two exceptions. Northern Ireland is one of the United Kingdom regions most dependent on agriculture. We have a rural economy, and the number of folk directly affected by agriculture is considerable. But many more are indirectly affected. Belfast and other urban areas may not be affected too badly, but rural areas and country towns like Armagh, Omagh and Strabane are affected totally.

It is essential to have a level playing-field. Several Members have made that point with regard to BSE. This disease was not caused by the farmer, though some commentators give the impression that it was. Responsibility lies solely with the Government, and they must take the necessary action.

Ms Sagar and other Members referred to the need for a food safety agency. The housewife is demanding higher food standards. No one is in a better position to raise standards than the farmer. If the Government are to set up such an agency they will have to be clear in their thinking. They must act in the interests of the farming community as well as the consumers, and the conditions that are imposed on food grown or processed here must apply to food from other parts of the world. We know that hormones and artificial-growth promoters are still given to livestock in America and other places. That is wrong, so it must surely be wrong to bring such meat into this country.

The present crisis in the beef industry was brought about by BSE, and it came to a head with the removal of intervention because Northern Ireland is a net exporter of meat. We produce far more than we need. Currently our only export market is the rest of the United Kingdom because the world ban is still in place. The Government are solely responsible for the crisis and for decisions about intervention. Mr David Campbell said that their initial advice to the European Union was "If you remove intervention, it will not cause any problem. There will be a levelling out of supply but no crisis in the industry." That advice was accepted by Europe and those in charge of the Union's Intervention Board, and consequently we now find ourselves in this crisis. As Mr Campbell said, the Government should apologize for their actions and take the necessary action to undo the damage.

There has been a 37% fall in farming incomes. I suggest that this figure is premature as the Government are not seeking compensation for the 30% change in the value of the pound.

Let us look at the sheep industry. The price of lamb has dropped by almost half, and the income from other sheep-meat products is falling. In the Markethill mart on Wednesday I saw sheep that would have made up to £53 a couple of weeks ago being sold for about £35, and I understand that further reductions are likely. The picture is not good.



*11.45 am*

Through their unions and the politicians the farmers have been lobbying very strongly, but the Government have not passed the slightest remark on their concerns. That much is evident from their advice to the Ministry of Agriculture and the European Community. Indeed, it is sad for democracy that you have to push a lorry into the sea before anyone begins to take notice. That, in effect, sends a message not dissimilar to the messages that the Government send on the political scene here: they will listen only to those who are prepared to take such action. But if Forum Members and other democrats are to have a meaningful role, the Government have a fundamental duty to listen to their views rather than to the views of those who dump a lorry into the sea. I suspect that if the Government fail to listen to the concerns of Northern Ireland's farmers, as expressed through their politicians, they will have more of the type of action that was evident at Fishguard in Wales.

The reality is that the playing-field is not level. Meat is being imported into the United Kingdom while we are not allowed to export our produce. The Government must address this issue in a practical and sensible way. They have the means to help the industry, but they need the will as well. Agriculture is a mainstay of Northern Ireland's economy. The Secretary of State said last night that she was taking the farmers' plight to the Cabinet. I am happy for her to do that, but she needs to do it with conviction. Recently it has obviously not been so, but if there is conviction in the future, that will be all to the good.

I look forward to a change of heart towards the agriculture industry. I implore the Government to continue to lobby for removal of the beef export ban and, in the meantime, to take realistic measures to alleviate a very serious, short-term problem. Action can be taken. Action must be taken.

**Mr Poots:** It is quite some time since we debated anything to do with agriculture, and I regret that we have had to bring this motion forward today. When I see the inaction of the Government I can only assume that Parliaments in Scotland and Wales and a proper devolved Administration in Northern Ireland, accountable to the people, would react completely differently from a rather aloof Government at Westminster, who have brought this situation upon themselves.

Ministers have ignored the farmers' plight and pleas, to the extent that they are now up in arms. Dr Cunningham says they have no right to protest. I want to give Dr Cunningham a message: farmers' incomes are down 37%. What is he going to do? Is he going to put them in gaol? Many farmers will go to gaol over this issue. They have no option. That is what Dr Cunningham will have to do to get this protest stopped. He is not prepared to offer money or help of any other kind.

Farming is vital to this country. It accounts for 12% of employment and 8% of the gross domestic product. In the rest of the United Kingdom the corresponding figures are 2% and 1.5%. That is why the United Kingdom Government do not place the same emphasis on agriculture as we do.

The Labour Government need to get the green pound situation sorted out. The effect of the Fontainebleau Agreement is that 71% of the money they receive from Europe has to be



paid back. But that leaves them with 29p in the pound. And farmers are liable to tax, which brings in another 24p in the pound. So the Government would be getting 53p in the pound from the European Exchequer if they opted for the green pound. That does not seem to be a bad deal. I would go for it if I were in their position.

Intervention too needs to be sorted out. Our market was taken away, and we were offered nothing whatsoever in return. We need a market. Cattle must be moved before they reach 30 months. Many animals are coming close to that age, after which they will be dumped. Perfectly good food is being destroyed.

I was glad that Ms Sagar raised the consumer issue, because United Kingdom consumers are being ripped off. Let us look at supermarkets. Last year, potatoes were being sold by farmers at £50 per tonne. The supermarket figure was £400 per tonne. What was the difference for? For washing the potatoes and putting them in a plastic bag. The supermarkets were getting a 700% mark-up. Cattle are being sold by farmers at £500 but are priced in the supermarket at over £2,000. The same goes for lamb, which is being sold from the farm at £40 but is priced at £200 in the supermarket. Consumers and farmers need to come together because the supermarkets are doing the dirt on them, ripping them off.

Then there is the quality of food. The supermarkets are very busy setting new standards for food. For example, they like a potato with a fine skin finish. They want it to look as good as possible. They do not want a potato that has a scab, but they do not tell the consumer that their potato is less disease-resistant and has been sprayed at least twice as often as others. The consumer is getting a potato which is of inferior quality and of less value but looks better. The supermarkets are concerned about fine packaging that is appealing to the eye, but not necessarily about good produce.

I would like to see the General Consumer Council and the farming bodies getting together more often to talk things through, instead of having the supermarkets in between, supposedly advising the farmers about what the consumers want. They are very good at setting high standards that the farmers must reach, but when prices are lower elsewhere they import. For instance, chickens are imported from Brazil, and potatoes are imported from France, Germany or elsewhere in Europe, with no traceability whatsoever. They demand that the United Kingdom farmers have traceability, but what about farmers in these other places? When it comes to price, the supermarkets' standards go out the window. The standards are there only when it suits them.

The furore surrounding BSE and CJD is rampant paranoia. Tragically, 22 people in the United Kingdom have died from CJD over the past five years. But 500 people in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board's small area died from lung cancer last year. If the meat plants or the beef farmers had given the Labour Party £1 million, would beef on the bone have been banned on Wednesday? That question needs to be answered by Dr Cunningham. It is an absolute disgrace that Labour were clapping themselves on the back last night for succeeding in retaining tobacco advertising for Formula One motor racing for a further nine years. Nothing has caused more deaths in Northern Ireland than tobacco and alcohol, yet there is rampant paranoia about the safety of beef, which is one of the most wholesome, nutritious foods, and very good value.



I support the motion, though I regret the need for it. I call on the Government to waken up and start treating the farmers and consumers properly.

**Mr Shannon:** If Members have been reading the newspapers they will have seen a number of explicit headlines. In last Saturday's 'Farming Life' the message was "Pigs in crisis"; during the week it was "Farmers' debts double"; and yesterday we had "Protest or die". Those headlines express very aptly the feelings of the entire farming community. Many people who never protested are now questioning the value of holding a meeting in the King's Hall rather than taking dramatic action which would grab the headlines and have the desired effect. As Mr David Campbell has said, it is disappointing that Dr Cunningham found it necessary to criticize the protests. I would never condone the actions of people who take the law into their own hands, but sometimes circumstances can move them to do so. The Government must take note of the farmers' crisis.

Mr Campbell highlighted the naïvety of the Ministry of Agriculture official who made the blunder of saying that we did not need intervention — a classic example of severe "foot-in-the-mouth disease", if ever there was one. He decided that we did not need intervention when all the facts indicated otherwise. As Northern Ireland does not currently have an export market we need to be able to fall back on intervention. Intervention is now crucial for the well-being of the agriculture industry, particularly the beef sector.

Because of the BSE crisis, many farmers tried to diversify. Some planted an extra field or two of potatoes; some went into pigs because at that time pork was fetching a better price; many bought extra lambs; and others planted more grain — all in an effort to keep an income for their families. What has happened? There has been disaster after disaster in almost all the farming sectors, including poultry and, with the arrival of the supermarket chains and their direct impact, potatoes and other vegetables. The price of lamb has fallen dramatically: it is £2.30 per kilo this week, whereas it was £3.20 per kilo last week. Yesterday saw a further fall. This time last year lambs were making £3.50 per kilo. Can any Member remember such depression in the agriculture industry?

Today a farmer who buys between 200 and 300 store lambs every year told me "I am going to sell my store lambs today or at the beginning of next week. I will lose £10 per head, but if I were to feed and look after them until the new year I would lose between £25 and £30 per head." That is the reality of today's farming. People claim that farmers are always talking about times being hard. Let them go to a farm today and see for themselves. Times have never been harder.

The pork industry has had its ups and downs over the years. Prices tend to rise and fall on a regular basis, but never before have we seen such a dramatic fall. Farmers are selling pigs for less than the cost of rearing them. In many cases, they are losing between £4 and £8 per head. One farmer was quoted this week as having said that the price he was getting for pigs bought for between £55 and £60 had fallen from £100 in April last to between £30 and £40 — not just no profit but a loss. How long can this go on?



12.00

Let me give some statistics. In 1994 2,000 farmers were involved in the pig industry. The number has fallen to 1,600, and with poor returns it could well drop further. There were 3,000 herds in 1988, and that number has fallen each year. In 1984 pig-meat was worth a total of £82 million — £190 million gross. What is its value today? Almost 4,000 people are employed on farms and in processing, and pig-meat is a key export.

I put much of the blame on the green pound. Our fellow Europeans in the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the Union have been able to send their pigs to Northern Ireland, take advantage of the differential and increase their profit. That is a very good reason, as other Members have said, to devalue the green pound now — not later but now. Indeed, it could have been devalued yesterday.

We have the spectre of stall-and-tether legislation, but our competitors will not have to meet the European Union regulations for a number of years. Is that fair play? I suggest that it is not. We need time to adjust. This is not a good time to invest in the industry. Money is being lost. We cannot make the large investment needed to enable us to comply with the stall-and-tether regulations. The banks will not lend the money, and for that reason the pig industry is slipping deeper and deeper into debt.

But we must be positive and find a strategy to get out of the difficulty. There are several ways in which we can move forward. Perhaps implementation of the stall-and-tether regulations could be deferred. Also, in terms of price, our feedstuffs must be able to compete with those produced across the water. At the moment ours cost substantially more than the United Kingdom average. Cereals account for 60% of pig rations in many cases; shipping the grain from England is what makes the process costly.

The Government have failed to address the special circumstances of Northern Ireland and its farming industry. It is disgraceful that they have not taken advantage of the European assistance that is available. Immediate aid is needed to counter the disadvantages to the rendering process here, the cost implications of which will be a further problem. There are no charges for offal disposal in the Republic of Ireland, for example. Also, our competitors can use meat-and-bone meal in feedstuffs, and that gives them an advantage. Then there is the very real threat of a new processing plant in the border region. That could spell further disaster for the pig industry.

We need to be sure of commitment to our pig and pork industry from the supermarket chains. At present they seem to do very little about buying Northern Ireland produce. A Marks and Spencer deputation told the Agriculture Committee yesterday that they intend to buy fresh pork in Northern Ireland. Verbal commitments are very welcome, but we want to see them turned into action — action for pig farmers, the pork industry and the people of Northern Ireland.

Vegetable growers have felt the winds of change more than most. Some people have decided to go out of production; others are soldiering on, often without Government assistance. In the Republic of Ireland there is grant aid of about £60 million, whereas in Northern Ireland investment assistance has amounted to £6 million — a drop in the ocean.



We have all heard the nightmare stories of cauliflowers being turned away because they were too big, of rhubarb that was not the correct colour and shape and of carrots that were not of the exact size and proportions. Can anyone guarantee the shape or colour of rhubarb? Can anyone be sure that carrots will all be the same? Farmers need a year or a year and a half to adjust to the new circumstances. Our growers can adjust if given the opportunity. It is scandalous that food should be thrown onto a skip just because it does not meet standards of colour or size.

Just this week I was told about a gentleman who borrowed £100,000 to turn one of his barns into a large cooling unit. He got no grant aid. Now he is wondering what is going to happen to the industry. His business is failing, and he is worried about the investment and about the future of his family. I do not blame him — I too am worried about the future.

Farmers can and will adjust. It takes time for investment to bear fruit. Perhaps two to three years are needed to build the structures for modern food production and distribution. It will be done, but we need financial assistance from the Government.

There must be fair prices for our products. A farmer sells his potatoes at £80 a tonne, as Mr Poots has said, whereas a fair price would be £120. He has to make a profit if he is to pay his bills. It takes more work, care and attention to produce potatoes and other vegetables to specifications. Producers do not mind hard work, but they deserve a profit.

Supermarkets have created opportunities and challenges. The farming industry will survive, but it needs loyalty. Let the supermarket chains purchase in Northern Ireland. The consumer wants to support home producers.

A strong farming industry benefits the whole community. If a farmer is not making money he cannot spend it, and other people do not benefit from the spending power. Agriculture is of paramount importance. If it is weak, the economy is weak; if it is strong, the economy is strong. Today, as never before, the province's major industry needs help. We have a duty to support it, and support it we must.

**Mr Clyde:** Dr Paisley talked about the crisis in the pig industry, and Mr Shannon mentioned the regulations that will do away with pig stalls. As this legislation will not take effect in the other European countries until 2005 or 2006, it should be deferred here. Some farmers put stalls in a short time ago, and they do not now have the finance to change their system.

In the beef sector, there are those who want slats to be done away with and all cattle to be bedded on straw. Northern Ireland farmers do not produce enough straw for that. If we had a bad harvest, there would be even less, and the majority of cattle would be lying on bare concrete. They would get very dirty, and there would be problems at abattoirs. The slat system is more hygienic. I have been told that the E.coli outbreak on the mainland involved cattle that were bedded on straw.

I cannot remember the beef industry ever being in such a bad state. Prices are falling, intervention has stopped, and farmers cannot get rid of cattle that are ready for the market.



They have not budgeted for the extra feed that will be needed. Some have to take land in conacre, and they are dependent on money from beef cattle to pay their bills.

I call on the Department to pay the suckler cow premium, the HCLAs and the special beef premium in full now. It usually pays a percentage now, another percentage later, and the rest in April. Full payment now would help the cash flow. There should also be compensation to offset the revaluation of the green pound, as well as pressure to have intervention opened up again.

I support the motion.

**Mr Dodds:** I fully support the motion and the comments of Mr David Campbell, who is Chairman of the Committee, and of Dr Paisley, who led for the DUP. All Members took the same general approach. That shows how united we are. Everyone is demanding that something be done to alleviate this crisis.

The word "crisis" has been bandied about, not just in relation to agriculture but about a whole range of issues. But this truly is a crisis. Never before has there been such a difficult period for so many sectors at the same time. Representatives of the Farmers' Union told me the other day that this is the worst situation they have had since the early 1970s. It is that dire. There is a tendency among some people to say that farmers are always complaining, but, as we have heard from other Members — Mr Campbell gave the figures — this is a really desperate time for people in rural communities.

I heard a man say on the radio "Well, you know, this keeps coming up, and it is something that should really be nailed every time we have the chance. Why should farmers be treated specially? Why should the agriculture community receive grants and subsidies when a person losing his job in any other sector would not get the same grants and subsidies?" But there is a difference. People on the land who lose their jobs have nowhere else to go. Farming is part of the fabric of society. It is not just another type of employment. It is part of rural life, and the policy of the European Union is supposed to be to keep people on the land to ensure that rural communities are revitalized. Agriculture will become unsustainable if farmers' incomes continue to be slashed by 37%, as has happened this year because of the drastic falls in product prices. And, as Mr Hugh Smyth said, the banks are not all that sympathetic when it comes to the hard-nosed reality of getting their money back.

It is essential that the Prime Minister hear directly the united voice of the elected representatives of the people saying that something must be done.

We had a debate on this subject back in September 1996 and one when the report was produced by the Committee. Many Members rehearsed the importance of having the BSE crisis dealt with as quickly as possible. But here we are, 15 months later, still dealing with its consequences. We thought that the Florence Framework, which was agreed back in the summer of 1996, would pave the way for lifting the ban in Northern Ireland. The province has fulfilled all the criteria set down, yet we still have problems. From experience in Europe I know the attitude of some states in the Union. They seem determined, for political reasons, to prevent the United Kingdom, one of the major players, from getting back into the market.



That is the only explanation for some of the most recent obstacles to removal of the export ban.

We have received a triple blow in recent days, particularly with regard to beef. We were led to believe that we could look forward to some good news about the ban. Now we are faced with the prospect that it will not be lifted in the immediate future.

*12.15 pm*

I believe that had the British Government applied for special status some time ago they would have got it. We would not win that battle today; the British Government have left it too late to go down that road. Following the recent European Union veterinary inspection, reports from Brussels indicated that, because of a number of obstacles, there might be further difficulties. We have also heard that even if the Standing Veterinary Committee, at its meeting in the middle of the month, clears Northern Ireland completely and gives the go-ahead, we may still run into difficulties with the Farm Council.

It is time to expose the hypocritical attitude that some European countries take to Northern Ireland. For instance, a recent official veterinary survey, which was reported in the national newspapers, particularly 'The Daily Telegraph' and 'The Times', referred to strong evidence that the United Kingdom in general, and Northern Ireland in particular, had been blatantly discriminated against. Apparently certain countries are reporting a very low incidence of BSE. For instance, Germany, which is one of the main culprits in this sorry saga, reported five although the number for the period in question might have been expected to be 48 times that. The number reported in the Irish Republic was 188, whereas one could have expected 911.

It is clear that, instead of addressing the fundamental problem in the way that the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, has, other countries have swept it under the carpet. They are conning their own consumers and conducting a campaign of discrimination against the United Kingdom. To give credit where credit is due, I have to say that Great Britain and Northern Ireland have faced up to the issue. But we are being penalized for having the best traceability system in Europe. Countries that sweep the problem under the carpet by underreporting, misreporting and describing BSE as something else get off scot-free. It is outrageous.

The British Government must do more to ensure, if this ban on beef exports is to continue, that the other countries, including European states, exporting beef to the United Kingdom adopt the standards that are imposed on us. At a time when our farmers face extremely difficult circumstances, why should we be forced to accept foreign beef which does not meet our standards? Our beef is the best, and the Government must take that fact on board.

The fact that the beef ban might not be lifted in the near future was difficult enough, but then there was the disastrous decision, taken last Friday by the beef management committee in Brussels, not to award any intervention tenders at all following reductions of 75% and 80% in previous weeks. On top of that was the announcement, to which Dr Paisley referred, about the ban on the sale of beef on the bone. I listened to that announcement as it



was made in the House of Commons. Dr Cunningham's statement was very brief. He outlined the circumstances in which, it had been suggested, there might be some risk to human beings. He made it very clear that the proposed measures were wholly precautionary, that the chances of infection were minuscule. Society is prepared, in other areas, to run risks that it will not countenance when it comes to eating beef. By that logic, people would not be able to drive a car or cross a road — any activity that involved the tiniest risk would have to be banned.

The Government do not take the same view on the question of tobacco. It has been proved that tobacco can kill. But what are the Labour Government doing? Because they had received £1 million from Bernie Ecclestone, they lobbied to have tobacco advertising exempted, and they are quite happy to keep tobacco on sale because they are getting plenty of revenue from the tax on it. But the most minuscule possibility of a person, in the rarest of circumstances, getting some infection from eating beef on the bone results in an immediate ban, leaving whole swathes of the community in a disastrous situation and confidence in beef totally undermined. The attitude of Labour, who promised so much when they were the Opposition and were so strong in their condemnation of the previous Government, leaves much to be desired. Indeed, they have shown gross hypocrisy in respect of the situation here.

Members have outlined the steps that could be taken by Ministers. Lord Dubs said on the radio this morning that the Government understand the problems and that the Secretary of State is considering what action to take. They can take action, but they will also have to pay compensation. They need to look at the HLCAs and at compensation for green-pound fluctuations. Are they prepared to do so? Farmers and others involved in agriculture are tired of sympathetic words. They are tired of the arguing and of being told that the responsibility lies elsewhere.

I hope that the Forum will unanimously agree that beef farmers and processors need action. Something must be done as soon as possible.

**Mr Gaston:** I support the motion.

Farmers have often been accused of crying poverty — frequently with good cause. Different areas of farming have had very difficult circumstances, but Ulster farmers, by and large, have the capacity to survive. Supported by their families, they tighten their belts, roll up their sleeves and get on with the job. But during the last year their income has dropped by almost 40%. How long can this go on? In the present situation how can beef farmers hope to succeed?

Since the BSE saga broke, the industry has lurched from one catastrophe to another. The export trade for Ulster beef represented a very large slice of our market — about 80%. Since the ban was imposed, the only outlet, apart from local trade, has been Great Britain. The remainder was sold into intervention, which at least kept the industry from collapse. The strength of sterling has left the way open for cheap imports — imports of unknown quality — and the Government's refusal to implement the green-pound compensation has been a catastrophe, putting the industry under extreme pressure. The final blow was the withdrawal of intervention buying. This will put the industry over the brink if immediate and positive action is not taken.



The Government and the European Commission have failed to realize the gravity of the situation. Lamb prices have plummeted too, and because sterling is strong, cheap lamb is being brought in, and that is diminishing export values. I sometimes get the feeling that Europe is waging a form of economic war against Ulster beef farmers, such are its efforts to keep our products out. If there is to be free trade in Europe, let it be fair also.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** This is a timely debate, and the Forum is to be commended for providing the platform for it. Members are, of course, aware that other matters were set aside to enable this important subject to be discussed. The fact that the Forum took such a decision demonstrates that it is in touch with the needs of the community, and that has to be welcomed.

The Government's decision, in effect, to ban more British beef has delivered a devastating body-blow not only to the farming community but to all those in the agri-industry. Wednesday's decision will have repercussions for the consumer. It is most disturbing. As one newspaper said, both the decision itself and the way in which it was announced were disgraceful. The Government say that British beef is safe. Jack Cunningham himself said so in the House of Commons on Wednesday:

"Our beef is subject to the most rigorous safeguards of any beef anywhere in the world."

Yet his actions indicate a policy based on panic, not self-confidence. His reaction has been one of folly. He has created further instability and confusion at a time when authority and assertiveness ought to be the order of the day. The words that I have just quoted and Dr Cunningham's decision to ban beef on the bone could not be more contradictory. On the one hand, he says that British beef is the safest in the world and, on the other, he says that he is going to ban more of it. It is unbelievable.

The agri-community — farmers, butchers, processors and ancillary workers — must have become used to such ineptitude. This Government appears to be mimicking the folly of the last one. The brief history of BSE indicates appalling ineptness. In 1988 farmers were told that BSE-infected cattle must be slaughtered. Less than a year later, in February 1989, a Government inquiry, headed by Sir Richard Southwood, predicted that the disease would die out by 1993. In July 1991 a Select Committee of the House of Commons ruled that British beef was safe. In 1995 John Major told the House of Commons that there was no evidence that BSE could be transmitted to humans or that beef caused CJD, but less than a year later, on 20 March 1996, Douglas Hogg claimed that BSE could be transmitted to humans through the food chain. One day later — within 24 hours — the European Union banned British beef exports, and in May 1996 the needless slaughter of perfectly wholesome British cattle over the age of 30 months began in earnest, and the industry has been suffering the consequence ever since.

Policy confusion led directly to panic measures. We were promised a fix, but then there was more confusion over the exact nature of CJD and its relationship to BSE. This has been a costly lesson in why scientists should not direct policy, as I think the whole industry and consumers would agree. The manner of the decision was bad enough, but the basis for it is appalling, to say the least. Here again scientists are dictating policy before publication of



the evidence — the inadequate evidence. I, like many others, have had a bellyful of scientists throughout this dispute.

It is amazing how only certain scientists are listened to. In February 1997 a think-tank established by Parliament declared that beef was safe; then the Oxford Report declared that British beef was definitely safe; but another crackpot scientist came up with the view that BSE could be transmitted in blood, and we were thrown back into turmoil. Wednesday's decision was based on another crackpot theory. That is very clear. When the decision was announced, my office contacted the Government and asked for a copy of the scientific evidence. The House may be interested to know that the evidence has not been published. There is a very big difference between unpublished scientific evidence and published scientific evidence. The former cannot be studied. More important, it cannot be challenged.

One important fact is that cattle that were used in the experiments had developed the infection in bone marrow only after the age of 30 months. As I have said, cattle over that age are now being slaughtered, so they cannot enter the food chain. In addition, the animals used by the scientists developed the infection only after very heavy doses of BSE had been injected into them. What a surprise! Scientists inject heavy doses of poison into animals and then wonder why they die! Such people just look ridiculous. They bring the whole science profession into disrepute.

*12.30 pm*

The reaction to the decision has just confused the consumer, who has been mentioned frequently in this debate. I was amazed at the Ulster Farmers' Union's blasé reaction. There were many raised eyebrows. Sir David Nash, the president of the National Farmers' Union in Great Britain, said

"We may be facing a total breakdown in the market if the announcement produces a reaction from consumers."

But the Ulster Farmers' Union appeared at first to welcome the decision.

The Government have sowed confusion and are now reaping anger and contempt. The retail price of beef will rise, but the producers' market price will be forced down, and production costs will soar. Both consumer and producer will suffer. There is no light at the end of this tunnel, and there are many twists and bends to come.

This is a real blow to butchers. The owner of Sammy's butcher shop on the Shankill Road told me yesterday that since the beginning of the crisis, in March 1996, he has had to lay off 10 employees. He believes that the writing is on the wall for butchers. Beef will be boned before it leaves the abattoir, and that will destroy the profession.

Of course, we have our own Department. The Secretary of State said last night that she wants more time for a decision. How long does she need? Will we have to wait another year? We have been told every year that there is going to be a decision. It is clear that this Government acts only when there is an emergency. Some people have been quick to criticize the farmers who are venting their anger, but it is a fact that their protest has stimulated the



Government. It has even put Gerry Adams off the front pages of the newspapers. That alone speaks volumes.

The Department of Agriculture told me yesterday that it could not send officials to Stranraer to help the Ulster farmers as that would upset another European state. When have other member states cared about Ulster beef? For the last 10 years the Irish Republic has deliberately advertised against us in regions, like the Middle East, where we were selling beef, and Germany has deliberately worked against us throughout the BSE crisis, yet the Department does not want to upset other member states. It is amazing. One member of the European Community plays tiddlywinks while the opposition turns out wearing rugby boots. The Department of Agriculture is sticking too closely to rules set by others but not obeyed by others.

Until the Government find the will to win the beef war it will be a war of attrition against the entire industry. There is no doubt that Ulster's beef is safe, but cosy meetings in London that boast that the crisis could soon be over will no longer wash. Concern for the industry is not enough; what we need is commitment from Her Majesty's Government to win the beef war.

I support the motion.

**Mr Gibson:** Many of the issues that I was going to raise have already been dealt with very well. One thing that has been referred to throughout the debate is the absolute hypocrisy of those in government, both at Westminster and in Brussels. Agreements have been rendered meaningless. Everyone knows that the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe signed up to the green-pound system. The money was allocated, and it is up to the British Government to honour the European Community agreement to compensate for the differential.

A matter that I mentioned in the debate of September 1996 is worth raising again. At that time I could not envisage an immediate solution to the problem that the BSE crisis posed for the beef industry. I said that the Farmers' Union and the Department should honestly consider how agriculture might restructure itself over a five-year period. If the ban were lifted in the morning, there would not be a meat market anything like the one for which we were producing in 1986. Therefore the agriculture industry must look honestly at rejigging itself, and that will take time, new capital investment and a lot of rethinking.

To date, no one in the Department of Agriculture has given any thought to how we might handle the effects of this crisis in the years to come. There has been nothing but mismanagement at the local, Westminster and European levels. A whole industry has been put at risk. I urge the Farmers' Union and the Department of Agriculture to give farmers genuine assistance by looking at the structure of the industry. My view 15 months ago was that BSE was a genuine crisis which had almost sounded the death-knell for the majority of our meat industry. I still believe that to be the case. Until there is honest rethinking, there will be no point in encouraging farmers to continue producing meat for intervention. There is no value in a product that cannot be sold. The time has come for an honest look at the agriculture industry. Whatever help is required must be given. The hypocrisy at European



level was obvious already, and the hypocrisy of our own Government has been exposed in this debate.

I support the motion, and I urge a serious rethink for the good of this industry.

**Rev William McCrea:** I support the motion. The fact that the Forum has set aside other business to debate this most serious situation in the farming industry proves that it is in touch with feelings in the community.

No one could overstate the crisis in the farming industry. The beef, pig, lamb and potato sectors are all affected. Agriculture is the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy. When winds blow on the farming industry, traders, large and small, feel the cold. The Forum is not debating this matter to please just one sector of the community. It is an issue of tremendous importance. Farmers are in dire need of support from elected representatives, and it would be remiss of us not to speak up on their behalf.

My Colleague Mr Dodds talked about what he described as the triple blow. First, we had indications from Brussels that because of the new so-called obstacles following the European Union veterinary inspection the beef export ban might not be lifted soon. We must be careful. In the past, farmers' representatives and elected people went to meetings with officials of the European Union or British Ministers and came out upbeat about the situation, optimistic that the ban would be lifted. But it was often a lot of waffle. They told us what they believed we wanted to hear. Neither the last Government nor the present one made a special case for Northern Ireland beef. Veterinary inspectors have looked at every part of the industry, and it is clear that we produce the safest and best beef in the world. We are willing to allow everything to do with it to be scrutinized, but because of other pressures the Government will not bite the bullet. They will not take the battle to Europe. They will not fight for Ulster beef.

In the House of Commons I heard Mr Hogg defending his position. The then Opposition — now the Government — tore shreds off him for doing nothing or for doing the wrong thing, but they now seem oblivious to what is going on. Is that because they believe that farmers lean towards the Conservative Party and, therefore, do not count? We must face up to the challenge, and the Government must take the battle to Europe.

It is disgusting that beef from other countries is regarded as being BSE-free. The explanation is that BSE is sometimes called by another name. Thus beef can be paraded as a safe product for the British market. There is so much hypocrisy. We have an industry in crisis and a Government with no sense of urgency. That is why farmers are stirred up with exasperation and anger.

The Forum demands action. The Government must immediately make a special case for Ulster beef. There are problems in several sectors of farming. Today we are making a united call for action. The Government cannot fob us off with fancy words.

Yesterday, in the midst of a crisis worsening by the minute, the Government told us that they would initiate an inquiry into how BSE arose in the first place. They believe that that will take the spotlight off their own inactivity and put it on the previous Administration.



Mr Hogg or Mr Dorrell will be put on the stand, and the spotlight will be off Mr Blair. But it will take more than Mr Blair's shiny teeth to wipe away the reality.

12.45 pm

We are in a crisis. Let Mr Blair be a man and give leadership. Let him fight the case for United Kingdom beef, especially for Ulster steak, which is the best in the world.

**Mr Calvert:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this very important debate. Though a farmer, I speak with no bias when I say that the farming industry is facing one of its most serious crises. Farmers' backs are to the wall, especially as this is the time of year when most conacre bills have to be paid. Normally other bills are paid before 1 November. This it is one of the lowest times in the farming year, and if farmers are not getting rid of their produce, it is very serious. They are facing ruin.

Confidence was high two months ago. We thought that the ban on exporting beef to Europe would be lifted. The farming community felt that by the spring of 1998 there would be the beginning of a European market. But Northern Ireland's beef industry was stunned last week by the decision of the beef management committee in Brussels not to buy intervention beef anywhere. This is indeed harsh justice, especially coming on top of the unfortunate lack of progress earlier in the week towards lifting the ban. Europe is doing everything it can to block our beef. New stumbling-blocks are created every week. The Government must ensure that Northern Ireland, which has made an excellent case for removal of the ban, is not discriminated against any longer.

We had a meeting with Walter Elliott. The people present included "Mighty Mo" — that hussy of a Secretary of State — and her sidekick Lord Dubs. It is a disgrace that those two are in such positions. What do they know about farming? Nothing. That woman needs to get a grip on her trousers, and she needs to do something to bring confidence to the people of Northern Ireland. They say "We are doing all we can to ease the farmers' plight." She is doing nothing to ease anybody's plight. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, spends more time calling Adams and McGuinness to 10 Downing Street than fighting for the farming industry in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has the best system for tagging cattle. We know where animals have been from the day they were born to the day they die. But there are more excuses every week — all very unhelpful to the farming industry.

I pay tribute to our MEP, Dr Paisley, for his efforts to have the ban lifted and to the Chairman of the Forum's Agriculture Committee, and I appreciate the opportunity to have this debate. Farming is one of the best industries in the world, and farmers are the hardest-working people in the United Kingdom. We believe in giving more than we ask for. No matter how deep this crisis gets, the farmers will still be out in the morning feeding their cattle. We will always ensure that our livestock are looked after.

Much credit must be given to the farming community for the way they have handled this situation. I have been told on the phone "My back is to the wall. I took cattle to Crumlin but could not get them sold. I have stock here, and I do not know how I am going to feed



them." That is the reality, and it is snowballing. Not only farmers but their wives too are under pressure. If we do not earn enough to cover expenses our families suffer.

But the Government do not care two hoots about the farming community. For instance, they have reduced the livestock compensatory allowance payments. We will not get those until after December. If we are lucky, they will come through by February of next year. That is no good. The Government have the money; let them pay it out.

The farming industry has been hit by a number of problems recently. We had the outbreak of Newcastle disease, and now T-bone steaks have been taken out of the market. And those are just two examples. I understand why the Members of Parliament and members of the Forum's Agriculture Committee feel disillusioned. They have worked hard to get this ban lifted, but the Government are not listening.

Another point which has been drawn to my attention is that the supermarkets that are opening in Northern Ireland are buying much of their produce in Great Britain and further afield. There is enough good home-grown produce in the province, so the supermarkets should not be importing. Can the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee put some pressure on them?

I want to refer to the legal moves by Fischler to bring us to book for protesting. Perhaps the farming community has been too docile. What happened when French lorry drivers went on strike? They blocked the roads, and their Government did nothing about it. Yet Fischler has the cheek to say that legal action will be taken against United Kingdom farmers for tipping a load of beef into the sea. There are not enough loads of beef being tipped into the sea. Unless we act now we will go out of business and there will no longer be a farming industry in Northern Ireland. Instead of lecturing us, some people should look at themselves and take proper action. The French Government should stop what has been happening during recent strikes.

I call on the British Government to do everything they can — that is asking a lot as they do not seem to have the will to do anything — and on the Prime Minister to meet the Chairman of the Forum's Agriculture Committee. We must press for the reintroduction of intervention so that our beef can have a market. Then we could try to get over this very serious crisis.

**Mr David Campbell:** On behalf of the Agriculture Committee, I want to thank all Members who have contributed to this debate, particularly those, such as Mr John White and Mr Hugh Smyth, who do not represent rural constituencies. Their comments demonstrate that this crisis affects all sections of society and all areas.

On Mr Calvert's last point, I can say that the Committee has just finished taking evidence on the purchase of products by the major multiples, and we will be bringing a report to the Forum early in the New Year. On a positive note, we were able yesterday to announce that Marks and Spencer have just reached agreement with a local processor to supply Northern Ireland beef to their stores here for the first time. That is something to be welcomed.



**Mr Shannon:** Can Mr Campbell tell Members where that beef is coming from?

**Mr David Campbell:** Milltown Meats of Newtownards has secured the contract, which is very good news.

I particularly welcome the comments of Mr Dodds and Mr Paisley, who elaborated on Dr Cunningham's announcement this week about beef on the bone. According to the news this morning, the chance of infection from eating meat attached to bone is about one in 1.2 billion. In other words, four people in the entire world would be at risk. That compares pretty favourably with the one-in-two risk that a smoker will contract a smoking-related disease. As Mr Dodds said, it exposes the hypocrisy of the Government's position. A letter in today's issue of 'The Times' highlights the beef farmers' mistake: they are not sponsoring Formula One racing. Perhaps that says more than anything else.

Maybe it is a sign of the times that this is the Forum's fourth major debate on crises in agriculture, and the third on BSE. All the arguments have been made. We hope that it will be the last such debate, but we cannot be confident of that. The message that must go to the Government is contained in the motion: the time for talking is over; we demand action.

Consumers and retailers can play their part in assisting Northern Ireland farmers specifically and United Kingdom farmers generally. Retailers do not need to stock foreign beef; let them stock British. Consumers do not need to buy foreign beef; let them buy British. That is the simple message for every retailer and every consumer in the United Kingdom. That is how they can support home industry.

Again I thank all those who have contributed to the debate. We await with interest a speedy response from Her Majesty's Government.

**The Chairman:** No doubt all Members are grateful that the Business Committee agreed that the scheduled motion should not be proceeded with, thereby enabling us to attend to this urgent matter.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

The Forum, recognizing the severe depression and despair facing Northern Ireland farmers at this time, calls on Her Majesty's Government to provide urgent assistance to compensate for the effects of the strength of sterling and the continuing BSE crisis, and calls on the European Commission to award Northern Ireland beef intervention tenders in full.

*The meeting was adjourned at 1.00 pm and resumed at 2.04 pm.*



## HOSPITAL SERVICES

**The Chairman:** I understand that it is proposed that the motion on the Order Paper be altered.

**Mr Ervine:** That is so, Mr Chairman.

**The Chairman:** It strikes me that that is better than having an amendment.

Do Members agree to the alteration?

*Members indicated assent.*

**Mr Irvine:** I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum, recognizing the need for more acute hospital beds in the Belfast area, calls on Her Majesty's Government to

1. fill the 280 acute beds in the Belfast City Hospital tower block before spending £65 million on providing 360 acute beds at the Royal site;
2. release £12 million from the £65 million to construct a purpose-built maternity unit at the Royal site, and confirm that there is a need to maintain a second maternity hospital in Belfast, that being the Jubilee at the City site;
3. release £29.3 million from the £65 million to the City Hospital to build the proposed cancer centre and to provide adequate funds to retain Belvoir Park as a treatment centre.

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** We intend to move an amendment. It is being typed at the moment and will be available soon.

**Mr Ervine:** The purpose of the motion is to identify what we believe to be hurried and, therefore, unreasonable proposals for future health provision in the province. The Government's behaviour has been irrational and unreasonable in a number of ways.

First, £65 million of Government money — our money, that is — is to be provided to build extensions at the Royal Victoria Hospital. What will that £65 million buy? No one knows, though we have a right to know. Will it provide what is needed, given the suggested adjustments between the Royal group of hospitals and the Belfast City Hospital? What are the health priorities, and how were they arrived at? They have not been outlined by the Minister.

We hear that Belvoir is to close. What about cancer care? It is suggested that a cancer centre be created at the City Hospital. When will that happen? Will the development take place in conjunction with the closure of Belvoir? Those questions have not been answered by the Minister. The proposals for maternity and gynaecological care are an absolute nightmare.

As public money was being set aside for construction work that did not take proper account of health-care priorities, the Minister was advocating that the proposed cancer centre



be funded under the private finance initiative. There are plenty of arguments that we could put forward against the private finance initiative, but the most obvious is that it will take three to four years longer to build and open a facility provided in that way than one funded by the Government in the usual manner. That is a good enough reason without any need to go into other arguments or seek clarification from the Minister.

We are told that more than £100 million has been designated for expenditure on various hospital sites throughout the province in the next five years. But priorities have not been identified, and the Government's position on specific services has not been stated. They accept that there is a clinical need for cancer care, maternity care and gynaecology provision, but in what the Minister said a few weeks ago about the closure of Belvoir, the establishment of a cancer facility at the City and the provision of 360 new beds at the Royal there was no sign of any attempt to prioritize. The Minister should give details of what will be provided with the £65 million and an assurance that any decisions on spending will be delayed until he is satisfied that it is what is needed, given the changes in provision between the Royal and the City.

The last Government — and we did not agree with everything they did or said — designated the City Hospital as a centre of excellence in obstetrics, gynaecology and cervical and breast oncology. But the new Government have overturned that. They have put into abeyance the use of three and a half floors of the City Hospital and created total confusion over what is to be provided at the Royal and how specialties are to be shared between the two hospitals. They are treating women as second-class citizens. There is evidence of a need for a centre of excellence for the treatment of women with specific health problems. Why are the Government behaving irrationally and unfairly?

We are told by the Minister that a new maternity centre is to be built on the Royal site. The Royal is a great hospital. I have no desire to denigrate it, but I must point out that the most optimistic suggested completion date for an extension is six to seven years hence. But the intention is to close the Jubilee maternity unit at the City before that. The Jubilee has almost as many patients per year as the Royal. Where will these women be able to have their babies in comfort and decent conditions? This will result in second-class citizenship. There are 3,000 births at the Royal per year, and almost 3,000 at the City. It is inconceivable that the Royal will be able to cope with 6,000.

Gerry Adams has said that the City Hospital is a white elephant. Last week it received a Charter Mark for excellence in the treatment of out-patients. The Government's treatment and Gerry Adams's remark are insulting. Whom did the Minister consult when he was making his decision about the extension to the Royal? He did not consult properly after the publication of the McKenna Report. There was no consultation period; there were no midwives or other women on the review panel; there was no appraisal of policy with regard to fair treatment; and there was no targeting of social need. Thus the review panel acted outside its remit, yet the Government accepted its recommendation. For the City Hospital this means a 30% reduction in revenue, three and a half empty floors in the tower block, and the loss of up to 700 jobs.

When I look at what this Minister has done I am inclined to jump to conclusions. Was he motivated by sectarianism? Perhaps he is trying to create a feel-good factor for some



people in west Belfast, at the expense of those who use the centre of excellence at the City Hospital. Due regard has not been given to the wishes of the people of the whole of Belfast and the rest of the province — and certainly not to the wishes of elected representatives. It is shameful. A whole community, whose numbers demonstrate the need for facilities at the City, is to be left without maternity, gynaecology and accident-and-emergency services. That seems to be Mr Worthington's plan. His decisions were made without proper consultation with the body that had been set up to advise him. People must be getting angry. There are questions that the Minister needs to answer.

2.15 pm

Regarding maternity provision at the Royal, I suggest that the Forum give the Health Committee a remit to look very carefully at the conditions in which women can expect to be delivered of their babies until the construction work is finished in five to 10 years' time. But the resulting report would not tell the whole story about Belfast or outlying areas. The majority of women who have their babies in the City Hospital — in the Jubilee — do not come from south Belfast. Expectant mothers come from west Belfast, east Belfast, Downpatrick, Lisburn — all over the province, in fact.

So when Gerry Adams looks across the motorway and calls the City Hospital a white elephant he is clearly being sectarian. He wants something special for himself and the little battery that runs around with him. It has little to do with people's health, and much to do with jobs — in some cases, jobs that he can control.

The "white elephant" deals with almost 60,000 accident-and-emergency cases a year, with an intake three days a week. It is sickening to wonder where those people will go. Will the accident-and-emergency unit in the Royal be able to cope with them? Will I be able to take my children to the accident-and-emergency unit? We all remember the brutal attacks made on elected representatives not long ago. There could be a similar attack on a policeman, a member of the Royal Irish Regiment, a former member of the RUC or of the Royal Irish Regiment, or even another elected representative. Or someone from the Unionist community might feel intimidated at having to go to the Royal site. There must be a choice. I do not know what hospital Tony Worthington attends, but he lives in a city that does not have the difficulties that Belfast and the rest of this province have. We must be mindful of those problems if meaningful services are to be provided.

I do not wish to be sectarian about this, but I have to be practical and make the point that it is just not good enough for West Belfast to be spoon-fed so that the absentee MP can feel good about it, while the remainder of the province worries about the provision of proper health care.

With the stroke of a pen Tony Worthington has created a potential disaster. For those who strove for the Charter Mark — the mark of excellence — for their service what Tony Worthington is proposing is a slap in the face. I repeat that these proposals were made without consultation and by people absolutely incapable of making the proper decisions.

The purpose of the acute hospital reorganization project — the McKenna Report — was to bring forward proposals to reorganize services at the Royal group of hospitals and at



the City Hospital in order — let Members listen to this — to provide a sound basis for their future development and to improve the quality of services at both. Three hundred and sixty acute beds are to be opened at the Royal, but that will leave 220 empty beds at the City. Does that sound like the development of both?

Maybe the Minister has other ideas that he has not told us about. Maybe he has another planning committee sitting somewhere looking at what might happen. But we are the representatives of the people, and the people are entitled to know. What is the provision? How dare the Minister make decisions without consultation.

It is in a somewhat angry mood that I move this motion. I ask Members to join me in my demand for answers.

*The following amendment was circulated by the Democratic Unionist Party: Leave out all the words of the motion and insert*

“This Forum, recognizing the need for province-wide provision of acute hospital and maternity beds and a fair distribution of health facilities across the province,

1. calls for distribution of health spending to ensure equitable provision of hospital services across the province;
2. calls upon the Government to give Northern Ireland the same rate of increase in resources for the Health Service as has been made available to other areas of the United Kingdom.”

**The Chairman:** The amendment that has been circulated by the Democratic Unionist Party seems to me to be on lines slightly different from those of the original motion, as modified.

**Mr Trimble:** It might be better to hold off for a while to enable consultation to take place between the parties. I take your point, Mr Chairman, but I think that some degree of consensus will be possible.

**Mr Morrow:** Is it clearly understood that the Democratic Unionist Party intends to move an amendment? As Mr Trimble has indicated, we may have an opportunity to put our heads together to see if we can come up with an agreed motion.

**The Chairman:** Yes, but in the meantime we shall proceed with the motion that is before us.

**Mr Stoker:** I would like to thank Mr Ervine for accepting our addition to his motion, for people should not lose sight of what is happening in the Belfast area. The motion now deals specifically with that area.

Following the McKenna Report, certain decisions were taken — taken democratically after widespread consultation. People in Belfast accepted the McKenna proposals. They recognized the need for rationalization between the two hospitals. Indeed, many people thought that the McKenna Report did not go far enough, as its remit did not include other hospitals in the Belfast area, such as the Mater, and outlying hospitals such as the Ulster, the Ards, the Lagan Valley and the Whiteabbey.



Previous decisions to keep the Jubilee at the City site open and to relocate the Royal Maternity at the tower block have been overturned without any consultation with the hospitals, the local community or local doctors. On the question of the Jubilee, there is a definite need to maintain a second maternity hospital in Belfast. The figures speak for themselves: more than 3,000 births at the Royal Victoria Hospital, 2,918 at the Jubilee and just under 1,000 at the Mater. The last figure falls very short of the Government's guideline for keeping a maternity hospital open. Once again, this is a political decision — the Mater Hospital is to be kept open at the expense of the Jubilee in south Belfast.

I would like to make Members aware of some of the other closures in the south Belfast area: the Samaritan Hospital, the Ava Children's Hospital and the Malone Place Hospital. And if the Jubilee closes, the Gardner Robb Clinic too will go. There is an underlying trend to move hospital provision away from south Belfast. Everybody should be aware of the attempts to relocate provision in west Belfast. Many people are coming to believe that these are purely political decisions.

I do not think that anyone objects strongly to the provision of a centre of excellence at the City Hospital. The Forum's Health Committee carried out an investigation into cancer care, and one of its recommendations was that this matter should be taken on board. But adequate funds should be provided to retain Belvoir Park as a treatment unit. Why has it been singled out for closure? I could give two or three different opinions, but the one that has been gaining credibility over the last couple of months is that the hospital is in a prime position on the southern edge of the city. There is a distinct lack of housing in the area, and this site is very attractive to private developers. Like others, I believe that this process has been put in train not just to save money but also to free a large chunk of land for housing. Everyone agrees that more houses are needed in Belfast, but they should not be provided at the expense of an excellent cancer-treatment unit. Health-care provision in Belfast should be based on health-care needs alone.

We will support the motion. The DUP amendment does not refer to acute beds or maternity care in the Belfast area. There is under-capacity in Belfast. The Royal Maternity Hospital deals with just over 3,000 births per year. Expectant mothers who cannot be catered for are transferred to the half floor in the City tower block that is underused. There is no reason to assume that if the Royal Maternity and the Jubilee were to combine, the resulting facility would be able to cater for almost 6,000 births a year.

I support the motion.

2.30 pm

**Mrs Parkes:** It was my intention to move the DUP's amendment, but discussions are still going on.

There is no doubt that the present state of the Health Service is a matter of deep concern to all of us and to the people we represent. Everyone in the Democratic Unionist Party believes that acute beds should not be concentrated entirely in the Belfast area. Many rural areas are being deprived of such provision, and people are forced to travel many miles



for medical treatment. Government policy is to centralize acute beds in what are called the golden six, leaving many rural communities without easy access to general care.

The Department of Health and Social Services produced regional-strategy proposals for the period 1997-2002. The document is entitled 'Health and Well-being into the Next Millennium'. Launched in July 1996, it outlines four key themes for the future. One of these is "Improving acute care". The strategy outlines the factors driving changes in the way in which acute care is delivered. It identifies the Department's overall aim for acute care as being

"to provide the highest quality of care appropriate to the needs of the patient."

Mission statements, aims, priorities and objectives look fine and are great to read, but they must be underpinned by adequate resources.

It is scandalous that a major hospital like the City has not only beds lying empty but whole wards closed. The new culture, which the last Government pursued, of making providers more businesslike, with the emphasis on profits rather than patients, is completely wrong. I trust that the new Labour Government will keep their election promises and change it. The Health Service is in a state of disintegration because of chronic underfunding. The present arrangements are totally inadequate and need to be reviewed. The Health Service can no longer provide a comprehensive service that meets all patients' needs.

Just last week the Minister allocated an additional £7.5 million to help with acute community issues. This is welcome, but the drip-feed process needs to be reviewed. A proper funding process should be established at the commencement of the next financial year. Also, the present capitation formula needs to be reviewed to ensure equity, and the increase in waiting-lists is totally deplorable.

I disagree with the working group's recommendation that cancer services be transferred from Belvoir Park Hospital. We need to maintain all these vital facilities, particularly since, as we have been told, cancer will become the number-one killer.

With regard to the third point in the motion, we need to be careful not to send the wrong signals, particularly as the Minister has extended the consultation period to three months so that all groups may express their views. It would be wrong for the Forum to be seen to favour the City Hospital to the detriment of Belvoir.

I am not sure that I agree that any of the £65 million allocated to the Royal should be taken from that budget and spent on maternity provision there or, if it does happen, on the cancer centre. The latter should get additional money. Last week the BBC drew attention to the fact that with the building of new hospitals, such as the Causeway and the Downe, about £335 million is available but has not been earmarked. We have not been assured of any of this money, and we must be careful, when calling for funds to be taken from an area, that the Government do not rob Peter to pay Paul.

The question of Health Service funding needs to be addressed as a priority. Only then will it be possible to distribute the resources fairly. In fact, it would have been better to defer



this motion pending the imminent release of the Government's new health strategy, "The Way Ahead for the Health Service in Northern Ireland".

**Ms Sagar:** The Women's Coalition welcomes this debate on an issue that is important for all of us — the planning and use of acute hospital services. Although the motion is about hospitals in Belfast, the issues it raises are equally relevant to hospital and other services throughout Northern Ireland. We need to know how many beds are required, where they should be situated and how the planning is carried out.

The motion rightly raises the issue of the pressure on hospital beds, especially during the winter months. This is a well-recognized problem. Some of the pressure could be relieved if proper residential care and community care were made available. We do not like the term "blocked beds" but recognize that for some people, particularly the elderly, care outside hospital is more appropriate. On this issue, we welcome the announcement of a Royal Commission to look at care for elderly people. It is a long-overdue initiative.

The motion draws attention to the 280 empty beds in the City Hospital. Our information is that this is an overestimate, that there are probably about 80 empty beds spread throughout the hospital. The motion makes the important point that we need to use all available beds very carefully. It is important not just to get the overall number right but also to plan the types of services needed. Different services need different levels of staffing and other support.

My next point concerns the location of services. The motion quite rightly draws attention to the need to plan services between sites. It refers to the Royal and the City. We fully support the idea that services on these sites should complement each other. It is wasteful to overlap or duplicate. The introduction of a competitive market into the Health Service has been harmful, and it has resulted in unnecessary duplication.

The motion rightly draws attention also to the need to spend in the most appropriate way all money identified for the Health Service. We agree absolutely about the need to spend money on the Royal. Anyone who has been a patient or a visitor there recently will surely agree that the fabric of the building is dangerous, and the conditions are Victorian and unhygienic. We have been unable to establish exactly how the £65 million is to be spent, and we do not yet know which project will have priority. Will it be a new purpose-built accident-and-emergency unit? Will it be a fracture service to cater for people from all over Belfast? And where do maternity services come on the priority list?

We welcome the decision to keep maternity services alongside paediatric services, but not without some reservations. We need to know how long it will take to build a new maternity hospital. Is there a possibility that there will be a decision just to make do? We hope that these questions will be put to those responsible. Pregnant women must have the facilities they require, and these must be provided.

We understand that the Department's capital-spending programme is oversubscribed. It seems highly unlikely that all the buildings promised for Northern Ireland will be provided in the next five years. A more fully informed debate is needed, and we would welcome the Department's comments.



Of course, there are many other pressures driving change. One of these is staffing. The move to reduce the long hours worked by junior doctors and the need for proper training are just two factors.

My final point relates to planning and information. We fully support the general ideas behind the motion. They represent a common-sense approach to making the best use of public money for the good of the public. But the motion also draws attention to the need for a wider debate and for this to be backed up by information. What is Northern Ireland's capital development programme? What are the Royal's priorities for the proposed £65 million? Are they in line with the City's priorities and those of the Government? What is the common and agreed agenda? To what extent are political parties formally consulted about changes in services, and are these in accordance with recent plans?

We welcome this debate. It serves a useful purpose. It also confirms the value of the suggestion, which we and others have made, that people should be invited to give evidence to the full Forum. We support the general points that have been made but feel that the details need further thought.

**The Chairman:** Let nobody say that democracy does not work in the Forum. I understand that, with the exception of Ms Sagar, who was on her feet, all Members, including Mr Ervine, who moved the motion, have agreed to the suggested amendment. Or do we have a further amendment? Papers have just been put in front of me.

**Mr Morrow:** We now have an agreed motion.

**The Chairman:** Are you happy with it, Ms Sagar?

**Ms Sagar:** Yes, I am happy with the amended version.

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** I do not know which of the six versions to speak on!

First, I would like to congratulate Mr Ervine on moving the motion. I recognize that it looks very much like a Belfast motion and understand the concern of those from rural areas, which also require money for health care. Anyway I am happy that we now have an agreed motion.

Mr Ervine used the case of the City and the Royal as an example of how the Government have claimed — I use the word “claimed” — that they are going to commit money to something. He called into question the sincerity and honesty of the Minister, Mr Worthington. He believes, as I do — we have had plenty of proof — that with Private Finance Initiative money supplementing Government money, and because of the delay that the involvement of both private and public sectors would cause, the City would cease to be a hospital as we know it. If that were to happen, jobs too would go. Who would see that the promises made to the Royal and to the people were kept?



2.45 pm

Governments have a way of giving people a five-year plan, only to declare five years down the line "Yes, we would love to have done that. We meant what we said five years ago, but unfortunately it is now impossible." No one knows this better than you, Mr Chairman, as you used to be vice-chairman and chief executive of the Housing Executive board. It was people like you and me who forced the Housing Executive to stop the nonsense of producing five-year plans which they knew they could never carry out. They came down to earth and gave us one-year plans. Perhaps that is what is needed in the Health Service. I do not want promises that no one can guarantee will be kept. We should fight for what we want now. That is the basis of Mr Ervine's argument. I know what I want now: the City Hospital must keep its maternity unit and have it improved.

The last thing we want to do is turn the issue of health care into a sectarian battle, but I must say clearly and categorically that the Protestant women of West Belfast, whom I represent, are not prepared to go to the Royal Maternity unit. Neither they nor their husbands would feel safe. Anyone who needs proof of that need only ask Nigel Dodds and his wife.

And what about the members of the security forces who live in Belfast? I wonder if Minister Worthington took them into consideration. I think not.

I am delighted that this motion is before the House.

**The Chairman:** This morning we had city Members giving support on agriculture. Now the opposite is happening with regard to hospitals.

**Mr Sammy Wilson:** I welcome the fact that we now have an agreed motion. Many Members were concerned about several aspects of the original one.

As has been recognized by Mr Hugh Smyth, the original motion was very narrow, concentrating on Belfast issues. While this is understandable, given the Progressive Unionist Party's narrow base in a few areas of Belfast —

**Mr Hugh Smyth:** I hope that the Member is not going to turn this into a political football. I explained that the reason for Mr Ervine's wording is that Minister Worthington has already agreed to this expenditure. Questions about, say, Coleraine or Banbridge do not arise. The commitment is to Belfast, and the motion was intended to focus on the very points that the Member will no doubt be making.

**Mr Sammy Wilson:** As a province-wide party, we felt, when we saw the original motion, that there needed to be wider recognition of the health issues that affect the entire province. The more resources are concentrated on one part of Northern Ireland, the less of the cake there is for the other parts. In fact, as Mr Ervine pointed out, the Government are not just looking at specific issues in the Greater Belfast area but focusing on a very narrow part of the city.



That brings me to a point that I am pleased to see highlighted today. Whether we like it or not, the Government are now treating some aspects of health care as a sectarian issue, a political football. The concentration of attention on the Royal and the fact that the Government have ignored certain matters with regard to maternity provision in, for example, the Mater indicate that they are so intent on focusing attention on the Republican movement's wish-list that the health needs of the wider population are being ignored.

It is not without significance, as Mr Ervine said, that maternity provision is to be concentrated in the Royal in spite of the fact that two Belfast maternity facilities meet the criterion in terms of the number of deliveries per year. Those are the City and the Royal. The one which does not meet the criterion is the Mater, whose number of deliveries is well below the Government's figure, but it has been totally ignored in this equation. Belfast needs two maternity hospitals. If the Government were considering health provision fairly, instead of adopting a "What must we do to please the IRA?" stance, they would be concentrating resources on the Jubilee and the Royal and questioning the future of maternity provision in the Mater. At the time of the review I challenged Dr McKenna about this matter. He said that he had been told that the Mater was outside his scope, even though it was in the centre of Belfast.

It all boils down to the same old thing: for Republicans every day is Christmas. But for the fact that Mr Blair's image consultants would not like it, he might as well dress up in a red suit and beard, for he is acting like Santa Claus.

We were concerned about the original motion's reference to releasing £12 million for the new maternity unit at the Royal. In the absence of wider consideration about Belfast's maternity needs, the Royal will have its provision, and the Mater will keep its unit, but there will be no maternity services at the City.

It has already been pointed out that Protestants and members of the security forces do not feel happy about going to the Royal Victoria Hospital. Fairness requires maternity services that are accessible to everybody.

As Mrs Parkes has pointed out, the DUP was also concerned at the original motion's reference to the release of money for a new cancer centre at the City, for that would almost preclude real consultation with the Minister about the retention of Belvoir. There is general concern about the concentration of hospital services in what are called the golden six, to the neglect of the rural areas, whose services are already under pressure.

Finally, I welcome Mr Ervine's recognition that there are some people, especially on the Republican side, who address every issue from a sectarian point of view because, by instinct, they are sectarian. They kill on a sectarian basis; they vote on a sectarian basis; they divide the population on a sectarian basis; and they address social issues on a sectarian basis. Perhaps Mr Ervine, when summing up, will explain why, if he agrees that Gerry Adams and his battery of thugs are so sectarian, the PUP wishes to share positions with them. His party is on record as having said that it looks forward to the day when it can propose —

**The Chairman:** You are getting away from the motion.



**Mr Sammy Wilson:** I did not bring the matter up. It was brought up in Mr Irvine's speech.

I would like to know why the PUP looks forward to the day when, in Belfast City Council and other local authorities, it can work with Sinn Féin on issues of social concern. Why does it look forward to working with a party that is so sectarian?

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** The Progressive Unionist Party's text sets out three points. I suppose it is a minor set-back that I cannot call for the deletion of "articles" 2 and 3! That would have been interesting. *[Interruption]* It was meant as humour. We now have an agreed motion. It is heartening to have frequent motions on issues that affect people on a day-to-day basis. Their purpose is to convince Ministers of the need to consult the community much more.

I am glad that Mr Hugh Smyth agrees that we need a motion which does not refer solely to health-care needs in the Belfast area. Now that we have such a motion, I hope that Members will vote unanimously in its favour. We must demand more consultation by the Minister, particularly in relation to the City Hospital, as inferences are drawn from the failure to address the problems that beset it. All of us want to see the Royal promoted and its maternity unit maintained, but, in respect of health care throughout Northern Ireland, we need evidence of the transparency in decision-making that new Labour keeps claiming.

I have no difficulty in supporting the agreed motion. I hope that we will get a ministerial response that takes account of Members' concerns. Then we can get our teeth into a health motion which addresses the question of the shortage of acute beds, particularly in the Belfast area, where there certainly is a problem, but also in the rest of Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

**Mr Irvine:** I suppose I should apologize to Mr Gregory Campbell for not getting his joke as quickly as I should have. I accept that he was being humorous. The DUP agreeing to one out of three is not bad.

I am pleased that we have an agreed text. But in order that that could happen, the motion and the amendment had to go. As the motion is about Belfast, it would have been ludicrous to omit the second and third points. I wanted to pin the Minister down on issues with regard to which he has already gone public. I certainly did not intend that the importance of spending money on health care throughout the province should be ignored, and I hope there is no such suggestion.

In being specific about figures, we were really saying "Minister, if you are going to do it, do it. But when you start planning for five, six, even 10 years ahead, we fear that promises may be neither wanted nor capable of being kept and that we will end up with two dump hospitals." That is what will happen if the Minister has his way. The debate has been clear in drawing attention to the issues — not for the first time, of course, as the Health Committee has done exceptional work on many matters, especially those to do with targeting resources and meeting needs.



We need to challenge the Government very forcefully. They come with what I would describe as a pink tinge, but I have no doubt that they will be as hard to get resources from as their predecessors, and that worries me. We need a collective response from elected representatives on issues that really should not cause too much difficulty — some hilarity perhaps, but not real difficulty. We need to pull together to identify issues that reflect the will of the people, and we must demand that resources be directed to where they are most needed.

I will not be here next Friday. It is good to be leaving the Forum for 1997 on a note of agreement.

**The Chairman:** That is a very nice touch. I am sorry that you will miss the party.

*The original motion was withdrawn and replaced by an agreed motion, also in the name of Mr Ervine.*

*Resolved:*

This Forum, recognizing the need for province-wide provision of acute hospital and maternity beds and a fair distribution of health facilities across the province,

1. calls for recognition of the specific needs of the Greater Belfast area;
2. calls for distribution of health spending to ensure equitable provision of hospital services across the province;
3. calls upon the Government to give Northern Ireland the same rate of additional resources for the health service as has been made available to other areas of the United Kingdom.

*The Forum was adjourned at 3.06 pm.*