

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 16 January 1998

The meeting was called to order at 10.01 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FORUM BUSINESS

The Chairman: Members will note that the last item on the Order Paper is an Adjournment motion in my name. It arises from a suggestion that was made at yesterday's Business Committee meeting. Mr Peter Robinson said that it might be useful to have a mechanism to enable Members to raise a burning issue which was not on the agenda. I have therefore agreed to place an Adjournment motion on the Order Paper each week, to be taken as the last item if time permits. As you know, we are supposed to end at 4.00 pm unless it has been resolved to extend the sitting. Any Member who wishes to speak on the Adjournment should give the Secretary his name in the usual way.

THIRD-LEVEL EDUCATION: FUNDING

Mr McMichael: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum

1. opposes all forms of tuition and top-up fees for third-level education;
2. calls for specific legislation preventing institutions from charging top-up entrance fees; and
3. calls on the Government to create a third-level education funding policy that will widen access, alleviate student hardship and prevent a two-tier system from being created.

Following the release last year of the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education — the Dearing Report — the Government announced their intention to replace the existing student support system with loans and to introduce a £1,000 means-tested tuition fee contribution. It is estimated that about two thirds of Northern Ireland students will have to pay such contributions for the privilege of third-level education. The Teaching and Higher Education Bill, which sets out the structure of the new system, is currently completing its passage through Parliament and is expected to become law by March.

I want to highlight the implications of this Bill for Northern Ireland and to support the strong opposition to these reforms being voiced by students and their representatives at the National Union of Students/Union of Students in Ireland (Northern Ireland) student centre. We must oppose the introduction of tuition fee contributions and strive to have them phased

out where they already apply, particularly in further education. Students should have free access to education. The implications of the new system have not been fully revealed by the Government. Details should be brought into the public domain before Parliament votes on the Bill and before new students apply for financial support.

The Bill has not been properly thought out, and it does not provide adequate safeguards against increases in the proposed fee. It is very clear that this major reform and the creation of a new system will not end student hardship. The new system introduces tuition fees for the first time for full-time undergraduates. Student groups believe that these reforms are the thin end of the wedge. There is little to stop future Governments, particularly if they have strong majorities, putting up fees and extending their scope.

This will deter some people — in particular, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, mature students and women — from thinking about entering third-level education. Applications to universities are already down 6% this year in anticipation of the proposed changes. One university in central England has decided to waive fees for certain courses in an attempt to attract more students. Policies should focus on making higher education more accessible, not more exclusive.

We want to see a fundamental change in the Government's attitude, and tuition fees ruled out in favour of increased support from business and industry.

Furthermore, there should be parity of opportunity for students throughout the United Kingdom. Those from Northern Ireland who study in Scotland are discriminated against. Scottish home-based students are given state funding for the duration of their four-year degree courses, whereas funding for the final year is denied to Northern Ireland students in Scotland. This is unacceptable. It is morally indefensible and absurd and exacerbates student hardship, but the Government are doing nothing about it in the new legislation.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State sweeping powers to set up a new system of student support. It is intended that this will be in place by the next academic year. However, little detail is forthcoming, and although it will be voted on in Parliament, the real costs and implications of this major reform are unclear. Just like the other major education reform in Northern Ireland, this proposal has obviously not been properly thought through. This was clear when the Government had to alter their proposals significantly after it emerged that they had not even considered the United Kingdom's 19,000 gap-year students — those taking a year out for other activities before going to university.

A future Government with a comfortable majority — not unlike this one — could increase the tuition fee above the rate of inflation, thereby further increasing student hardship. The Bill leaves out crucial measures that would protect students from such increases. In its recent report on funding issues the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment argued for further safeguards to protect students from an inappropriate rise in fees, and the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals backed that call.

The UDP endorses the Dearing recommendation for an independent review of student support and of the level of tuition fees. The Bill gives the Secretary of State discretionary power to prevent top-up fees from being levied. If an institution charges a top-up fee, there is

no compulsion on the Secretary of State to claw it back, but under clause 18 she has the power to do so. I am opposed completely to the concept of top-up fees. They are the single most dangerous means of creating a two-tier, privileged education system.

The Conservative Party and many peers with university connections are expected to argue that universities should be allowed to set their own fees regardless of the implications for students.

We must not muddy the waters on this fundamental issue. The debate is not about student hardship or the principle of shared responsibility for education but about the so-called élite universities wanting to price the poor out of top-flight education. That is not what our education system should be about. Before the election the Labour Party said that the present student support system increased student hardship, yet the new scheme will do little to alleviate that.

It is estimated that a student living away from home in Northern Ireland needs £4,232 to meet the very basic costs of living. The present scheme of loans and grants makes less than £3,000 available to meet those costs, and the new scheme, although increasing slightly the amount available, will leave students with a significant shortfall. It will continue the legacy of student hardship. The Government should delay its implementation by one year to allow the financial needs of students and the impact of student hardship on drop-out rates and low achievement to be examined.

I would welcome Members' support. Northern Ireland, with its higher levels of social and economic deprivation, cannot afford to deter thousands of young people from seeking access to higher education. At the very least the Government should defer implementation of this poorly-thought-out legislation for a year so that its deterrent effects can be minimized and remedial legislation formulated to ensure that higher education remains a right and does not become a privilege.

Mr Weir: I support the motion.

Merit should be the principle behind third-level education — indeed, behind education generally — and it is the spirit we should be seeking to foster in society. There should be equality of opportunity for every individual. Opportunity should be based not on ability to pay but on natural ability.

A problem has been created by the proposal to levy tuition fees — another example of the current Government's extending some of the policies of their predecessors. We have seen here time and time again how the Department of Education fails to think out rationally the effects of its policies.

In the last few years the number of students entering third-level education has doubled to about 1.5 million, and the Government intend to increase that figure significantly in the next few years. We should all be in favour of improving access to third-level education, but the financial consequences have clearly not been thought through by the Government, and this has created a massive shortfall. The Dearing Report highlighted the funding gap for

universities, which currently stands at £565 million per year. The Government have announced additional provision of about £165 million, but there will still be a very large gap.

That brings me to the first of my worries. Under the proposed scheme, fees will be calculated on the same reasonable basis as the current top-up fees — a means-tested formula by which students whose parents earn less than £23,000 a year do not have to pay anything. That element in itself is not the major problem, which is two-fold.

As Mr McMichael said, this is very much the thin end of the wedge. One may accept the concept of top-up fees, but, while what is proposed may not be as bad in practice as it looks, the potential for future problems is great. In Australia, student contributions were introduced on a similar basis — initially accounting for about 23% of the total tuition fees. That is very similar to the level being proposed here. However, after a few years the proportion had risen to 45%. Future Governments in this country will be under great pressure to increase the fees again and to increase the amount that students are asked to contribute.

10.15 am

One problem that has been highlighted is the funding gap. We have not seen much by way of figures from the Government. There is a strong suspicion that even with the introduction of these fees there will not be nearly enough money to fund third-level education, which may mean that students will have to bear a greater part of the burden.

There is a second element, which has not been highlighted quite so much by the student-union leaders but is a very strong argument on their behalf. At present students do not have to pay fees, and they get half of their maintenance funding by way of grant and half by way of loan. The loan is available to all students, but the grant is means-tested so that those on the lowest income get the highest amount — indeed, many people are outside the scope. Under these proposals the maintenance grant would be phased out over a period of two years. Top-up fees are to some extent based on ability to pay, but the phasing out of the maintenance grant will by its very nature hit hardest the people who earn the least. This will create even more hardship for students than do top-up fees. Indeed, the replacement of the maintenance grant by a maintenance loan will deter people.

There will be particular problems for Northern Ireland, which has a higher proportion of students from a manual-work background than the rest of the United Kingdom. I am glad that Mr McMichael did not fall into the trap of asking that Northern Ireland be made a special case and exempted from the legislation. That would be counter-productive. I shall explain why exempting students or institutions would backfire. Northern Ireland students should not be seen to be favoured. The problem of those in Scotland has been mentioned. But there is another problem with regard to Scotland. Because of a loophole students from the rest of the European Union are treated more favourably than those from other parts of the United Kingdom. European students are entitled to the same treatment as domestic students, and they have been able to use the Scottish loophole to get to the top of the queue. If an exception were made here too the people benefiting most would be those from outside the United Kingdom.

The problems highlighted by Dearing would also be exacerbated. Northern Ireland has insufficient university places. We need between 5,000 and 12,000 more. Of the six-form students who go on to university 40% go across the water, principally to England and Scotland. Forty per cent of those go unwillingly, because they cannot find places in Northern Ireland. If there were some sort of exemption for Northern Ireland it would only increase the numbers coming from Europe and the mainland. It would put increased pressure on places here and would end up costing the Northern Ireland Office a vast sum of money without achieving the objective.

The rationale behind these proposals is poor. The finance question has not been thought through. We have seen a vast expansion of the university sector, but not a corresponding increase in funding. Indeed, there has been a drop of approximately one third in student funding over the last few years. If the Government are committed to increasing the number of people at university they will have to think again. They must be prepared to make the necessary financial commitment and not expect the most vulnerable, the poorest, to help with funds.

The Forum must take a strong stand. These proposals are the thin edge of the wedge and must be opposed throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr Gibson: In Northern Ireland there has always been high respect for education. Since the Plantation days, when we sent people to universities in Scotland, we have regarded it as a priority. And we have always believed that education should be free. With that background we ought to oppose the imposition of any kind of top-up fee.

Some institutions, such as Oxford and Cambridge, claim to give more because of their unique status, and they set their own entrance examinations. Yesterday the Education Committee heard evidence from parents of preparatory school pupils. That is a long way from third-level education, but those people are prepared to pay. That is their choice. They want the facility. I am very concerned about the question of top-up entrance fees. We do not want to limit choice, but we strongly oppose the imposition of tuition fees. We have stated in the past that there should be no charge for tuition, no back-door tax on education, no dilution of the principle of free education.

I strongly support the call for widened access — something that is in line with the Dearing Report. However, when we talk about the availability of places and how they are provided we should take into account the fact that universities will probably change dramatically. Third-level education is provided in many different ways in this technological age, and the campus concept will change. This morning I heard about a Scotsman in Indonesia who is linking up on the Internet with the top professor in the agriculture field in Scotland so that his Indonesian students can have access to the very best academic capabilities.

Instead of thinking in terms of a third campus, I favour achieving the necessary expansion by using outreach centres. This is already working very well in Armagh and Omagh. Queen's University and the University of Ulster wish to expand, and there is an opportunity to increase the numbers of places available. The system may be slightly different

from what we are used to. Those of us who went to university praised our Alma Mater and thought that nothing else was good enough. But we are living in a changing age.

I oppose the imposition of tuition fees. I also broadly support the call in the third paragraph of the motion. I am very unhappy about the idea of limiting choice. Prohibition tends not to be successful. If a centre of excellence offers something over and above that which others can provide, people who are willing to pay should not be denied the opportunity, just as those who are prepared to pay for special education can have it. A society should be liberal enough in its thinking to accept that.

The DUP opposes the Government's imposition of top-up fees and calls for an expansion of university places here so that 40% of Northern Ireland young people who go to university will no longer have to leave the province. Also, the variety of what is available should be explored. Unfortunately, as the Minister announced this morning, discretionary grants are to be reduced by 50%. "Education, education and education" has become a hollow phrase. There is no additional money for the education budget. The Minister is prepared to do no more than explore the spending priorities within a very tight package. There will be no additional money.

In principle, I support the motion.

The Chairman: Mr McMichael said that the Government should be encouraged to wait a year before proceeding with these proposals. Members may wish to address that point.

Ms Bell: We support the motion in broad terms as we are very concerned about tuition or top-up fees of any kind. Education is a right, not a privilege, in any society. This should be the thinking of the present Labour Government, especially as one of their first public pronouncements was that their priorities were "Education, education and education". We now know that that meant cuts. Today we have had the announcement that student grants are to be halved. We also heard some time ago that nursery-school facilities were to be extended. The Education Committee was very pleased about that, but now the Government are going to withdraw subsidies from prep schools. Whatever one thinks of prep schools, this is a very important issue for the people involved. Yesterday we heard from several prep schools and from concerned parents. Their argument should not just be put to one side. Unfortunately that is what the Labour Government seem to be doing.

Labour, like the Conservatives, did not mention higher education in their election manifesto. The Liberal Democrats had a number of very good proposals. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education produced the Dearing Report — and everyone knows what has happened to that.

We agree that there are grounds for a review of third-level education, especially in view of what is happening in further education, with people being given what are known colloquially as sub-degrees. But we would be concerned at any broad system of tuition or top-up fees, which would definitely deny access to a large number of pupils from all levels of society.

Higher-education funding has been eroded over the years. Student numbers have gone down, and with all the recent statements about Dearing and the loan proposals the number of applications to the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) has decreased. The drop of 8% to 10% is the result of the panic caused by the Government. Mr David Blunkett has said that higher education is excellent for the economy, but I am afraid that this view is not evidenced in these proposals, which have, in fact, deterred students from applying for university places.

10.30 am

The proposed loans and repayment systems are clumsy and confusing, to say the least. It is envisaged that students may have to repay up to £15,000 under the terms of the new scheme. They are being encouraged to enter into substantial debt, which will lead to Northern Ireland's graduates moving to the mainland and elsewhere to find a decent job — one that can keep them and help to pay their debts — and that will be to the detriment of everyone here.

The capping system prevents us from having a decent third-level education system. This is something that must be looked into so that we can encourage students to stay here. Of course, if we are to have a decent capping system we must also have a decent funding system. In fact, the Dearing Report recommended an end to capping. Furthermore, decisions about additional campuses must be taken soon. Unfortunately the Government have not even looked at these points.

I agree with the proposal from the National Union of Students: we should urgently set up a higher education council, which could look at these issues from a practical point of view with the Department of Education and could address specific local problems. Thus we would welcome deferment. Mr Weir is quite right to say that we should not expect special treatment, but before the proposals are implemented we should look at what effect they will have on the province.

The Dearing Report also recommended wider access to tertiary-level education. This has been supported by the students themselves, who have said that the inability to increase proportionally the number of students from lower socio-economic groups is perhaps the single greatest failure in the tertiary-education system. This needs to be addressed. Students are also saying that the issue of funding will have to be dealt with.

There must be equality of opportunity in the education system, enabling each pupil to realize his full potential. We do not need to comment on the extent to which that is currently the case at any level of education here. Equality of opportunity would not only help the students but also ensure a better socio-economic future for Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Empey: This motion touches on many points that are vital to the future economic and social well-being of the province. The United Kingdom as a nation compares extremely badly with its major industrial competitors, particularly in respect of the percentage of its people who are involved in tertiary education. We are also becoming increasingly

uncompetitive with the very nature of our tertiary education. A more holistic approach is taken in countries like Germany and Japan, where there are much closer links between higher education and industry and commerce. Attempts are being made in Northern Ireland to develop such a relationship.

The most alarming aspect is research, which fares extremely badly in the United Kingdom. Mr Gibson was very far-sighted in saying that third-level education would not be confined to campuses in the future. But in spite of this, research funding is being reduced at a time when United Kingdom businesses face extreme competitive pressures because of the strength of the pound. Farmers and those in engineering are facing a lot of difficulty because of the currency situation. The only way to deal with that is to develop more efficient production methods. This can be achieved only with investment in research and development, yet a very short-sighted Department of Education is proposing to reduce the funding for that.

We also have to address more fundamental problems. The last Government introduced the concept of student loans. In some cases one can see why that was done, but I have very great reservations about a young person starting out in life with substantial debt — something that goes against the grain of people here. On the other hand, students from wealthier backgrounds are taking out the maximum loan, investing the money and making a profit. The rate is obviously very competitive, and the money can be used to buy property and annuities. This has become a regular feature of student life at that end of the spectrum. The system does not attempt to encourage the people to whom Mr McMichael referred. It is draining resources, rather than focusing them where they are needed.

Many students rely heavily on careers teachers and their school's ethos when choosing a university. I regret to say that this decision is not based solely on academic factors. There is an element of snobbery: "Do not go to university X. Go to university Y, which has a more famous name." This completely ignores the fact that many institutions, particularly some of the more modern ones, have achieved very significant levels of expertise. For example, the business school of the University of Ulster has earned a world-wide reputation. But there is a snobbery factor which encourages young people to leave the province for third-level education. Furthermore, the local universities have insufficient places. This has driven standards up, particularly at Queen's, and it is extremely difficult to get a place.

Then there is the added pressure of people coming from the Republic to study in Northern Ireland. While one would not want hermetically sealed higher-education institutions — that would be counter-productive, and one does want a free flow of people and ideas — it should be noted that the flow is mainly from the South to the North. This means reduced opportunities for young people from Northern Ireland, who are forced to study at universities in Great Britain at very considerable expense. For instance, it takes four years to earn a basic degree at a Scottish university. When travelling expenses are included the cost can be about £6,000 a year.

A few weeks ago Tony Worthington sent a letter to students telling them that they should not worry, that they could borrow more and would not be disadvantaged in any way.

But I return to my fundamental point: allowing a young person to start his working life with a millstone of debt is not something that any Member in this Chamber would be proud of.

The United Kingdom's attitude towards industry is creating long-term problems. There is a feeling that being educated for a position in an industry that creates wealth or produces articles is not as good as being educated to become an accountant, to go into the Army or — dare I say it? — to become a lawyer. It is wrong that any involvement with industry should somehow lead to a person's being seen as a failure. Why should someone who works for British Steel because he could not get into law be perceived as having failed? If we do not concentrate on building up the competitiveness of our industries, where will the money come from to pay for lawyers? Wealth is created by industries. The present attitude to industry is wrong, yet we see it in the Government, in Parliament, in the teaching profession and even in the universities themselves. We must change the nation's attitude to higher education and make a radical shift away from pure study to take more account of the needs of industry and commerce.

10.45 am

There is activity already, but it is insufficient. Part of the problem is that many of the people who have a significant influence on students and on the education system have fixed views. I firmly believe that they need retraining to refocus on a world that is changing fast. Look at the recent economic changes affecting the Far East — the tiger economies are in ruins. The implications are serious. If we do not produce in the universities the necessary brainpower to help industry to compete against such enormous odds we will be failing the country and failing our young people.

I am very concerned that student fees will act as a barrier to entry to third-level education. We must put resources into raising our percentage of young people in higher education to that of our major competitors. In spite of the Government's stated commitment to "Education, education and education", their actual policy is acting as a barrier which will further slow the increase in, if not reduce, student numbers.

We accept that resources are not infinite, but to cut back on research and development at universities will critically damage our future. Funding is crucial to the education system. Without it the brainpower in the research groups at Queen's will be lost to the United States, which can offer enormous sums of money from privately funded endowments. Our biggest asset is our people, with their education, skills and brainpower, and we must fully exploit it or suffer the consequences.

The Chairman: I have been handed a piece of paper which says "DUP amendment". As no notice has been given, I would have some difficulty in accepting it.

Mr McMichael: I discussed an amendment with the Chairman of the Education Committee with a view to achieving wider consensus. The DUP is proposing an alternative motion, and I cannot accept it.

The Chairman: That must be the situation.

Mr Peter Robinson: What do you mean, Mr Chairman? Mr McMichael may not agree with the amendment, but that does not mean that it cannot be moved.

The Chairman: But we have had no notice of it.

Mr Peter Robinson: It will be moved by the next DUP Member to speak.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words of the motion and insert

“This Forum opposes the imposition of tuition and top-up fees for third-level education and calls upon the Government to create a third-level education funding policy that will widen access and alleviate student hardship.”

The Government's recent funding proposals for higher education are Draconian. Everyone agrees that funding has been seriously eroded over the last 10 years, while student numbers have almost doubled, rising to 1.5 million. Staff numbers have not kept pace with this increase, and most worrying of all is that the amount of money per student has dropped by 33.3%.

The reason for the amendment is that my party does not agree with the second paragraph of the motion.

The Government have announced an extra £165 million for higher education in England, but no announcement has been made for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. There is an urgent need for more student places. It is estimated that 76,000 places will have to be created every year until and beyond 2001. The new fees will be a barrier to access, especially for students from a low-income background.

Northern Ireland will suffer special hardship for several reasons: people here rely more on maintenance grants than do people in the rest of the United Kingdom; we have a higher proportion of low-income students from a manual-work background; we have a lower gross domestic product per head than the rest of the United Kingdom; and we have the lowest student-loan take-up rate.

I agree with Mr Empey that it is grossly unfair to force students into hardship and burden them with debt. Long before earning any money — before even entering the system — they may have to borrow way beyond their means and put themselves in debt up to their eyeballs. Is that fair? I suggest that it is unfair to saddle young people with debt that they may be unable to pay back in the short term. University courses can last up to six years. The prospect of a heavy debt hanging over them for such a long period could deter many young people. The Government must seriously consider what they are about.

Parents should be entitled to send their children to a fee-paying school, which is why my party opposes the second paragraph of the motion.

The Government's policy will lead to real hardship for some students, dragging them below the poverty level. Television advertisements show elderly people who have to choose

between buying food and heating their homes. Many students will face a similar choice if the Government's proposals go ahead.

Today's students are the work-force of tomorrow, and we are responsible for ensuring that they have the education to enable them to attain their full potential. They in turn will be responsible for looking after us as we grow old.

Is it fair that foreign students, including those from the Irish Republic, can enter our higher-education system and that, as a result, some of our own have to go elsewhere? Students from the Republic should be paying higher fees instead of being subsidized by British taxpayers. Some of them look upon our education system as something they can milk dry. That cannot be allowed.

The Agriculture Committee has it on good authority, following visits to the agricultural colleges at Enniskillen and Loughry, that their students will be charged tuition fees from April of this year. We are very concerned about that. These colleges, like many Government Departments, have tightened their belts over the last few years. While their student numbers have risen, their teacher levels have not. They have cut back as far as they can. Many students will be unable to pay the proposed fees, and it is unfair to expect them to go into debt to do so at a time when the farming industry is at its lowest ebb.

Labour said that its priorities were "Education, education and education". The Conservative Party's policy was to try to make people pay their way, which was one reason for its rejection by the electorate. But the present Government, who call themselves new Labour, are pursuing policies more akin to Thatcherism than to what some might have expected from Tony Blair.

I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Casey: Labour supports the motion. We too are opposed to the imposition of tuition fees.

Over the past 10 years higher-education funding has been seriously eroded. While the number of students in the United Kingdom has almost doubled to 1.5 million, the level of staffing has increased by less than 15%, and funding per student has dropped by almost one third.

The aim of the Secretary of State for Education is that 35% of 18- to 21-year-olds should have access to higher education. That will require the creation of 76,000 student places per year until 2001.

The Dearing Report presented four options: a means test to provide a core element for all and access to loans; increased access funds, with an extra hardship loan of £250; a system of bursaries and scholarships; and fees — the most contentious idea of all. The Government have adopted the last of these for third-level education. Parents whose combined income exceeds the threshold will have to pay the fee, which has been set at £1,000 per student. But even those who will initially be exempt cannot feel safe, because, as we know from experience, ceilings can gradually come down.

11.00 am

Dearing said that funding for higher education here should be the same as for the rest of the United Kingdom. However, there is clear evidence that Northern Ireland has special needs that should be taken into consideration, such as a lower gross domestic product and lower wages.

The introduction of tuition fees could result in less participation by students from the lower socio-economic groups, and that is totally against the idea of free education for all. One of the main reasons we oppose the imposition of these fees is that it would go against the policy of the Education Secretary, who wishes to raise participation levels in higher education. We are back to the old scenario of the Government's proposing one thing but doing something else — and what they are doing works against what they hope to achieve.

Northern Ireland relies more on maintenance grants than does the rest of the United Kingdom, and that is a very important factor. In 1996, 45% of Northern Ireland students were eligible for assistance, compared with 29% in England and Wales; in 1994, 45% of Northern Ireland students were in receipt of full grants; and in 1991, 35% of entrants to Northern Ireland universities were from a manual-work background. These figures highlight the anomalies between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The reason so many Northern Ireland students attend Scottish universities is that there is a cap on the number of higher-education places in the province. We will be penalized when tuition fees have to be paid, for the Scottish students are funded for all four years of their studies.

There is some merit in Mr Gibson's suggestion about off-campus sites. He referred to those in Armagh and Omagh. If there were off-campus sites throughout Northern Ireland many young people could avoid borrowing money to pay for accommodation, some of which is of a standard little better than that of a workhouse. They would be able to stay at home with their families. Some young people are eager to loosen family ties, but I am quite sure that there are many who would be very glad to remain in the comfort of their own homes. The alternative is the conditions in which, for economic reasons, some young people are forced to live.

Fewer student loans are taken out in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain — 29% in Northern Ireland but 37% in the whole of the United Kingdom in 1993. This tells us that young people here are reluctant to borrow. It is disgraceful that anyone should have to start his working life in debt. People make sacrifices to put their children through third-level education, and I am quite sure that many of the less prosperous would be only too glad of some financial contribution.

Mr Empey: I am sure that, like me, Mr Casey knows of Northern Ireland students in Scotland who live in extremely poor conditions in properties that are owned by more wealthy students. The latter take in three or four people to help to pay off a mortgage, and they end up with a property, while the students who live in dreadful conditions end up with nothing.

Mr Casey: Dearing also identified a funding gap of £565 million in the current system. The Government have allocated £165 million for higher education in England and Wales and have announced an extra £83 million for further education. An announcement about higher education in Scotland and Northern Ireland has not been made. Again we are being treated differently from other parts of the United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland needs between 5,000 and 12,000 more higher-education places, but at the moment student numbers are capped. As a result a high proportion of young people have to go to universities in Scotland, Wales and England. Four options have been proposed to help to alleviate this problem: Springvale; expansion of Queen's University; an additional semester; and sub-degree courses, which students would follow for one or two years in a further-education institution before moving to a higher-education institution to complete their degree. Some of these options are worth studying, but, with regard to the last one, further-education institutions too are finding that their funding does not allow them to provide adequately for their students.

Dearing's recommendations for Northern Ireland are quite specific. The idea of a quality-assurance agency should be fully extended to the province. This would ensure that students were treated as consumers and that degrees were of a high standard. Dearing also picked up on the important relationship between education institutions and industry. This is something we have always prided ourselves on. The qualifications that young people get in Northern Ireland make them ideally suited for some of the high-tech industries that are coming in. And there are great opportunities in the United States and elsewhere in the world. It is a pity that we have a brain drain, but it is to be expected if the economy cannot provide jobs.

Reference has been made to students from the South. I want to remind Members that we are in the European Union, where boundaries are no longer supposed to exist. It may be an education for students from the South to live in Northern Ireland. They may learn something, and perhaps the Northern Ireland students they are mixing with could benefit. There are also many students from overseas countries. I see quite a number of oriental people. Those from other countries should not be discouraged in favour of local students.

Mr Robert John White: Broadly speaking, I am in favour of the motion, but we should be careful not to go overboard with sympathy. Students need a wee bit of hardship during their early years. I say so from experience — my own and that of my family. We have three children — all male, I am glad to say. I apologize to the ladies.

The Chairman: You are very lucky that the Women's Coalition are not here.

Mr Robert John White: I would be just as honest if they were. I am very proud to have three sons, and I make no apology. My wife is not quite so sure.

Our boys went to university in England. The book of the Universities Central Council on Admissions gives too much choice. You are bamboozled about where to go. You would need a degree in higher mathematics to understand the different permutations.

It was popular in those days to say "I am doing ... at ..., and I am enjoying it." On many occasions I was heard to comment "I am not that fussy about whether you are enjoying it or not so long as you make something of it."

Our youngest son went to Birmingham, and every time we called to see him he was in the billiard-room. You do not pay for your children to wait their turn to play billiards or to do some of the other things that students do. Parents need to emphasize that their children do not have to enjoy their time at university. Rather, they must get on with it and get something out of it at the end.

It has been suggested that industry should pay more. But industry already pays 35% of its profits in corporation tax — quite a high contribution. I am sorry that Mr Casey is not present to hear me express the belief — and I stand to be corrected — that the Southern Government levy advance corporation tax at the rate of 10%.

A Member spoke about the percentage of people going to England and the percentage staying at home. I think the figures 29% and 35% were mentioned with regard to funding. Those are dropping, and the borrowing figure for Northern Ireland is not so high. One of the reasons is that those who go to university in Northern Ireland may want to get a job here when they finish. But jobs are not so plentiful, and the pay is not so good, so it is wise not to borrow so much. Parents wisely try to prevent their student offspring from going too far into debt.

I have a fair background in the field of grammar-school education, having been a member of a board of governors for 20 years. It is staggering to hear how much is spent by individuals in a tuck-shop. So too are amounts of pocket-money — and I am not talking about the well-off. A "trade union delegation" — my family — used to come to me. On one occasion we had a discussion about pocket-money. We agreed on levels, and we agreed that any money not claimed in the week in which it was due would no longer be payable. That may have been unfair, but you must have some rules.

As I have said before, everything in education has to be paid for by someone. There is no such thing as something for nothing. If people can afford to make a contribution towards their children's third-level education they should do so. They should also pay tax if they are earning enough. But there are those who cannot afford to pay yet have ability to go on to third-level education. The country cannot afford to be without their talents. It is a poor do if we are not prepared to pay for them. I have no hesitation in saying that if we need to increase taxes to pay for those who cannot afford to pay for themselves we should do so.

11.15 am

One of our boys was in Germany for quite some time. In Britain the level of deduction from average pay is about 33%, whereas in Germany it is 46%. Salaries there may be higher, but more is taken to pay for things that the Government want to do, and there is no apology. Also, people tend not to use credit-cards. They withdraw cash to pay for their purchases, and that makes them more conscious of what they are spending. As I sign without my glasses I do not have a clue about the cost until I get the bill, which comes as a salutary reminder of foolishness on occasions.

Somebody from the Alliance Party said that such-and-such was not a privilege but a right. It is a privilege for the nation to educate its youth. It may well be a right, but it is a privilege also. Let us not get rights and privileges mixed up.

Mr Empey talked about industry. Industry may feel that it is doing enough, but there are areas where it could do more. However, it does offer scholarships and sponsorship to good ex-grammar-school people who want to go to university, though it probably tries to get some of the money back by requiring from them a commitment to work after completion of their courses.

We want to ensure that those who can pay do so and that those who cannot are paid for. Education, though necessary, should be seen as a privilege.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: We welcome this opportunity to discuss education once again. Mr Empey's comments about the investment of all this money should be an incentive for me to go back to university and get another degree. At the end I might own another house.

Mr Gibson intimated that DUP Members have some difficulty with the motion — particularly paragraphs 1 and 2. Paragraph 1 says that the Forum

“opposes all forms of tuition and top-up fees”.

It therefore makes paragraph 2 superfluous, though there is a technical difference. Paragraph 1 talks about top-up fees, whereas paragraph 2 refers to top-up entrance fees.

Mr McMichael spent a lot of time talking about the imposition of tuition and top-up fees at the tertiary level of education. This concerns us. But even worse is that there will inevitably be means-testing — a dirty concept, and something which can have tragic consequences. Revenue collected to make provision for education should benefit everyone, from whatever strand of society. So the issue is not just about having tuition top-up fees but also about means-testing, and I reject that in principle.

At its last conference, two years ago, the National Union of Students adopted a policy whereby it accepted that students must make a contribution to the cost of their education. It was accepted that, while they will always whinge about contributing, they do have some responsibility. So the motion is not in line with current student thinking.

Mr Empey made an important point that is relevant to our amendment: university is not everything. There is a perception that only those who have gone on to higher-level education can be regarded as the best in society. That is flawed thinking. As Mr Empey pointed out, there has been a drive to encourage people in the service sector to go to university. Jobs in the production sector, the manufacturing sector and those which involve ordinary, manual skills are looked down upon as second- or third-rate. That is wrong. We need to be very careful, even in the motion, not to belittle manual workers.

Ms Bell's point is also relevant to our amendment. Instead of jumping in with both feet we should wait to see precisely what is to be put on the table and how things will work out. Mr McMichael talked about a period for further investigation, but the wording of the motion does not allow for that.

The second part of the motion implies denial of free choice. We already have a multi-layered education system. If someone is prepared to pay to send his son or daughter to a particular university, so be it. People cannot be denied choice, which is why our amendment is so important.

Mr Empey made a further interesting point. In the United States there is a vast range of privately funded endowments, but that is not the case here. The trend there is towards a free-market economy. People are given the freedom and the opportunity to progress and develop in whatever area they want, but this country legislates people into a strait-jacket.

It is very important that we all realize the implications of what we are voting for. Members who vote for the motion will be asking for a strait-jacket. They will be seeking to deny institutions the right to charge entrance fees and top-up fees. I urge Members to read the motion and compare it with the DUP amendment, which is more logical, provides a breathing space in which to investigate the issue further and takes cognizance of current thinking among the student population. Our amendment encourages free education for everybody in that it specifically opposes the imposition of tuition and top-up fees. It encourages the Government to adopt a funding policy for third-level education, but politicians need to do some lateral thinking about the form it should take.

Education is a very important issue, especially for parents who are concerned about their children's development.

I urge the Forum to adopt the DUP amendment.

Mr Coulter: I want to speak about paragraph 3 of the motion.

This province is proud of its high standard of education at all levels, but let us look at what the Labour Government are doing. They are moving away from their original objective, which was to make all levels of education available to everyone.

Despite what Mr White has said — and I know that some people abuse the financial system — there is hardship among students. The vast majority are responsible people who find it difficult to meet financial demands. One student I know has facetiously said that he finds it exceedingly difficult to live on his overdraft. In addition, many students are directed to places outside Northern Ireland where the cost of living is even higher.

I want to take up the issue of the mature student. Having gone down this road myself, I know the difficulties. The other day I talked to someone who is doing a research degree. He was doing extremely well in doctorate work but had to step down to Master's level because he could not afford the fees. This is symptomatic of the Government's attitudes. Students should be free from such worry. Mature students especially have a responsible

attitude to opportunity. They appreciate the chance to benefit not only themselves but their country as well.

Mr Weir: I think I am right in saying that mature students have a particular problem in that they are ineligible for student loans. Under the system that is proposed, undergraduates will get not a grant but a loan. That will be an additional burden. Should this not be tackled in legislation?

Mr Coulter: My Colleague has made the point that I was leading up to.

I have worked in higher education and further education. Nine students from a class in Ballymena Technical College that I taught achieved doctorate degrees in engineering. That would be impossible today. All except one of those people were married with families. Mature students are not given grants, as my Colleague has said. The motion

“calls on the Government to create a third-level education funding policy that will widen access, alleviate student hardship and prevent a two-tier system from being created.”

I congratulate Mr McMichael for raising this subject, which affects many families. We ought to push hard to ensure that the Government take into account all the points that have been raised today. No doubt the Education Committee will also be looking into the matter.

I have the greatest of pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Poots: Though I support the general thrust of the motion, I cannot support all its terms.

Finance is the key problem for tertiary education — indeed, for all levels of education and for many other issues. We need to look at areas where savings could be made. I cannot agree with the plan to charge young people to go to university, but it might be possible to make savings by tightening up the entrance qualifications. Many universities now allow people in with very low A-level grades. As a result many graduates find that businesses are loath to recognize their qualifications. Employers say that they are not very well qualified. Degrees are not valued so highly. In Canada so many young people were studying at university that there were not enough to do practical work. On graduating, many found that there were no jobs in their field, so they ended up having to take ordinary work. University entrance requirements should be tightened up. Some people are better suited to, say, a college of further education.

11.30 am

I agree with Mr Empey that education is not the be-all and end-all. Some of the wealthiest individuals never went to university. They left school at 14 but had a bit of wit and intelligence.

People who drop out of university should be accountable for the cost. If somebody goes to university for several months and then drops out, the university has to stand the cost of a full year because it cannot fill the place.

Mr McMichael wants the Government to prevent the creation of a two-tier system. But there is a two-tier system already. In fact, there are more than two tiers. Is the Forum saying that people who want to pay to send their children to university should not be allowed to do so? Are Cambridge and Oxford to be prevented from charging extra fees? That would be wrong. If people want to pay for their children to go to university or to prep school or to Eton, fair enough. The Forum has no right to intervene. We are not yet living in a Communist state, and I hope we never will be. Qualifications are the key. If you have the necessary qualifications you should be allowed to go to university, irrespective of whether you come from a wealthy background or a poor background. If you have the ability you should be allowed to do the course.

I support the Democratic Unionist Party's amendment.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the motion, which is based on the submission of the National Union of Students, and I congratulate Mr McMichael on bringing it forward.

The number of applications for higher education is falling. We are also aware of something in the Ulster ethos which says that you should not get into debt. Income levels in Northern Ireland are significantly lower than in the rest of the United Kingdom, and if these proposals are followed through, the numbers going into higher-level education here will continue to fall. There is a shortfall of places, and — maybe I am being cynical — the Government are trying to lessen the gap by these measures.

Education at all levels is the cornerstone of economic regeneration. If we are to build a better and more secure future it is vital that education be available to all who can benefit and who, through their achievement, can enhance the potential for economic regeneration. There is a direct relationship between inward investment and the level of education of a work-force, whether academic or vocational. Anything that prevents people from maximizing their abilities hinders seriously the drive for economic and social regeneration. In the west of the province unemployment levels tend to be higher, and that lessens significantly the chances of achieving full potential there.

I have no hesitation in supporting the motion. It is vital that anyone who can benefit should do so and thus enhance the well-being of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McMichael: I thank Members for their contributions.

With regard to the DUP amendment, the motion was on the Notice Paper for a number of weeks, and there was ample opportunity to table amendments. In fact, I altered the language yesterday after consultation with Mr Gibson. He informed me that the area of contention for the DUP was paragraph 2, but it was impossible for me to change that. There was no reason for the DUP's not tabling its amendment this morning. We have had this problem before. We need to be consistent, but you, Mr Chairman, have to decide whether an amendment is in order.

I want to address Mr Kirkland's contention that the motion contradicts student thinking. The original wording was formulated by the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland, so it must be consistent with their thinking.

It seems that the area of difficulty for the DUP — it is a fundamental issue: probably the central issue of the motion — is entrance top-up fees. Élitist-type universities, or those considered to be of a higher calibre, will be able, in spite of the fact that the new system will cause students even greater hardship and reduce accessibility, particularly for those in socially deprived areas, to hike their fees by several grand. It is argued by the DUP that to prevent them from doing so would be to inhibit choice. But additional entrance fees do just that.

The whole philosophy behind this has to be seriously questioned. Take my own experience. I went to a grammar school — Wallace High in Lisburn. I lived in the Knockmore estate, which is an area of high disadvantage. Very few people from my estate went to Wallace. I felt privileged. That I had access to the place was due to my academic ability and not my family circumstances, and I valued that. Wallace High has a prep department. Many fine individuals came through the prep and left Wallace with outstanding qualifications. But prep pupils automatically got places in the upper school, even if they did not have the academic capacity to make the most of a grammar-school education.

A system which allows access on the basis of how fat a parent's bank balance is, rather than the academic capacity of the child or young adult, is wrong. It limits choice fundamentally to accept people regardless of academic ability. Those who do not have the necessary capacity are depriving others of places to which they are entitled. I am completely opposed to that. I want people from Old Warren or Knockmore or Rathcoole or the Shankill to have as much right to go to Oxford or Cambridge as someone from Cherryvalley or Cultra. As a matter of fact, I would rather that there were enough places to enable them to stay here so that when they came out of university their talents could be utilized to advance Northern Ireland's economy.

Are we going to support the creation of a system in which only the "right" kind of people — those from the "right" financial background — will go to certain universities? Is that consistent with modern thinking? Does it suggest that people who live in my area are the "wrong" kind? Under no circumstances will I ever support such a system, which is what the DUP is proposing.

I sympathize with Mr Empey's comments about the dangers of asking young people to start out in life with a massive debt on their shoulders. That is entirely wrong and very discouraging, particularly to people from deprived areas. As industry benefits from the end product of university education it should provide some of the finance. I realize, of course, that it does so to some extent already.

The motion is consistent with student thinking and is incisive about the difficulties in Government policy. As I have said, the Government should defer implementation of the legislation to investigate the real costs and the impact on students. They need to look into the question of accessibility, particularly for people from vulnerable and deprived sections of

society. The "i"s must be dotted and the "t"s crossed if reform is to bring about a better education system. Nothing can stand still, but, as we have seen in recent years, Governments' reforms are rarely positive.

We had this debate in respect of the proposed reorganization of the education and library boards. Who was proved right? The Government or public opinion? It was public opinion. It is wrong to believe that the Government will always get it right, that they will always think things through. That proposed reorganization was a prime example. It was driven by economics and ulterior motives. This is exactly the same.

I ask Members to support the motion as an honest appraisal of the needs of the education system.

11.45 am

Question put: That the amendment be made.

The Forum divided: Ayes 16; Noes 26.

Ayes: May Beattie, Robert Bolton, Cecil Calvert, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Oliver Gibson, Trevor Kirkland, Jack McKee, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Joan Parkes, Edwin Poots, Peter Robinson, James Shannon, Eric Smyth, William Snoddy.

Noes: Antony Alcock, Eileen Bell, Thomas Benson, David Browne, Hugh Casey, James Clarke, Robert Coulter, Malachi Curran, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, Sam Foster, Sam Gardiner, John Hunter, Derek Hussey, Kieran McCarthy, Gary McMichael, Oliver Napier, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Hugh Smyth, May Steele, Robert Stoker, David Trimble, Peter Weir, John White, Robert John White.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Peter Robinson: Since we support the broad principles of the motion we will not divide the Forum.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum

1. opposes all forms of tuition and top-up fees for third-level education;
2. calls for specific legislation preventing institutions from charging top-up entrance fees; and
3. calls on the Government to create a third-level education funding policy that will widen access, alleviate student hardship and prevent a two-tier system from being created.

The Chairman: May I use the Chairman's prerogative to add to Mr Empey's comments about the relationship between business and wealth creation.

The Institute of Directors, which I ran before coming to the Forum, operated a scheme known as shadowing. Young people spent some time, usually in the year prior to A-levels, shadowing senior managers or directors to see what life in business is like. They saw how exciting it is and what the positive and negative sides of having a business career are. There is a feeling, which I certainly share, that academic and other professions are more popular among bright young people than is going into business. But business is important to the province.

12.00

Nearly 200 young people have gone through that shadowing scheme. Superimposed on it was the belief that it is not just academic achievement that is important but leadership as well. Leadership is very important. The most brilliant and best-qualified person might be unable to lead people anywhere. Someone in the Army once said "He leads people who follow him only out of a sense of curiosity, to see what he is going to do next." I am not sure that that does not apply close to here.

Shadowing schemes are quite common, but we put a Northern Ireland spin on the concept. I suppose it helped that I was a former director of the company when we got British Airways to assist by taking young folk — ones who had emerged as potential leaders — to help people in India, Africa and South Africa. The combination of good academic qualifications, proven leadership ability and the capacity to suffer hardship is important. The first group went to the highest inhabited village in the world — in the Indian Himalayas. That was a very testing experience. Some people fell by the wayside, but others did magnificently.

We should all be proud of the fact that a scheme devised and operated in Northern Ireland is now being offered by the airline to businesses in seven parts of the United Kingdom.

The meeting was suspended at 12.02 pm and resumed at 2.02 pm

AMBULANCE SERVICE

Mr Casey: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum deplores the current financial crisis and recent violent attacks which have beset the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and calls on the Government to address the situation immediately, enabling the public to regain confidence in a vital service which endeavours to provide for the whole community.

First, I would like to reassure Members of the Forum's Health Committee that this motion is neither an attempt to undermine their work nor any reflection on the Committee. I hope that the debate will help when it comes to making recommendations and drawing up the report on the Ambulance Service.

The last Health Minister, Baroness Denton, stated in January 1994 that the ambulance services, as they were then organized, should be amalgamated. It was not until 27 January 1995 that a consultation paper was issued, with a closing date for responses of 20 February 1995. Three weeks was a totally inadequate consultation period, but in spite of this the ambulance services were amalgamated into a single trust on 1 April 1995.

Emergency calls and doctors' urgent calls are purchased directly by the four health and social services boards, and patient-care services and routine calls are purchased directly by three of them — the Northern, Southern and Western Boards. Since 1994 the Eastern Board has devolved the purchase of those services to its area's nine trusts. This can lead to serious administrative difficulties.

At the time of setting up the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service such trusts were already in operation in England, Scotland and Wales. These provide an indication of funding per head of population and of staff/population ratio. Funding in Bedfordshire and Herefordshire is £19.02 per head of population, with a staff/population ratio of 1:1,269; the corresponding figures for North Wales are £17.43 and 1:1,520; for Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, £15.91 and 1:1,194; for South and East Wales, £15.77 and 1:1,492; for Scotland, £13.72 and 1:1,888; for the West Country, £12.00 and 1:2,083; for East Anglia, £11.90 and 1:2,258; and for Merseyside, £9.79 and 1:2,400. Northern Ireland is at the bottom of the list, with £9.56 and 1:2,500. So the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service got off to a very bad start.

The current state of the service has been the subject of much media attention. Today I want to concentrate on two aspects: funding and attacks on staff and their vehicles.

It is very difficult to ascertain whether the service is adequate. The chairman of a trust would have you believe that there are no problems, but the trade union and people on the ground are saying something entirely different.

The budget for 1996-97 was £18.5 million, and the per capita spend for 1997-98 is as follows: £8.39 in the Eastern Board area; £8.99 in the Northern Board area; £9.44 in the Southern Board area; and £9.80 in the Western Board area — giving a figure of £9.56 for Northern Ireland as a whole.

With the exception of Scotland, Northern Ireland is the largest ambulance-service area in the United Kingdom — over 5,000 square miles. The rural nature of the province is also an important factor. I am sure that, bearing all the facts and figures in mind, we would all agree that our Ambulance Service is inadequately funded and inadequately staffed.

On 14 January the 'Down Recorder' claimed that the Ambulance Service has warned that twelve additional crew members, at a cost of £321,000, are needed to improve emergency cover in the Down district and that the antiquated ambulance station in Downpatrick needs to be replaced. It also revealed that a new emergency vehicle is to be provided for the town as crews are currently working with an ancient fleet. The paper goes on to highlight the Ambulance Service's shortcomings and says that it is having great difficulty in providing the expected level of service.

The Ambulance Service says that because of progressive changes to the acute-hospital services, ambulances have to transfer more patients from Downpatrick to Belfast for specialist treatment, resulting in reduced emergency cover. The need to take patients from outlying areas to hospitals such as the Royal and the City was probably not foreseen when the trusts were being set up.

As with other trusts in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland's trust has had to meet cost-improvement targets. We recognize that everything is geared towards efficiency and effectiveness and that the Ambulance Service is no exception. It has been set a cost-improvement target of 1.5% per annum, which is equivalent to savings of £240,000. Such a cut is sure to put the service into dire straits. In fact, £240,000 is the cost of one emergency ambulance.

It goes without saying that emergency services are demand-led. The number of emergency calls is beyond the organization's control. Some ambulance crews have to travel great distances and provide cover for various hospitals. This is unacceptable. Travelling time could be vital to a patient's survival. Lives must not be put at risk under any circumstances.

In 1996 the number of 999 calls dealt with was 60,000, and the service achieved a charter standard in each board area. But no matter how commendable this record may be, it must be noted that it is based on an average. There are stations where such a standard is not being achieved, and it is the patients who suffer. This is especially so in rural areas.

There has been a 15% increase in the number of emergency calls in Northern Ireland over the last three years, yet research shows that there has been no increase in morbidity rates. Evidently the public need to be educated in how to use the emergency service properly. In addition, it is essential to prioritize calls, and response times must be set.

Many of the difficulties faced by the service are due to underinvestment in the emergency fleet. There are currently 158 vehicles, 58 of which fall outside the Department's guidelines — either they are more than seven years old or they have travelled more than 140,000 miles. Thirty-one per cent of the accident-and-emergency vehicles and 48% of the patient-transport vehicles are due for replacement. If this issue is not addressed by way of major capital investment, maintenance costs will soar and reliability will inevitably be jeopardized.

Eighteen vehicles arrived this month, but because of the bureaucracy the private finance initiative there will be a long wait before the next lot. The Ambulance Service will have to lease vehicles from the private sector and charge the cost to the boards. This is another departure that will have to be watched very carefully because interest charges and VAT will be added.

Increased investment will also be required if the number of acute hospitals continues to be reduced or if casualty departments are closed. And staff training must take account of the fact that people with injuries will have to be transported great distances. Vehicles will also be out of their areas for longer, so each area will need more. Improvements in technology also affect the emergency services. Some hospitals contain more sophisticated technology than others, so ambulances have to transport patients between hospitals. Increased investment is required to allow for this so as not to put at risk other patients in areas where there is reduced cover.

2.15 pm

Some ambulance stations are in poor condition and need investment or replacement. It is vital that stations be based in areas where they can give the best level of cover. For example, in the Southern Board area the night response rate depends on where the ambulance cover is based. This can have serious implications for patients, particularly if the controller has to assess demand and allocate the ambulances accordingly.

Emergency-crew cover for seven 24-hour days costs £200,000. Budget cuts of £240,000 each year may mean that one crew and one ambulance will have to be withdrawn from service. An ambulance costs about £55,000, so Members can work out how many ambulances can be bought for £240,000. Also, there are only two ambulance manufacturers in the United Kingdom, and it takes months for an order to come through. Even if money does become available it will be some time before the ailing vehicles can be replaced.

According to UNISON, £4 million is needed to deal with the estate within the service, including ambulance stations, health and safety and vehicles, and the union has warned that lives will be put at risk unless there is a cash boost for improvement. It estimates that at least 13 additional ambulance crews are needed. These are alarming figures. This situation cannot be allowed to continue — there has to be an injection of capital. They have been able to replace some vehicles with extra funds from the Department of Health and Social Services. If that money had not been forthcoming the service would have been in dire straits.

In the foreword to the annual report the Chairman of the Ambulance Trust says

"It is our responsibility to ensure that the decision-makers recognize that the Ambulance Service is the linchpin of the Health Service and must be properly resourced. It is a tribute to our staff and management that in the face of reduced income and increased demand the service has achieved its statutory financial objectives, attained Patient Charter standards and produced the lowest management expenses in comparison with leading ambulance services in Great Britain."

That is how high he has set his sights — achieving the statutory financial objectives and gaining Patient Charter standards. Patient Charter standards have been obtained in some

areas but not in others. There are going to be changes in that as well. At the moment they have to achieve a 50% level for emergency cover. That is going to be increased to 75%. Whether or not they can achieve that is open to serious question.

Finally, following a number of worrying attacks recently on ambulances and their crews, we feel the need to call on the Government to provide adequate measures to protect them. As Northern Ireland returns to a more normal society in the light of the current cease-fires, the numbers of attacks and instances of abuse suffered by the Ambulance Service have, surprisingly, increased. There are cases of ambulances not being allowed to respond to emergency calls and having their windows broken by youths throwing objects. This type of irresponsible, anti-social behaviour is completely contemptible, and we condemn it unreservedly.

We wish to pay tribute to the excellent service provided by ambulance men and women during the course of the last 30 years. They deserve our full support. After all, they provide a vital service for every person in Northern Ireland. We agree with UNISON that there needs to be an injection of capital into the service as quickly as possible.

The Chairman: I call on the Chairman of the Health Committee, Mr Hugh Smyth.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I can understand Mr Casey's decision to go ahead with the motion, but yesterday the Health Committee appealed to the Labour member of the Committee to have it withdrawn. That was not because we do not think the subject important. It is very important, which is why the Health Committee is giving so much time and attention to it. Members can make up their own minds whether to speak in the debate, and Committee Members are free to do so. However, as we will be producing a report on the Ambulance Service, I do not intend to take part myself.

Mrs Parkes: The Health Committee felt that this debate was untimely as we have spent quite a few months working on the Ambulance Service. We have taken evidence from the four boards, and we have met the Chief Executive of the Ambulance Service and representative groups from the staff. We have also visited various ambulance stations. I do not want to pre-empt our report by saying anything today. While we sympathize with the Ambulance Service and, of course, give it our one hundred per cent support, it would not be in order for members of the Committee to take part in this debate.

In future if Members were to tell each other what they were doing, it would prevent something like this from happening again. This has led to a very embarrassing situation for the Health Committee.

The Chairman: We have the Business Committee for co-ordinating the activities of the Forum.

I have a considerable personal interest in the matter in view of my little brush with this kind of thing a month ago. Northern Ireland ambulances have had a very good reputation since Dr Pantridge made his breakthrough on defibrillation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

The Forum deplores the current financial crisis and recent violent attacks which have beset the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and calls on the Government to address the situation immediately, enabling the public to regain confidence in a vital service which endeavours to provide for the whole community.

SPECIAL DEBATE (RULE 10(5))

Motion made and Question proposed:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 23 January 1998. — [*The Chairman*]

Lord Alderdice: The Forum was established to engage in political dialogue. The last time I spoke here I referred to those — I was thinking particularly of the Secretary of State — who were talking to people committed to operating outside the democratic process. It seemed to me that the Secretary of State was prepared not only to meet with prisoners but to give more time to them than to elected representatives. I do not propose to go over that ground again, not least because there have been important developments in the last week. In any case, our position on the matter is clear.

The political developments include the negotiations that led to the publication of the paper by the British and Irish Governments, which, for those who are committed to Northern Ireland and its future, is encouraging. It maps out opportunities and challenges which could stabilize Northern Ireland in a way that has never been possible in our political memory.

However, there are people who are dismayed by the paper — those who thought that this process could lead, in short order, to a united Ireland, joint authority or something of that kind. Certainly that is the impression I get from those in the Republican movement who have spoken.

It is important to build upon these developments to increase stability in Northern Ireland, and we can all make a contribution to that. I am particularly impressed by Tony Blair's commitment, and I am very glad that Mr Ahern's contribution has been so constructive. Several other people made efforts, and Mr Trimble played a constructive role.

However, more needs to be done. While as party Leader Mr Trimble has every right to feel that he has some achievements under his belt, he should think seriously about talking directly with Sinn Féin. I do not believe that there will be a meeting of minds, but I do believe that there should be a meeting of persons. It is important that Sinn Féin hear directly from Unionists exactly how committed they are to Northern Ireland's remaining in the United Kingdom and the sort of part they believe Nationalists can play here. They hear things from me, and they hear things from others, but they hear things at arm's length from Unionists.

It would be valuable for Sinn Féin to get this injection of reality. Sometimes I feel that there is a complete lack of realism in the Republican movement about what is possible.

There has been a lot of talk from Republicans about Unionists not engaging with them, but Republicans have great difficulty in engaging with what is politically possible. They hear in the talks the sorts of things that are available, and they see in the paper that has been published what is realistically available, but it would be helpful and constructive if they were to hear that directly from Ulster Unionists prepared to engage with them, as they have engaged with all the other parties. After all, Mr Trimble has met with Loyalist parties and, indeed, prisoners. Those who were elected to the Forum — it is a pity they are not here — have a mandate to be part of the talks, and he should engage directly with them. The process would become dynamic if that were to take place. I say this not in a carping way — in fairness I have paid tribute to the fact that the Ulster Unionists have played a constructive part in the talks, as have other parties.

I appeal to them to think seriously about this. I am not saying this without due thought and without an appreciation that some in the Unionist community genuinely have great difficulty with this. There are others who will have difficulty with it — folk who have been quite prepared to be involved with dangerous people in the Unionist community but who chafe at this. I understand that, but I ask them to give it serious consideration. They would be doing so not only in the interests of Northern Ireland and the talks but ultimately because it is in their own interests that the process retain stability and build momentum.

Mr McCarthy: The matter I want to raise is somewhat different. I want to talk about the environment, and I hope that the Minister responsible and the planning hierarchy will listen. The first point concerns the inhabitants of the villages of Kircubbin and Greyabbey; the second concerns everyone who cherishes our beautiful countryside and landscape.

2.30 pm

Greyabbey and Kircubbin — indeed, all the villages in the Ards Peninsula — need to have their sewerage systems modernized. I am glad that the Water Service intends to tackle Kircubbin and Greyabbey. Unfortunately the proposal is to combine the two systems on a site at Doctor's Bay in Kircubbin. That is totally unacceptable to the inhabitants. In our opinion there are alternative possibilities, which would go some way towards allaying the inhabitants' fears.

There are many reasons for objecting to the Doctor's Bay site, including its close proximity to private housing, the local primary school and the new community and health centre; the increased gases and odours; and the increased lorry traffic along narrow, busy streets. Local people have already made representations to Ards Borough Council and the planning office in Downpatrick, and they have put together a petition with more than 200 objections to this proposal. I am glad to say that Ards Council, of which I am a member, unanimously disagreed with the application and, indeed, has asked for a public inquiry before any decision is made. I hope that the Department will listen to the local inhabitants and that the Water Service will come up with a more acceptable remedy to our problems. The sewerage systems do need modernizing and until that happens, the much-needed housing developments in both villages will remain at a standstill.

My second big concern has to do with the landscape and the fact that telecommunication masts are still being erected. My constituency, which includes the Ards

Peninsula, is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Two such masts were put up there this week. One in particular stands out as a terrible blot on the landscape — on the top of a hill overlooking Strangford Lough. Any visitor or tourist travelling between Kircubbin and Portaferry will be appalled by it. This monstrosity can be seen for miles around and definitely spoils the beautiful countryside.

The inhabitants are also angry because of the possible health risks. The planning authorities have refused local people permission to build a small dwelling for a family member, not on the top of a hill but in an obscure corner of a back field. Is it any wonder that people are incensed?

I appeal to landowners to say "No." They should not allow these masts to be built. I also appeal to Lord Dubs to put a stop to these ugly eyesores now, before irreversible damage is done.

Mr Weir: I do not want to pre-empt something which may be brought before the Forum in a few weeks' time, but Members should be aware of the Government's proposals for preparatory schools.

The Education Committee heard yesterday from the trade unions and a group of concerned parents. Their evidence was very interesting and, as was highlighted this morning during the debate on tuition fees, showed the lack of thought on the part of the Department of Education. The aim, allegedly, is to save £1.5 million, but we heard that this proposal would actually cost £3.5 million. From an economic point of view it is clearly not in Northern Ireland's interests.

The aim may be to comply with what seems to be the Government's policy of ending the assisted places scheme in England and creating a more egalitarian education system, but the reality is that it will have the opposite effect. There are at present 3,500 pupils in the preparatory departments of some 25 schools. Many of them do not come from privileged, middle-class backgrounds, as has occasionally been alleged, for example, in the SACHR report. In fact, many parents have saved very hard to put their children through a preparatory department, often because it is the only local primary-level school in the area that they have been able to get them into.

If the Government go ahead with these changes it is unlikely that all 25 schools will be able to continue in their present form. A number may have to close, and the pupils will have to be relocated. Instead of paying 40% of the tuition costs of those pupils, the Government will be paying 100%, and that, economically, is nonsense.

Those schools which will be able to survive will effectively become independent preparatory schools, rather akin to those in the public-school system in England. That will do much more to create a two-tiered system, which is contrary to what the Minister alleges is driving his policy. This is clearly a very stupid and ill-thought-out idea.

The Education Committee will shortly be bringing this matter to the Forum, but we should take this early opportunity to make the Minister aware of the stupidity of his policy

and urge him to think again before the educational needs of a large number of pupils are tampered with and disruption caused.

Mr Poots: I would like to say a few words about the “great breakthrough” that has taken place over the past few days. We are being told that it is all things to all men. It certainly is all things to all men. Many people are trying to make it appear that Sinn Féin has lost out badly. Surely the fact that Sinn Féin has taken it so well indicates that it has not lost out at all.

We were supposed to be seeking a replacement of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, but what is being proposed instead? An analysis by Mr Tom Brady says that Dublin will play a much more proactive role in sensitive, security-related issues than it does at the moment through the Maryfield secretariat. Instead of being restricted to requesting reports and issuing protests after an incident, the Dublin Government will now be fully involved on the ground in building new structures and representing the views of the Nationalist community within the intergovernmental machinery. That is as fine a piece of negotiating on behalf of the Unionist community by the three people who were involved as I have ever seen — people who had a secret meeting with Dublin officials. It was so secret that neither the Garda nor the RUC were informed in advance. *[Interruption]*

Willie Ross and Willie Thompson certainly were not.

But what concerns me perhaps even more is the fact that they are prepared to countenance constitutional change, particularly to section 75, as a quid pro quo for changes to articles 2 and 3. How can you negotiate and barter a legal document for one that is illegal? We have sat here and argued about articles 2 and 3; we have passed motions that articles 2 and 3 are illegal, immoral and criminal, and yet this illegal document is being traded off for part of our Constitution.

At the first talks, when Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneaux were negotiating, the 1920 Government of Ireland Act was not on the table. The aim of those talks was to find a suitable replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 on the following bases: how Northern Ireland was to be governed within the United Kingdom; the nature of the relationship any new administration would have with Dublin; and the nature of the relationship between London and Dublin with regard to the new administration in Northern Ireland.

Section 75 represents the title deeds of the Union. It is essential in that it grants supreme authority to the United Kingdom Government to enact legislation for Northern Ireland. To trade section 75 for articles 2 and 3 is madness. What we have seen this week is Sunningdale and the framework document all over again — the same old stew, all stirred up. Even Mr Mallon said that we have seen it all before in the framework document.

I call on Mr Trimble to back away from what he is doing; I call on him not to sell Northern Ireland out; I call on him not to go for a Council of Ireland with executive powers and to stop surrendering Ulster's sovereignty to the Irish Republic.

Mr McAlister: Members will not be surprised that I am going to continue the theme that my Colleague started.

The new gospel according to Mo goes something like this: "Faith, hope and the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and the greatest of these is the Anglo-Irish Agreement." We now have a new set of proposals. Of course, the Government do not necessarily agree with that because, in spite of the efforts made by the Ulster Unionist Party, and its Leader in particular, to suggest that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is now defunct, the Minister for Political Development confirmed last night on television that it is definitely still on the table. And according to media reports, that was also confirmed to Mr Bob McCartney by none other than our Prime Minister. So far as he is concerned, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the framework document are still very much on the table. *[Interruption]*

I do not know of anyone on the other side of the Chamber who keeps me right. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: They think they are doing their best. Give them credit for that.

Mr McAlister: Earlier this week one of the commentators said that this new agreement was so brilliant, so simple, it was a wonder that nobody had thought of it before. I cannot go along with the word "brilliant", but it is an amazing document — it means all things to all people.

In a television programme no longer ago than last night the Eire Government and the SDLP were saying that the North/South bodies would have executive powers, that the agreement definitely said so. Yet the Ulster Unionists were saying that that was not the case, that these bodies would not have any teeth, or that whatever teeth they had would be able to be pulled by the new Assembly. There seems to be total confusion, even on that point.

I would love someone to explain to me how all these points of view can be right, and the man in the street is asking how the proposals can be all things to all people. That simple question is being asked in factories and homes and on the streets today by ordinary, concerned Unionists. How can this agreement suit everyone?

2.45 pm

Someone said on the radio this morning "What about the long-forgotten subject of decommissioning?" It has been sidelined along with everything else.

Mr Peter Robinson: Is the Member referring to the programme in which someone said "I'll bring the talks to an end if it does not take place"?

Mr McAlister: I refer to the one in which someone said "We will be going no further if there is no decommissioning." Others may have forgotten about decommissioning, but this party has not, and at every opportunity we will be raising the matter — again and again and again. I raise it today, and, if necessary, we will raise it in any future Assembly because the man in the street has not forgotten about decommissioning.

There are many bitter pills ahead. This whole process is built on sand — it is false and flawed, and it is only a matter of time until it falls apart completely. We will not gloat in those circumstances, but the situation could be so easily resolved if people were to heed proper advice. Of course, the doctor can offer advice, but it is up to the patient to take the medicine. The public are utterly amazed at what is happening at Stormont.

Mr Gibson: First, I want to confirm that Mr Weir was correct in what he said about the submissions from the preparatory schools. That is why an amendment was moved to the motion today. I do not understand how people can be sympathetic on one occasion and then change their minds. However, I am getting used to it.

And I am delighted to see that a new psychiatric adviser has been appointed to look after the special-needs department of the Ulster Unionist Party. What has just been said by Mr McAlister is being borne out all over the country. If we were to look at the various manifesto pledges that were made in May 1996 and again in May 1997 we would be amazed at the number of promises that have been broken. There is no small alarm that those who said "Trust us" cannot be trusted. It is very important that they do get a new psychiatric adviser because it is difficult to trust people who say one thing today and do the opposite tomorrow.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Three stories jumped out as I read the paper this afternoon, all with a common thread. The first — and this is not because Noel McAdam is sitting in the Gallery — in the 'Belfast Telegraph' was the story about "bloody Sunday" and the demand for an investigation into the events there. The second was about yesterday's meeting between the Lower Ormeau residents, Gerard Rice and the Parades Commission. The third was about tomorrow's meeting of the intellectuals of the Ulster Unionist Party in Glengall Street. The common thread running through those stories was the different negotiating styles which those various, diverse groups have used to try to get what they want.

The first group use the bit-by-bit negotiating style. First, it wanted letters of apology. It did not get letters of apology from John Major, but verbal apologies. Then it pushed a little further, and now we are going to get an official Government apology for the events of "bloody Sunday". Having got that, it will demand a full-blown inquiry. And, no doubt, when it has had that inquiry, it will want some of the soldiers who were involved to be prosecuted.

The Lower Ormeau residents seemed to use the "Put the boot into everything" negotiating style. They met with the Parades Commission yesterday, and the very first thing they talked about was their lack of confidence in it. Indeed, they want the chairman to resign, and they reeled off their list of demands. Of course, it is very clear that those who approach negotiations in that way hope that by saying that nothing is acceptable they will soften those with whom they are negotiating and get something from them. I have no doubt that by saying they have absolutely no confidence in the Parades Commission the Ormeau Road residents will push the commission into a corner where it will feel that it has to do something to please these disaffected people, and they will get what they want this summer.

The third negotiating style that seems to be apparent from the story about the Ulster Unionist Party Members is rather bizarre. It is a happy-clappy, whoopy-woopy negotiating style. As soon as they are handed a document they say "Great: we have 80% of

what we want" while everybody else sits around, grim-faced and saying "This is a terrible document. We couldn't possibly live with this." And then they hope to get even more than they have already been offered.

Leaving aside whether or not you agree with their sentiment that 80% of what was offered by the Prime Minister at the start of this week is acceptable to Unionists — and I find that bizarre as well — it seems to me that it is the daftest negotiating ploy to say to those with whom you are negotiating "We are nearly there." It is a particularly daft negotiating ploy to use against a Government who we know from experience are determined to slant their policy more towards making Republicans happy than towards pleasing Unionists. If Unionists now say at the very start that they have 80% of what they want they can be sure that the Government will seek to claw some of it back. I do not know the reason for their approach. Perhaps we will get some illumination from the Ulster Unionists this afternoon. It may be that David Trimble had an eye to tomorrow's meeting with the intellectuals of the party, as the 'News Letter' said.

Mr Trimble: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sammy Wilson: No. I have very little time left.

Perhaps it was the prospect of the razor-sharp intellects of those who will put him in the dock tomorrow that caused him to make the best of the situation. It may be that he is in competition with the PUP to see who can be the more positive. The PUP said that 99% of the framework document was acceptable, but the Ulster Unionists are coming up close with 80%, and perhaps that will increase. Perhaps they have simply been deluded.

What we have here is the Liam Averill version of the framework document: you put a dress on it and hope it gets past the guards. Perhaps that is what has happened. Whatever the reason, this week has not been good for Unionists. It may have led to a few short-term slaps on the back, and some people may be saying that Unionists are being positive and are wonderful chappies. However, Unionists will live to regret their slackness in accepting something which, as some of my Colleagues have already said, holds very grave dangers for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I am really embarrassed to speak about Ulster beef after all this. This week we had the European vets' proposal to allow Ulster beef back into Europe. It is important that we look at what follows from that. If the vets have called for it we have to look at the Ministers' meeting and at what we can do to promote Ulster beef in Europe.

We all know what the beef crisis has done to the farming industry in Northern Ireland, and we all know the repercussions it has had for farmers — debt and poverty. The mainstay for many Ulster farmers was beef, and Ulster beef was, quite simply, put under the cosh of European restrictions and regulations. We all welcome the agreement of European Union vets that Ulster beef has met the standards to enable it to be sold in Europe again. The next stage is the meeting of the Ministers. We hope that they too will agree and give final approval to the re-entry of our beef to Europe.

The reason for the change of heart in Europe is quite simple: people came to Northern Ireland at the end of last year, looked at our traceability system and decided that the regulation was acceptable. They have accepted the Quality Assured Scheme and the traceability system for Ulster beef. They have agreed that in many cases the standard of Ulster beef exceeds the standards in the rest of Europe — indeed, in the rest of the world.

We have a green-field product that sold extremely well in Europe before the BSE crisis, and we now have to try to re-introduce it to our fellow Europeans. We lost our beef market through no fault of our own, and we will have to work especially hard to get it back. Some Europeans, such as Albert Heijn in Holland, have told us that their customers wish to buy Northern Ireland beef. They say that beef they have purchased over the last few years, during the BSE crisis, does not taste as good as Ulster beef, that it has not been of the same quality. But the possibility that we will soon be back in Europe makes the need for an aggressive sales policy very obvious. One method of doing that is to have a meeting of all the interested parties to agree a strategy. For example, the Livestock Marketing Commission has money for promoting the industry. Other interested bodies are prepared to give their time and energies, and what we now need is a strong commitment from the Government.

Now is the time to prepare for re-entry into Europe. It could be only three months away. We must plan accordingly. We need to reverse the concerted attacks that have been made on the Northern Ireland beef industry, and we need to be ready and working together in Europe from day one. Let us hope that this is the beginning of the end of a saga that should never have included Northern Ireland. Our former markets are waiting for our produce. Their consumers wish to taste our beef once again. To be realistic, it will be hard going, and it could be very difficult, but let us prepare for Ulster beef's re-entry to Europe. We need to do the spade work right now. We need to get all the interested parties together to prepare the way.

Mr Peter Robinson: In the short time that is available to me I want to offer the Ulster Unionist Party some advice, though I can never be sure that it will listen. I am even less sure that it will take my advice.

3.00 pm

The Ulster Unionist Party has reached a very delicate stage — as, more importantly, has the province — in its secret and more formal dealings with the Dublin Government and other parties in the present talks process. After 'Propositions on Heads of Agreement' was published, Glengall Street put out a statement which included some repetition. Two of its paragraphs began with the words "It is clear", and at one point it said "this Council is clearly". The one thing that is absolutely certain, no matter how we look at this document and the fall-out since its publication, is that clarity is the last thing it contains. When people say that things are clear in the way that the Ulster Unionist Party does — and this goes back to the "crystal clear" claims of Brian Faulkner, with whom many parallels can be drawn — they are trying to sell something very obscure to the people, something in which they want the people to believe. The 'Alice in Wonderland' suggestion that a word means what one wants it to mean is, in effect, how they are interpreting this document.

The document refers to constitutional change and equates an illegal territorial claim with the legal status of the United Kingdom Parliament in Northern Ireland. On last night's 'Hearts and Minds' programme, Mr Trimble argued that the 1973 Act was the important piece of legislation with respect to Northern Ireland's constitutional position. Leaving aside the fact that the 1920 Act is going to be amended, he puts his faith in the 1973 Act, which is the basis of the last constitutional settlement that the Ulster Unionist Party entered into at Sunningdale.

Mr Trimble: Will the Member give way?

Mr Robinson: I am happy to do so if the Chairman will give me the additional time.

The Chairman: There is an alternative and that is to give you five minutes, Mr Trimble.

Mr Peter Robinson: The reality is that the 1973 Act will be replaced by any agreement that may come out of the 'Propositions of Heads of Agreement'. So do not put any reliance on any undertaking in the 1973 Act because that will be repealed by any new agreement. And that brings us back to section 75 of the 1920 Act. Why was it picked? Because the United Kingdom does not have a written Constitution in the way that the Irish Republic does. The Irish Republic wanted to be able to deal with two claims to the territory of Northern Ireland. Section 75 indicates clearly the authority of the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland; and the Constitution of the Irish Republic also lays claim to Northern Ireland. They intend to amend both instruments by inserting a consent clause, but not to remove the territorial claim of the Irish Republic in articles 2 and 3. And the insertion of the consent clause is perfectly consistent with the maintenance of a territorial claim. There will just have been a levelling of the ground.

It is noticeable, incidentally, that in the 'Propositions on Heads of Agreement', which, according to the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, includes all the most important issues for negotiation, there is no section which maintains that Northern Ireland is and shall remain a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. So, in effect, the Ulster Unionist Party has equated section 75 with articles 2 and 3 in a scenario where the new 'Propositions on Heads of Agreement' would replace the 1973 Act.

The second issue in relation to this document — and it is only the second of many, but I can only touch on two today — relates to the North/South bodies. Three things point to the role and nature of those bodies. The first is this: who will be on the North/South body? That is very clear. It tells us that there will be

"a North/South Ministerial Council to bring together those with executive responsibilities".

Why? — because they will be exercising executive responsibilities. What are they going to do? They are going to take decisions. It is very clear that this body is not simply going to consult and talk about issues or make recommendations to an Assembly or to the Dáil — it is going to take decisions. Moreover, the document makes it abundantly clear that, having taken those decisions, the North/South Council will have the authority to set up implementation bodies to carry those decisions out. In every way that is executive authority

on an all-Ireland basis — the very thing that the Ulster Unionist Party pledged time after time that it would never discuss, never mind agree to.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Forum Members should be concerned at today's news that O'Hara's Bakeries in West Belfast, one of the oldest family-owned companies, is close to closure. It has announced the closure of 20 of its 24 shops, with the loss of 180 jobs. This will have a devastating effect on an area with so much unemployment and social deprivation, and it is sad that nobody seems to be doing anything about it.

Admittedly, the Government provided assistance when O'Hara's new premises in Cambrai Street, which runs between the Crumlin and the Shankill Roads, was built three years ago. But I would like the Forum's Economy Committee to consider investigating the whole bakery industry here because Belfast alone, in the past nine months, has witnessed the closure of Golden Bloom, Jane's, Kennedy's and now O'Hara's. Some people will point the finger at the entry of the large supermarkets — Tesco, Sainsbury's and Safeway — but I am not sure that that is the only reason. Apart from the plight of the bakery industry, retailers on most of Belfast's arterial routes are finding life extremely difficult.

Last Friday, Eric Smyth, Hugh Smyth and I, together with other councillors in Belfast, met with O'Hara's receivers in the hope that something might have materialized. Regrettably, we have just learned that the company has accrued debts of some £3 million — an enormous amount of money. But we still think that with the right type of ownership O'Hara's could become a profit-making business. It has all the facilities and an excellent work-force — people who are dedicated to producing a quality product at the right price.

From time to time Forum Members have expressed concern about the economy. In spite of the Government's efforts, like those of the last Administration, to paint a glowing picture, it is clear that many firms — from textiles right across to the service industries — are finding life extremely difficult. And the strong pound is not helping the situation. We, as public representatives, must lobby the Economy Minister, Adam Ingram, and the Industrial Development Board. I trust that the Chairman of the Economy Committee will take this matter on board, but especially the plight of the bakery industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum-at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 23 January 1998.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.09 pm.